

Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World

CARPOCRATES, MARCELLINA, AND EPIPHANES

**THREE EARLY CHRISTIAN TEACHERS OF
ALEXANDRIA AND ROME**

M. David Litwa

ROUTLEDGE



Carpocrates, Marcellina, and Epiphanes

Carpocrates, Marcellina, and Epiphanes is the definitive study of the early Christian theologian Carpocrates, his son Epiphanes, and the leader of the Carpocratian movement in Rome, Marcellina.

It contains the first full-length study of and commentary on the fragments of Epiphanes, the earliest reports on Carpocrates and Marcellina, as well as the *Epistle to Theodore* (containing the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark). Readers also encounter an up-to-date history of research on the Carpocratian movement, and three full profiles of all we can know from the earliest Carpocratian leaders. Written in an accessible style, but based on the most careful historical and linguistic research, this volume is a landmark, helping to redefine the field of early Christian history.

Carpocrates, Marcellina, and Epiphanes is a welcome addition to the libraries of all students of early Christian theology, researchers investigating early Christian diversity, and scholars of Gnostic, Nag Hammadi and related materials.

M. David Litwa is Research Fellow in Biblical and Early Christian Studies at the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry, Australian Catholic University in Melbourne. Litwa is the author of many books, most recently *Posthuman Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Thought*, *The Evil Creator: Origins of an Early Christian Idea*, and *Found Christianities: Remaking the World of the Second Century*.

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Three Early Christian Teachers of Alexandria and Rome

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Three Early Christian Teachers of
Alexandria and Rome

M. David Litwa

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For Stan Stowers, Harry Attridge, and Jos Verheyden
Models of scholarship



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Preface

Translations of Greek and Latin texts are my own, unless otherwise noted. In making my translations, I have consulted, and have attempted to improve on, the most recent published translations available.

This book was written during Melbourne's painfully long lockdown, and I am grateful to the librarians of my own university (especially Karen Campbell) and those at the Dalton McCaughey Library in Parkville, Victoria.

Here I gratefully acknowledge those who helped me by reading and commenting on portions of this work. Sincere thanks to my colleagues Kylie Crabbe, Michael Theophilos, Stephen Carlson, and Ben Edsall, for reading a draft of Chapter 1. Michael Kok, Michael Zeddies, and Scott Brown offered detailed comments on Chapter 3. Professor Outi Lehtipuu kindly provided comments on my concluding profile of Marcellina. I feel special gratitude toward Winrich Löhr, who read the entire manuscript and offered comments. Final thanks go to the reviewers, Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski and Dylan Burns, who provided helpful remarks on the Introduction and Conclusion.

Readers should note that small portions of this book adapt passages in my previous volume *Found Christianities: Remaking the World of the Second Century CE* (London: T&T Clark, 2021). These adaptations are flagged, along with page references, in the notes.

Sigla and abbreviations

In the Greek and Latin texts:

- Words or letters in angled brackets <> represent editorial editions
- Words or letters in square brackets [] are deletions
- Words or letters in parentheses () are faded or effaced in the manuscripts

In the English translations:

- Words or letters in parentheses () fill out the sense of the original text.

Abbreviations of ancient texts and modern works in this volume follow the *SBL Handbook of Style*, second ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014). Other abbreviations are as follows:

<i>AAH</i>	<i>Against All Heresies</i> = <i>Adversus Omnes Haereses</i> by “Pseudo-Tertullian”
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>AH</i>	<i>Against Heresies</i> by Irenaeus
BG	Berlin Gnostic Codex
BSGRT	Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana
<i>CA</i>	<i>Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark</i> , by Morton Smith
<i>CH</i>	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
<i>DGWE</i>	<i>Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism</i> , ed. Wouter Hanegraaff
<i>Div. Haer.</i>	<i>Diverse Heresies</i> by Filastrius
<i>DL, Vita Phil.</i>	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of Eminent Philosophers</i>
<i>Fab.</i>	<i>Heretical Fables</i> by Theodoret
<i>HE</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i> by Eusebius of Caesarea
L	Codex Laurentianus V,3
LCL	Loeb Classical Library

LS	Long and Sedley, ed. <i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i> , 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2003)
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Oration(s)</i>
P	Parisinus supplément grec 464 (key manuscript for <i>Ref.</i>)
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca</i>
<i>Ref.</i>	<i>Refutation of All Heresies</i>
<i>SH</i>	<i>Stobaeae Hermetica</i>
<i>SHA</i>	<i>Historia Augusta</i>



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Introduction

Who was Carpocrates? Most early Christian writers depicted him as the founder of a licentious cult, a magician, and a practitioner of “pagan” rites. They said that his followers practiced indiscriminate sex at their communal banquets. Carpocrates, claimed his opponents, demanded that his followers engage in every sin before they could break the cycle of transmigration and rise to the supreme Father. Since 1958, Carpocrates has also been accused of stealing, interpolating, and corrupting Christian scripture (a version of the gospel according to Mark). Scholarly treatments of the past century portray Carpocrates as a Platonic philosopher, a “Jewish Christian,” a “gnostic,” a promoter of free love—even as a mythical figure who never existed.

Whatever else this study will attempt to show, it will unveil Carpocrates as a real person of the past, a Christian, and a pioneer of melding biblical exegesis with philosophical lore.¹ He and his followers were apparently not ascetic, but neither were they “libertine.” Although Carpocrates would probably have denied practicing “magic” (a crime under Roman law), he and his followers may well have embraced miracles, divinatory practices, and the invoking of lower (angelic) powers—just as many other Christians did. In the late 150s or early 160s CE, Carpocrates’s follower Marcellina established a Christian assembly in Rome with its own baptismal rite and worship practices. It is the only known Roman Christian group in the second century to have been led, it seems, entirely by a woman. All in all, the Carpocratians were an important if experimental Christian group that flourished in the second century. The influence of their ideas and practices has still not entirely disappeared.

History of research

Most of the scholarly treatments of Carpocrates and Carpocratians occur in dictionary or encyclopedia articles. Most of these articles are—in accordance with the genre—largely cursory and (re-)descriptive of ancient sources.² The favored source for summarizing the views of Carpocrates is Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* (*AH*) 1.25, since it is a readily accessible text and seemingly straightforward. Nevertheless, scholars dedicated to understanding Carpocrates and his movement should resist the temptation of turning first to Irenaeus’s heresy catalog.

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Irenaeus's indirect and polemical report must take second place to our sole surviving primary source. This source is a set of excerpts from a work called *On Justice* by Carpocrates's son Epiphanes. I will treat Epiphanes in due course (Chapter 1 of this volume). For now, it suffices to say that he was a talented young theologian whose thought deserves more attention.³

In this history of research, I will only engage the more substantial treatments of Carpocrates and his heirs ("Carpocratians") that have appeared in the last 80 years or so.⁴ I will not take up space summarizing the many dictionary articles—most of which are themselves summaries no more than a page in length. I will, however, note two examples as a warning about misinformation.

We are informed by the *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (fifth edition, 2001), that the Carpocratians were "A sect of Gnostics" who

claimed Christ derived the mysteries of his religion from the Temple of Isis in Egypt, where he was said to have studied for six years, and that he taught them to his apostles, who transmitted them to Carpocrates. Members used theurgic incantations and had their own peculiar greetings, signs and words, and symbols and degrees of rank ... The sect endured until the sixth century.⁵

This is indeed a fascinating set of claims, but unfortunately not a single one of them can be molded into something resembling truth. It is a striking example of pseudo-scholarship and an important reminder that the walls of the academy are porous, allowing "fake news" to seep in unawares.

A second example, from a generally more respected source, seems more accurate, but—as will become clear to readers of this volume—it still falls significantly short of truth. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (eighth edition, 2018), informs us that Carpocrates and Epiphanes founded a "Hellenistic"—not a Christian—"sect," and that they were "notoriously licentious." Epiphanes is said to have advocated "communal ownership of property, including women." The latter claim is often repeated in various forms. It assumes—quite wrongly—that husbands under Greco-Roman law could legally "own" their wives. Male dominance and abuse were rife, it seems, in Greco-Roman marriages; but men did not own their wives as property. This encyclopedia entry also contains at least three other—if not false, then certainly questionable—claims: (1) that "Carpocratians believed that men [*sic*] had formerly been united with the Absolute," (2) that they would be saved by despising creation, and (3) that Jesus was only "one of several wise men who had achieved deliverance."⁶ As far as I know, Carpocrates never mentioned "the Absolute" or said that people were once united to it. Irenaeus said that Carpocratians strive to despise "the things here" (*AH* 1.25.2); yet these "things" do not necessarily encompass all of creation. Finally, to portray Jesus as only one of several redeemed sages makes it seem as if he had no overriding significance for Carpocratians. Nevertheless, Jesus was, I will argue (in Chapter 2), the supreme sage and model for Carpocratian soteriology.

Herbert Liboron

As for serious academic treatments of Carpocrates, perhaps one can begin with the only other monograph on Carpocrates (*Die Karpokratianische Gnosis*)—though, at only 55 pages, it is perhaps better described as a pamphlet. It was published in 1938, a year before Nazi Germany invaded Poland, by a scholar called Herbert Liboron.⁷ Liboron was already under the spell of Hans Jonas, who published his *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* in 1934. Following Jonas, Liboron provided a good example of how putting Carpocrates into the framework of Gnosis/Gnosticism skews the results of an inquiry.

Throughout the book, Liboron received Irenaeus's report as "the true Carpocratian doctrine," which overrode the excerpts from Epiphanes.⁸ Accordingly, Liboron understood Carpocratian thought to represent "anticosmic radicalism," a "libertine attitude to life," and "crude dualism."⁹ Carpocratians were said to have held a "gnostic" view of the unborn God.¹⁰ Carpocratian cosmology is, we are informed, a typical instance of gnostic "pessimism."¹¹ The Carpocratian cosmos, according to Liboron, is totally corrupt and evil. Angels created the world in opposition to the highest God.¹² Redemption means freedom from the cosmos and its powers. There is no need for a savior, only for liberating knowledge. Carpocratians were antinomian, relativists, libertines, and practitioners of magical rites who demanded complete moral freedom and had contempt for marriage.¹³ Liboron even accepted the "obscene banquets" mentioned by Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius.¹⁴ His results, therefore, end up largely reinscribing heresiological reports.

Heinz Kraft

To his credit, Liboron rightly opposed the view that Carpocrates and Epiphanes did not exist.¹⁵ This was an important intellectual move, since in 1952 the mythicist view of Carpocrates and Epiphanes came out in full force. The scholar Heinz Kraft rejected Clement of Alexandria's biographical data for Epiphanes, maintaining the theory that Epiphanes was actually a moon god worshiped on the island of Cephallenia (modern Cephalonia west of mainland Greece).¹⁶

At first glance, the theory sounds outlandish, so a little background will prove useful. In 1858, Gustav Volkmar proposed that "Epiphanes" referred to a god of the moon worshiped on the island of Cephallenia.¹⁷ Another scholar, Adolf Hilgenfeld, protested that we only know of a moon goddess there and that she fell in love with ἐπιφανῆς Ἐνδυμίων (Endymion, known for his lengthy sleep).¹⁸ Neither scholar cited inscriptional or literary evidence for a god or hero called "Epiphanes" on Cephallenia.¹⁹

According to Kraft, Epiphanes was actually an *Egyptian* moon god (because the Egyptian moon god was male) named "Harpocrates"—a "god of light" who remained a child.²⁰ Like his predecessors, Kraft cited no inscriptional or archaeological evidence for such a god on Cephallenia. Basing himself almost entirely on Celsus's testimony about "Harpocratian" Christians (in Origen, *Cels.* 5.63),

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Kraft daringly identified Carpocrates with the god Harpocrates and denied the existence of the historical Carpocrates. Naturally, then, he could not believe that Carpocrates had a son.

Kraft provides a good example of how a historian can sweep away ancient data with the broomstick of shaky and associative inferences. His theses that Epiphanes's *On Justice* was neither Christian nor Carpocratian have been widely recognized as baseless.²¹ As I will argue in Chapter 1, there is no solid reason to deny Clement's biographical data about Carpocrates and Epiphanes. Their profound influence—and the threat they posed to heresiologists—is best explained by their reality.

Jean Daniélou

In 1958, Jean Daniélou made two advances in Carpocratian scholarship: he did not needlessly deny the existence of Carpocrates, and he successfully removed him from the framework of "Gnosticism." For Daniélou, Carpocrates was instead a key instance of "Jewish Christianity." Daniélou made his conclusions based on a different reading of Irenaeus's heresiological report, which claimed that Carpocrates believed that Jesus was the son of Joseph and that angels made the world. A doctrine of creation by angels had Jewish precursors. The humanity of Jesus (true son of Joseph) was a doctrine associated with "Ebionites" (aka "Jewish Christians"). Daniélou also claimed the doctrine of the soul's ascent through angelic spheres as a "Jewish Christian" idea. Even the doctrine of reincarnation, though Pythagorean in origin, was claimed for Judaism on the basis of Origen's *Commentary on John* 6.73 (where Origen opined that transmigration is part of Jewish secret lore). These doctrinal parallels, for Daniélou, become genetic connections: Carpocrates "seems to be essentially dependent on a heterodox Jewish gnosis."²²

In hindsight, it seems odd to associate Carpocrates, who rejected all or part of Jewish law, with "Jewish Christianity." At present, the category of "Jewish Christianity" has been subjected to severe criticism.²³ All in all, it seems to be not much more than a reinstantiation of the heresiological category "Ebionism"—a form of Christianity said to be "heretical" because it was deemed to be too Jewish. In the end, Daniélou describes little more than do the heresiologists themselves: Carpocrates was associated with other "Judaizing" groups like the followers of Cerinthus and "Ebion" (the mythical founder of Ebionite Christianity). This was largely because the Carpocratian Jesus was the true son of Joseph, not born from a virgin. The fact that Carpocrates's doctrines seem in part to be Jewish or "Jewish Christian" is not because he was dependent on "Jewish gnosis," in my view. It was, rather, because he lived in a cultural cosmopolis (Alexandria) where ideas like transmigration and heavenly ascent were affirmed by Jews, Greeks, Romans, and by peoples of various ethnic groups. In brief, "Jewish Christianity," even if it were an illuminating category, does not adequately explain Carpocrates's thought, and it largely ignores Carpocratian practice.²⁴

Gershom Scholem

The famous scholar of Judaism, Gershom Scholem, did not treat Carpocratian Christianity in any depth. Nevertheless, his ideas were important for one of his students, Morton Smith (treated in the next section). Smith supposedly found an epistle to “Theodore” ascribed to Clement of Alexandria at the monastery of Mar Saba near Jerusalem. When Smith informed Scholem about the discovery, Smith observed, Scholem “pounced immediately on the mention of the Carpocratians.” Smith went on to claim that

Carpocrates was said to have taught that sin was a means of salvation. Only by committing all possible actions could the soul satisfy the demands of the rulers of this world and so be permitted to go on to the heavens, its true home. A remotely similar theme was important in the writings of some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jewish heretics whom Scholem had been studying (Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank).²⁵

In a letter that Scholem sent to Smith dated December 30, 1959, Scholem indeed called the Carpocratians “the Frankists of Antiquity.”²⁶ Interestingly, Scholem considered the eponymous founder of this movement, Jacob Frank (1726–1791), to be a “nihilist,” a “degenerate,” and “a figure of tremendous if satanic power.”²⁷ According to Scholem, Frank believed that “Moses pointed out the true way, but it was found to be too difficult, whereupon he resorted to ‘another religion’ and presented men with ‘the Law of Moses,’ whose commandments are injurious and useless.”²⁸ Frank’s “way of nihilism” produced a movement (the Frankists), aiming to free people from “all laws, conventions, and religions.”²⁹

In effect, Scholem understood Carpocrates through the lens of his own reconstruction of Jacob Frank. Scholem called Carpocrates a “nihilistic Gnostic.”³⁰ In Scholem’s mind, Frank unknowingly resuscitated ancient Carpocratian tradition. “Not only the general train of thought, but even some of the symbols and terms are the same!” The “Gnostics,” Scholem claimed, “completely inverted biblical values,” and held that the law of the alien God enjoined “the commission of ‘strange acts’” which were “directly opposed to the Law of Moses.”³¹

In this understanding of Gnosis, Scholem again followed Jonas, whom he quoted at length:

In this [Gnostic] doctrine of immoralism we are confronted both with a total and overt rejection of all traditional norms of behavior, and with an exaggerated feeling of freedom that regards the license to do as it pleases as a proof of its own authenticity ... Such moral nihilism fully reveals the crisis of a world in transition by arbitrarily asserting its own complete freedom and pluming itself on its abandonment to the sacredness of sin ... and this is why the gospel of libertinism stands at the center of the gnostic revolution in religious thought.³²

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As is widely recognized today, virtually none of Jonas's claims here can be considered reliable.³³ Indeed, Jonas surpassed the heresiologists in his eloquent essentializing of "Gnosis," whether it be ancient or modern. Using the framework of Jonas, Scholem misread the Carpocratians, reinforcing the heresiological portrait as reinscribed by Jonas, Liboron, and others.

Morton Smith

On September 27, 1976, Morton Smith wrote a letter to Scholem, "I think I've learned more about Jesus from you and Shabbatai Zvi (I'm sometimes not sure which is which) than I have from any other source except the gospels and the magical papyri."³⁴ It is a revealing comment, since Jacob Frank was an heir of Zvi (aka Sabbatai Zevi), or at least of the Sabbatian movement.

Three years earlier, Morton Smith had published two books—one scholarly, one popular—on a text he called "Secret Mark." In the popular book, Smith called the Carpocratians "one of the most scandalous of the 'gnostic' sects, early and extreme variants of Christianity."³⁵ He claimed that

Clement quotes some fragments of Epiphanes's work justifying free love and communism by representing the world as the work of an egalitarian god ... It appears that the sect celebrated orgiastic communion meals which they said gave them access to the kingdom of God. Their libertinism and indifferentism were justified by sayings of Jesus and of Paul (or, agrapha quoted also by Paul?). Baptism played an important role in their theory, as did the notion of a new covenant.³⁶

This is an interesting, though largely misleading, account. Not only does this rather sloppy description largely repeat heresiological rhetoric, in places it even invents new data. Clement, for instance, did accuse the Carpocratians of having orgies at their love feasts, but never directly mentioned anything about these meals providing access to the kingdom of God (*Strom.* 3.2.10.1). To my knowledge, water baptism is never mentioned in the earliest sources on Carpocrates (Irenaeus and Clement), nor is the idea of a "new covenant."

In his scholarly book, Smith's 12-page discussion of Carpocratians is based on his lengthy collection of patristic sources.³⁷ There is much here that again reinscribes heresiological reports, but I will focus on Smith's distinctive interpretations. As in his popular book, for instance, Smith credited some of the anti-Carpocratian rumors of the heresiologists, such as mass orgies (redescribed as "ritual copulation") during love feasts.³⁸ In an attempt to expand the evidence for Carpocratian libertinism, Smith believed that Carpocratians could be found in many of Clement's slurs against "unspecified libertines."³⁹ Smith's procedure—finding Carpocratians in generalized attacks on libertines—is neither critical nor correct.⁴⁰ Since Michael Kok has recently shown how Smith exaggerated the libertine and magical features of the ancient data on Carpocrates, I will not belabor the point.⁴¹ Suffice it to say that Smith's project was not the historical reconstruction

of the Carpocratian movement, but the advancement of his own views regarding the primitive and original nature of Christian libertinism and “magic.”⁴²

Simone Pétrement

Simone Pétrement’s book, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (originally published in French in 1984), was a *tour de force* when it first appeared. Few before her—and even fewer after her—have attempted a comprehensive historical explanation of “gnostic” Christian movements in the first and second centuries CE. Unfortunately, Pétrement was, like her predecessors, too inclined to credit heresiological portraits concerning Carpocrates. She followed the heresiologists in connecting Carpocrates to other early Christian teachers—namely Saturninus, Basilides, and ultimately to the “dissident school” of Menander (who are all figures from Irenaeus’s heresy catalog).⁴³ This move to align Carpocrates with earlier thinkers is made on the slim basis of a putatively shared doctrine of creation through angels (a connection made by Irenaeus himself).

Carpocrates, Pétrement wrote, was “antinomian” in the sense of portraying Jesus as rejecting Jewish law. Epiphaneus is saddled with the same charge, even though he only castigated one of the “commandments of the old Law.” Pétrement went even beyond Irenaeus in inferring that, because Carpocratians called themselves “gnostics,” they must have believed in salvation through knowledge.⁴⁴

Even though Pétrement stated that Carpocrates “is not docetic,” she still associated his teaching with “docetism” by virtue of his Irenaean connection to Cerinthus, Saturninus, and Basilides.⁴⁵ The best analogy for Carpocrates, according to Pétrement, was Basilides, who philosophized Christianity, although Carpocrates is “much more Platonic and Pythagorean” than Basilides. There are patent Platonic parallels to Carpocratian beliefs: transmigration, the body as a prison, the soul’s preexistence, and so on. Yet Carpocrates’s supposed doctrine that there is nothing good and evil in itself is manifestly un-Platonic, despite Pétrement’s attempt to base the teaching in Plato’s *Republic* 443c–4a. Her appeal to *Republic* 619b–20b to explain the soul’s need to undergo all experiences is intriguing.⁴⁶ In this scene, souls choose their lives badly because they forget the terrible consequences of a life of pleasure and domination. Only souls duly chastened in their past life (or lives) learn to choose a decent and quiet existence.

Overall, what is concerning about Pétrement’s analysis of Carpocrates is not only that she repeated much of the heresiological data as if it were social and doctrinal fact, but also that she sometimes extended the logic of ancient polemic beyond even what the heresiologists said. Several examples of this tendency have already been pointed out. To cite another: Pétrement averred that Carpocrates advanced “certain propositions of his own in order to scandalize most Christians.”⁴⁷ But the only people we know of who were scandalized by Carpocrates (as indicated, at least, by their rhetoric) were the heresiologists; and most of them wrote long after Carpocrates lived and in an attempt to defame him.

In the end, however, Pétrement set a helpful trend in research by depicting Carpocrates as both a Christian and as a philosopher. Like Basilides, Carpocrates

transformed Christianity as much as possible into a philosophy.⁴⁸ This viewpoint, though not stated in quite so bald a fashion, would be confirmed in later research.⁴⁹

Winrich A. Löhr

In the mid-1990s, Winrich Löhr published two groundbreaking articles, one on Epiphanes (1993) and another on Carpocrates (1995).⁵⁰ In the former, Löhr helpfully outlines the flow of Epiphanes's thought, discusses his philosophical influences (Platonic, Cynic, and Stoic), and reviews the scholarly interpretations. Löhr points out that Epiphanes's discussion of private property and the "community of women" remained theoretical. Epiphanes, that is, made no concrete recommendations about sharing property, let alone women.⁵¹ The point of Epiphanes's argument, for Löhr, was theological. Epiphanes not only degraded the Judean deity from high God to faulty legislator, but he also renounced this deity in preference for a just creator. Löhr thus sought to place Epiphanes in a theological spectrum with other early Christian theologians who denied the ultimacy and superiority of the Judean deity (for instance, Marcion and the so-called "Antitactae").⁵² Unfortunately, Löhr's interpretation is valid only on the view that the "Old Testament god" is indeed the "legislator" whom Epiphanes criticized. The legislator could also be the human figure Moses (as will be argued in Chapter 1).

Löhr's 1995 article, "Karpokratianisches," is, in the main, an analysis of Irenaeus's report on Carpocrates (*AH* 1.25.1–6). It argues that Carpocratians, if they were libertine with regard to rejecting Jewish law, were not morally loose. Accusations of licentiousness were part and parcel of heresiological strategies and should not be accepted at face value. Along the way, Löhr makes the case for Carpocratians as Christians informed by certain Platonizing philosophical themes such as transmigration, the deified philosopher hero, and the acceptance of a higher morality above human regulations.⁵³

To say with Löhr that Carpocratians taught "Christianity as a philosophy" is certainly defensible. Nevertheless, it only highlights half the story.⁵⁴ It prioritizes the doctrines of elite literate teachers and does not sufficiently look at the practical side of the movement—the image worship, aural cauterization, the role of grace, the works of faith and love, scriptural readings, divinatory practices, and so on. Carpocratian Christianity gives every indication of being a religious movement. As Löhr well knows, some ancient philosophical groups were also religious groups, and vice versa.⁵⁵ This was also the case for Carpocratians.⁵⁶

Michael Allan Williams

In his landmark study, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (1996), Michael Williams further undermined the libertarian reading of the Carpocratians. After redescribing Irenaeus's report (*AH* 1.25), Williams noted that Clement's notice on Epiphanes is doctrinally dissimilar to what Irenaeus said, thus raising doubts about Irenaeus's overall accuracy. The Carpocratian goal of imitating Jesus in his triumph over the passions hardly

confirms their reputed licentiousness. Irenaeus is frankly inconsistent: despite the supposedly Carpocratian teaching that one must perform every possible work, Irenaeus never accuses them of trying to “commit absolutely *every* human deed.”⁵⁷ Irenaeus himself, as Williams underscores, could not believe that Carpocratians practiced the crass immoralities of which they were accused (*AH* 1.25.5). Here it is best simply to quote Williams’s own summary:

Given the secondhand nature of his [Irenaeus’s] information and then the hesitation he himself expresses about believing reports of their behavior, given the seeming inconsistency in his account, and given his polemical objectives, it is possible that his reconstruction not only contains a degree of intentional misrepresentation but is also based in the first place on some fundamental misinterpretations.⁵⁸

Guy G. Stroumsa

In 1999, Guy Stroumsa published a book chapter on Epiphanes’s *On Justice*, an English version of a German essay that had appeared the year before.⁵⁹ Although his study appeared after those of Löhr and Williams, Stroumsa continued to frame Epiphanes and Carpocrates in terms of the amorphous category of “Gnosticism”—which, for Stroumsa, involved the rejection of Israel’s deity and “antinomian practices.”⁶⁰ Stroumsa reports, and seemingly accepts, both Irenaeus’s account of Carpocrates and Clement’s views on Epiphanes without much question.⁶¹ He situates Epiphanes’s discussion in the frame of “gnostic” justice in general, expanding on the teaching of Elchasai and Mani. Stroumsa concludes that Epiphanes did not discard justice or law. Rather, he changed their meaning “from their original biblical, Jewish, and early Christian meaning.”⁶² Law no longer meant revealed law, but the law of nature. Justice, in turn, was internalized to refer to Pauline justification.

Both conclusions are questionable in my view. Despite Stroumsa’s methodology, quotations from Paul on topics other than justification cannot serve as evidence that Epiphanes conceived of justice as justification.⁶³ It is mistaken, furthermore, to assume that viewing law as natural law would no longer be “Jewish” or “Christian” (both Philo and Clement, for instance, selectively embraced natural law as divine law). Stroumsa was apparently still working with fairly rigid categories wherein “Gnosticism” did not or could not overlap too much with “Judaism” or “Christianity.” His use of bounded categories is outdated, as is his acceptance of the heresiological claim that “Carpocratian Gnosticism” transformed “what was forbidden into religious duties.”⁶⁴

Kathy L. Gaca

Kathy L. Gaca (2003) offered the third significant treatment of Epiphanes published in less than a decade.⁶⁵ She depicts him as a “Gnostic Christian Platonist” who adapted Stoic *eros* “in a communal Christian form.”⁶⁶ With depth and

aplomb, she excavates the background of Epiphanes's thought in the doctrines of Plato, yet more so in the Old Stoa (mainly Zeno and Chrysippus). It was only predictable that Epiphanes's thought would come into conflict with Clement's view of marriage, which was nourished, according to Gaca, by Pythagorean and later Stoic thought.

Gaca's work presents many important insights and is well worth study. My main concern is that she portrays Epiphanes as opting for "the communal sexual principles of Plato and the early Stoics," *over and against* the Septuagintal and Pauline legacy, which Epiphanes "expressly criticizes for being misguided and unjust."⁶⁷ Perhaps this judgment suffices as Gaca's particular reconstruction (she offers an extensive account of Pauline sexual ethics). If, however, we are concerned with representing Epiphanes's own point of view, he would not have presented himself, I think, as a critic of Paul or of the Septuagint as a whole. Epiphanes never explicitly criticized Paul, and his comments against the Septuagint were limited, as far as we know from his fragments, to a single passage (Exod 20:17 // Deut 5:21). Far from opposing Christian scripture, Epiphanes interwove his eclectic (mainly Stoic and Platonic, but also Cynic) philosophy into his reading of scripture.

Gaca's further assertion that Epiphanes viewed marriage as "the preeminent transgression of natural law" also requires nuancing.⁶⁸ Despite the claims of some social conservatives (ancient and modern), the human idea of marriage—in all its diversity—was and is a fairly flexible concept. According to Diogenes the Cynic, for instance, marriage was nothing but the state of man persuading a woman to cohabit with him (DL, *Vita Phil.* 6.72). One can agree with Gaca that Epiphanes opposed monogamy, but not necessarily "marriage" *per se*—an institution radically redefined by Plato, Zeno, Diogenes, and perhaps Epiphanes himself.

Birger A. Pearson

Birger A. Pearson's treatment of Carpocrates comes from his survey *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (2007). Although his account mostly consists of redescription, Pearson shows critical engagement by questioning the heresiological reports. Starting from Clement's testimony about Epiphanes, Pearson notes that neither Carpocrates nor Epiphanes can be called "Gnostics." Irenaeus portrayed Carpocrates as gnostic by introducing a doctrine of angelic creation (AH 1.25.1). Nevertheless, "we are entitled to question whether Carpocrates posited the split between the transcendent God and the world creators" because the teaching is not found in the excerpts from Epiphanes.⁶⁹ "The 'monadic Gnosis' mentioned by Clement would presumably indicate that Epiphanes and other Carpocratians in Alexandria taught a single divine principle and made no distinction between a transcendent deity and a lower creator." Accordingly, "Either Irenaeus was wrong about what he said or the [Roman] Carpocratians known to him" had adopted dualism as opposed to the Carpocratian monists in Alexandria.⁷⁰ I myself do not think there is evidence of such a large theological disagreement between Carpocratians in Rome and Alexandria.

Thomas J. Whitley

Thomas J. Whitley completed his dissertation on the Carpocratians in 2016. Overall, Whitley's presentation of the evidence is critical and compelling. If he merits any criticism, it is perhaps because he credits Irenaeus too much. Irenaeus, according to Whitley, "remained fairly faithful in transmitting their [Carpocratian] views." He also thinks that Irenaeus's presentation of "Carpocratianism as a complete and logical system lends credibility to his discussion."⁷¹

Although one can agree with Whitley that we cannot dismiss a work because its author aimed to marginalize opponents,⁷² Irenaeus is for other reasons not a consistently reliable witness to Carpocrates. Irenaeus never cited the sources of his information, he tended to contaminate and assimilate reports on various figures, and his overall framework—grouping Carpocratians into an omnibus category of "gnostics" going back to Simon of Samaria—results in distortions that are still very much with us today.⁷³

To be sure, Irenaeus did not completely confound the doctrines of his opponents. All the same, one should question Whitley's observation that "When claims about 'gnostics' in Irenaeus' work are compared with the Nag Hammadi library, he is regularly shown to have been accurate in his descriptions and quotations."⁷⁴ The fact that Irenaeus's work selectively overlaps with material found at Nag Hammadi is indisputable. The most famous case here is the overlap in Irenaeus *AH* 1.29 with the aeonology section of the *Apocryphon of John* (BG 26.6–39.6; NHC II,1 2.10–10.28). At the same time, overlap does not always mean strict accuracy. There are important differences, for instance, between *AH* 1.29 and aeonology of the *Apocryphon*. In this case, Irenaeus had an original document—not necessarily our *Apocryphon of John*—before him which he summarized. His summaries seem to be basically faithful. When it comes to the Carpocrates report, however, Irenaeus was mainly taking over a *previous heresiological report* on Carpocrates—a report which was probably written after Carpocrates's death, based on indirect sources (including rumor), and designed to destroy Carpocrates's reputation as a Christian. If Irenaeus had Carpocratian treatises at his disposal, as he claims, he did not summarize them at length; and he made only a small effort to revise the Carpocrates report which he inherited.

In discerning Irenaeus's overall accuracy, one must also take into account cases in which Irenaeus's testimony stands in tension with Nag Hammadi materials. In my view, Nag Hammadi and related literature does not, in the main, confirm Irenaeus's claims, for instance, about a Valentinian second baptism (*AH* 1.21.1–2), the libertinism of his opponents (1.13.5–7; 1.25.5), or his genealogizing (tracing all opposing sects back to Simon, making Saturninus and Basilides students of Menander, and so on).⁷⁵ Indeed, given the overwhelmingly ascetic features of Nag Hammadi texts, the excoriations of Carpocratian "licentiousness" seem somewhat out of place.

To return to Whitley: he seems to be influenced by Morton Smith's maximalist approach of reading Carpocratians in Clement. The Carpocratians, according to Whitley, are said to approach life as a matter of indifference. This point he derives

from Clement, *Stromata* 3.5.41.4. Yet in this passage, Carpocratians are not mentioned; their presence must be inferred. Likewise, Whitley urges, on the basis of *Stromata* 3.8.61.1, that Carpocratians defended moral indifference on the basis of Romans 6:14 (“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”). Once again, however, Carpocratians are not referred to in this passage.⁷⁶

Whitley also occasionally goes beyond the evidence in Clement when there is insufficient reason. For instance, Whitley is “confident” that “wives in common” is a teaching that “can be traced back” to Carpocratians, although he admits “we have no solid evidence that the group actually practiced this type of communalism.” He thinks that Epiphaneas “defends and justifies” having wives in common with “vigor”⁷⁷—yet not even Clement argued this point. Epiphaneas argued for the injustice of private property and criticized the command not to desire a neighbor’s wife (Exodus 20:17).

One can agree with Whitley that the categories of “Christian” and “Greco-Roman” were socially constructed both in antiquity and today.⁷⁸ On the other hand, it seems that Whitley’s desire to portray Carpocratianism as an anti-ascetic movement led him to accept too readily some heresiological claims (for instance, that wives were common, that the categories of good and evil were human constructions, that one must experience everything to escape the world).⁷⁹ One senses that Morton Smith’s libertinist reading of the Carpocratians stands in the background, despite the fact that Whitley rightly criticizes Smith’s excesses in this regard.⁸⁰

Izabela Jurasz

The 2017 article by Izabela Jurasz, “Carpocrate et Epiphane: chrétiens et platoniciens radicaux,” is largely an exposition of the Carpocratian reports in Irenaeus and Clement.⁸¹ Jurasz’s overall purpose is to show the doctrinal connections uniting Carpocrates and Epiphaneas. She gives due weight to the Carpocratian interpretation of scripture (both Pauline and gospel texts) and of Platonic writings (mostly the *Phaedrus* and *Republic*). Her expositions are careful and critical. She recognizes, for instance, that heresiologists did not witness the supposedly immoral behavior of the Carpocratians. Heresiologists only had access to Carpocratian doctrines, and they inferred immoral practices from the doctrines. Jurasz helpfully underscores the compatible Christian and philosophic identities of Carpocrates and Epiphaneas. Her exposition of the Platonic background of both thinkers is helpful, as is her suggestion that there were Cynic influences that deserve further exploration.⁸²

There is not much to contend with here. One might only take issue with Jurasz’s overly general language that, for Epiphaneas, nature “is opposed to law.” According to Jurasz, Epiphaneas attempted, from an “antinomian perspective,” to refute law in general.⁸³ These statements are only valid if we assume that human laws are in view. Epiphaneas was, in my view, a supporter of law, if by law we mean natural and divine law. In addition, Jurasz may go too far in saying that

Epiphanes proposed “the establishment of a community of goods and women.”⁸⁴ The surviving excerpts from *On Justice* do not indicate that Epiphanes made any concrete proposals. Instead, they show that Epiphanes, still very much on the level of theory, argued that private property was unnatural.

Methodology and roadmap

Such are the main scholarly treatments of Carpocrates to date. They show how far scholars have come in the past 40 years or so. Carpocrates and his heirs are no longer automatically shunted into the global category of “Gnosticism,” and interpreted through a heresiological framework. Elements of heresiological categories and interpretation, however, still have a tendency to linger, especially in brief encyclopedic articles and popular literature online.

It is time now to explain the approach and structure of the present volume. In some ways, the material treated here is more limited than that outlined by Smith and Whitley. Both of these scholars have provided an important service by collecting the evidence for Carpocratians from the second to the twelfth century CE. Smith mainly provided the sources in Latin and Greek (from transcribed selections of now dated scholarly editions). For his part, Whitley offers English translations of these same texts, though not all of his translations are reliable.⁸⁵ Their labors of collecting, listing, and translating the sources will not be replicated here. My goal is more modest: to understand Carpocratians in the second century CE, which is the only century, it seems, in which they thrived.

Whitley claims that his reconstruction of the Carpocratians engages “every single claim made about Carpocrates, Epiphanes and the Carpocratians between the second and the twelfth centuries.”⁸⁶ I do not make this claim, largely because virtually all the sources after Clement of Alexandria, and certainly after Epiphanius in the late fourth century CE, are derivative in nature. This means that, even if later sources seem to add new information, they had no other sources beyond what we possess. The “new” information of later writers consisted of their own inferences, most of which are polemical and insecure. In this situation, an appeal to the criterion of multiple attestation is useless. It does not matter how many writers attest a certain datum if almost all these writers depend on a single source (usually Irenaeus or, after the fourth century CE, Epiphanius).

The only three genuinely independent, early, and extensive sources for understanding Carpocratian Christianity are Celsus (via Origen), Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. Clement’s witness, moreover, should be prioritized because he is the only source that provides a direct quote—some 520 words—from a Carpocratian who also happened to be Carpocrates’s son. It is therefore necessary to begin with and to prioritize the testimony of Epiphanes.

The study of Epiphanes’s *On Justice* has, in the past 30 years, received something of a renaissance. Yet since dictionary articles and popular treatments of the Carpocratians still tend to prioritize Irenaeus’s secondary report (*AH* 1.25), the rationale for preferring Epiphanes must be further explained. It seems fair to suppose that if we were writing the history of a movement and had two sorts of