

Pre-Christian Gnosticism

A Survey of the Proposed Evidences

Edwin M. Yamauchi

Second Edition

Wipf and Stock Publishers
EUGENE, OREGON

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3
Eugene, Oregon 97401

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A Survey of the Proposed Evidences
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Copyright©1973 by Yamauchi, Edwin M.
ISBN: 1-59244-396-6
Publication date 10/14/2003
Previously published by Baker Book House, 1973

The original edition was published in 1973 in London by Tyndale Press,
and in Grand Rapids by Eerdmans.
A second revised edition was published in 1983 in Grand Rapids by Baker
Book House.

To my son Brian

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FOREWORD

'It all depends what you mean . . .' was a gambit which listeners came to associate with the late Cyril Joad when he answered questions as a member of the BBC Brains Trust in the early years of World War II. A number of people found its constant repetition mildly amusing, but of course he was absolutely right. There cannot be rational discussion of any subject unless the participants are agreed on the meaning of the terms they use, and this is as true in New Testament studies as it is everywhere else.

The necessity of clear definition is particularly important when such terms as 'Gnosis' and 'Gnosticism' are used. New Testament interpreters will tell us that the 'human tradition' against which Paul warns the Christians of Colossae was a form of Gnosticism, or they may qualify it as 'incipient Gnosticism'. Others, pre-eminently Rudolf Bultmann, will tell us that what we are given in the Gospel of John is a demythologized and Christianized version of a pre-Christian Gnostic source. How are we to evaluate these and similar accounts of our first-century Christian literature?

First, by definition. If we stick closely to the etymology of 'Gnostic' and related terms, then every form of religion which makes the true knowledge of God fundamental has a claim to be called 'Gnostic'. But we know that the meaning of terms is decided by their use, not their etymology, and the use of 'Gnostic' and related terms is more restricted than that. When, however, we examine the actual use of these terms, we find a wide variation. There is indeed a general agreement to limit the terms to those schemes which reflect the myth of the Redeemed Redeemer (sometimes also identified with Primal Man) who descends to the prison-house of matter to deliver from it, by revealing the true knowledge, the heavenly essence

which is held in thralldom there since it fell from the upper world of light. But to what degree, or in what form, this myth must be reflected in a scheme if that scheme is to be called 'Gnostic', is something on which there is no unanimity. Hence the need for definition.

Second, by studying the evidence. For the most part, our surviving evidence for Gnosticism is considerably later than the New Testament period – so much so that the protagonists of pre-Christian Gnostic influence on the New Testament are countered by others who maintain that the distinctive features of Gnosticism in the narrower sense are best accounted for in terms of Christian influence. When two such directly opposed positions can be held, we may suspect that the evidence is ambiguous, or that powerful *a priori* factors are at work. In any case, the complicated problem can be resolved only by a dispassionate and comprehensive study of all the available evidence. The available evidence continues to increase in volume as more of the Nag Hammadi documents are published. It may be that some of these documents, when they have been carefully examined, will give clearer answers than have been possible thus far to questions of the existence and nature of pre-Christian Gnosticism. Unfortunately, we get the impression at times that existing presuppositions are unconsciously allowed too much weight in the interpretation of new material as it comes to light.

In this situation Dr Yamauchi, who has already established his reputation as an authority in the field of Mandaean studies, helps us greatly both in defining our terms and in evaluating the evidence. He surveys the whole range of Gnosticism and gives us an up-to-date assessment of the present state of the question. With this 'Guide to the Perplexed' many New Testament students will be able to grasp and to judge more intelligently authoritative but conflicting assertions about Gnostic influence which they would otherwise be unable to control. It is a pleasure to welcome and recommend Dr Yamauchi's work.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The following monograph is an expansion of the Tyndale Lecture for Biblical Archaeology presented before the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research in July 1970, at Cambridge. I would like to express my warm thanks for the hospitality shown to me by Alan Millard of the University of Liverpool, Gordon Wenham of the University of Belfast, and Derek Kidner, the Warden, during my stay at Tyndale House.

I am indebted to Professor David Scholer of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for allowing me to have a pre-publication copy of his *Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1948-1969* (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1971), which was of inestimable help. My warm thanks go also to Professor Malcolm Peel of Coe College, who permitted me to examine the unpublished portion of his Yale dissertation, 'The Epistle to Rheginos: A Study in Gnostic Eschatology and Its Use of the New Testament' (1966).

This work would not have been possible without the wholehearted co-operation of Mr Leland S. Dutton, Research Resources Librarian of Miami University, and of his staff in securing inter-library loans.

My research has benefited from grants from the Rutgers University Research Council, and the Miami University Research Council. A grant from the discretionary fund of the provost of Miami University helped to pay for travel expenses to England. Also of assistance was a grant from the American Philosophical Society, which was primarily used to examine unpublished Mandaic manuscripts in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The publishers and I are grateful for a subvention grant from the provost of Miami University, which has helped to make the publication of the manuscript possible.

I am especially appreciative of the suggestions which were made by Professor F. F. Bruce of Manchester University, Alan Millard of Liverpool University, and Andrew Helmbold of Tidewater College, who were kind enough to read the manuscript.

Last but not least I am thankful to my wife, Kimie, for her help as I wrote this manuscript.¹

¹ The manuscript was completed at the end of 1971; a few additions were incorporated in June 1972. An important work which I obtained too late to incorporate into the manuscript is L. Schottroff, *Der Glaubende und die feindliche Welt* (1970). The author subscribes in part to Schmithal's thesis and seeks to prove that the Gospel of John is a Gnostic document.

Papers on the Nag Hammadi texts have been contributed by P. Perkins, *Society of Biblical Literature, Seminar Papers* (1971), I, pp. 165-177, and by D. M. Parrott, *idem*, II, pp. 397-416; by G. W. MacRae, C. W. Hedrick, P. Perkins and F. Wisse in *Society of Biblical Literature, Proceedings* (1972), II, pp. 573-607.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am grateful to Baker Book House for issuing a second edition of the following monograph, as this allows me to summarize the developments of the past decade (1972–1983) in the stimulating, controversial, and at times confusing subject of ‘pre-Christian Gnosticism’.

Public interest in Gnosticism has been aroused by reports in the media, *e.g.* ‘The World Haters’, *Time* (9 June 1975), pp. 46–47, and by the widely publicized work of Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979). Pagels, a scholar of the first rank, has written a controversial work which has evoked both praise and sharp criticism.¹

Scholarly investigation of Gnosticism has been especially spurred by the publication of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1977) by James M. Robinson and his team of scholars. In the latest supplement (XI) to his indispensable ‘Bibliographia Gnostica’, *NovTest* 24 (1982), pp. 340–368, David M. Scholer has listed the 5,139th publication on the subject. In his original work, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1948–1969* (1971), he had listed 2,425 items. In other words, nearly 3,000 books, articles, and reviews on Gnosticism have been published in the last decade!

While most of the reviews of the first edition have been

¹ J. A. Fitzmyer, ‘The Gnostic Gospels according to Pagels’, *America* (16 February 1980), pp. 122–124; G. Stroumsa, ‘The Gnostic Temptation’, *Numen* 28 (1980), pp. 278–286; K. McVey, ‘Gnosticism, Feminism and Elaine Pagels’, *Theology Today* 37 (1981), pp. 498–501.

generous,² there have been three frequently made criticisms to which I would like to respond:

1. The discussion of topics such as the Hermetica was admittedly quite compressed and consequently difficult for one unacquainted with the subject to follow. In chapter 12, therefore, I have included, as an aid to the uninitiated reader, references to articles of an introductory nature which I have written on such subjects.

2. The subtitle was perhaps misunderstood, in that the 'Survey of Proposed Evidences' was not so much a survey of the primary evidences as it was one of the opinions of scholars on the evidences. Analysis of the primary documents is absolutely necessary but is also very technical and often tedious. My purpose was not to expose the reader directly to the texts but to the judgements of scholars who work first-hand with the texts.

Even the scholarly specialist has to rely upon the judgements of other scholars in areas outside of his own expertise. However, only a wide and diligent reading of a mass of materials will prevent the non-specialist's being affected by 'tunnel vision'. And in the case of texts used as evidences to support the case for a pre-Christian Gnosticism, even specialists disagree on interpretations of the texts because they experience 'tunnel vision' to some extent. (For those who want to examine the varying interpretations, the necessary documentation is provided in the footnotes.)

3. Because of the fragmentary evidence and subjective judgements involved, a pre-Christian Gnosticism must be considered possible. I am well aware of the dangers of a sceptical attitude toward either classical or biblical traditions because of the fallacy of arguments from silence, that is, the lack of archaeological or textual evidence.³ However, the analogy is not quite the same. In the case of pre-Christian Gnosticism we are

² E.g. E. Ferguson, *Restoration Quarterly* 17 (1974), pp. 118-119; W. H. C. Frend, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), pp. 88-89; G. W. MacRae, *CBQ* 36 (1974), pp. 296-297; E. H. Pagels, *Theological Studies* 35 (1974), pp. 775-776; M. Peel, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43 (1975), pp. 329-331; G. Quispel, *Louvain Studies* 5 (1974), pp. 211-212, and *BiOr* 32. 3-4 (1975), pp. 260-261; D. M. Scholer, *Christianity Today*, 10 May 1974, p. 72; G. C. Stead, *JTS* 26 (1975), p. 187; J. D. Turner, *JBL* 93 (1974), pp. 482-484; and R. McL. Wilson, *The Expository Times* 84 (1973), p. 379.

³ See my *The Stones and the Scriptures* (1981), ch 4.

dealing with a scholarly hypothesis rather than with a phenomenon explicitly attested in first-century documents.

Some scholars will continue to use later evidences as a necessary and illuminating hermeneutic to 'flesh out' the background of earlier periods. Other scholars will remain sceptical of a full-fledged Gnosticism in the first century on the basis of the evidences available to us – and rightly so in my judgement.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the many scholars, not all of whom agree with me, who generously shared their publications with me. These include R. van den Broek, F. F. Bruce, R. Allen Culpepper, E. Earle Ellis, J. A. Fitzmyer, W. Ward Gasque, Andrew Helmbold, Albert Henrichs, Ludwig Koenen, Enrique López, Rudolf Macuch, I. Howard Marshall, Elaine Pagels, Birger Pearson, Malcolm Peel, Simone Pétrement, Gilles Quispel, David Scholer, Glenn Shellrude, Werner Sundermann, Robert McL. Wilson, Frederik Wisse, and Dwight Young.

I would like to express my particular gratitude to Professor Robert McL. Wilson, who was kind enough to read the manuscript of the new chapter and to offer suggestions and corrections. Readers will wish to consult the *Festschrift* in his honor, *The New Testament and Gnosis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, forthcoming), which contains many important articles on our subject.

ABBREVIATIONS

ATFG	Tröger, <i>Altes Testament-Frühjudentum-Gnosis</i>
BiOr	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis</i>
Cairo	Wilson, <i>Nag Hammadi and Gnosis</i>
CBQ	<i>The Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CG	<i>Cairensis Gnosticus, i.e. the Nag Hammadi texts</i>
CMC	Henrichs and Koenen, <i>Cologne Mani Codex</i>
ET	English Translation
GEMO	Yamauchi, <i>Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins</i>
GL	Left <i>Ginza</i>
GNT	Tröger, <i>Gnosis und Neues Testament</i>
GR	Right <i>Ginza</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IDBS	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume</i>
ISBE	<i>The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCSD	Sanders, <i>Jewish and Christian Self-Definition</i>
Jonas	Aland, <i>Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas</i>
JTS	<i>The Journal of Theological Studies</i>
Labib	Krause, <i>Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib</i>
Louvain	Ries, <i>Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique</i>
New Haven I	Layton, <i>The Rediscovery of Gnosticism I: The School of Valentinus</i>
New Haven II	Layton, <i>The Rediscovery of Gnosticism II: Sethian Gnosticism</i>
NHL	Robinson, <i>The Nag Hammadi Library in English</i>
Nov Test	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTA I	Hennecke and Schneemelcher, <i>New Testament Apocrypha I</i>
NTA II	Hennecke and Schneemelcher, <i>New Testament Apocrypha II</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OG	Bianchi, <i>Le Origini dello Gnosticismo</i>
OLZ	<i>Orientalistische Literaturzeitung</i>
Oxford-1	Krause, <i>Gnosis and Gnosticism</i> (1977)
Oxford-2	Krause, <i>Gnosis and Gnosticism</i> (1981)
PCG	Yamauchi, <i>Pre-Christian Gnosticism</i>
Quebec	Barc, <i>Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi</i>

<i>Quispel</i>	van den Broek and Vermaseren, <i>Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RechSR</i>	<i>Recherche de Science Religieuse</i>
<i>RevSR</i>	<i>Revue des Sciences Religieuses</i>
<i>RGG³</i>	<i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , 3rd edition
<i>RThPh</i>	<i>Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie</i>
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SSR</i>	Bianchi, <i>Studi di Storia Religiosa della tarda antichità</i>
<i>Stockholm</i>	Widengren, <i>Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism</i>
<i>Strasbourg</i>	Ménard, <i>Les textes de Nag Hammadi</i>
<i>StTh</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>ThLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>ThR</i>	<i>Theologische Rundschau</i>
<i>Trajectories</i>	Robinson and Koester, <i>Trajectories through Early Christianity</i>
<i>VigChr</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
<i>ZRGG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important issues facing New Testament scholarship today is the issue of Gnosticism. The publication in 1969–1971 of English translations of Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*, of Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, of Rudolf Bultmann's *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, and of Walter Schmithals's *Das Kirchliche Apostelamt* and *Die Gnosis in Korinth*, and the ongoing publication of Qumran, Mandaic, and Coptic texts make this a most appropriate time for considering the broad questions concerning the relationships between Gnosticism and the New Testament.

Was there a pre-Christian Gnosticism? How fully developed was Gnosticism in the first century? Did Gnosticism directly or indirectly influence nascent Christianity? How have new texts and new studies affected the situation today? What methodological assumptions undergird the work of scholars who accept a pre-Christian Gnosticism?

I. PROBLEMS IN DEFINING GNOSTICISM

One of the immediate problems facing us is the definition of 'Gnosticism' and of 'Gnostic'. On the one hand, we have those who would define Gnosticism very narrowly and, on the other hand, we have those who would define the phenomenon quite broadly. Thus one man's Gnosticism may be simply another man's Mysticism, Esoterism, Docetism, or Encratism. Those who will accept only a 'narrow' definition of Gnosticism do not find any conclusive evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism, whereas those scholars who operate with a 'broad' definition

of Gnosticism find it not only in the New Testament but in many other early documents as well.

To begin with, van Baaren, who thinks that it is not possible to give 'a short definition' of Gnosticism, lists sixteen characteristics of mature Gnosticism:

1. 'Gnosis considered as knowledge is not primarily intellectual, but is based upon revelation and is necessary for the attainment of full salvation.'

2. 'There is an essential connection between the concept of gnosis as it appears in gnosticism and the concept of time and space that is found there. . . .'

3. 'Gnosticism claims to have a revelation of its own which is essentially secret. . . .'

4. 'The Old Testament is usually rejected with more or less force. If not fully rejected it is interpreted allegorically. The same method of exegesis is as a rule chosen for the New Testament.'

5. 'God is conceived as transcendent. . . . God is conceived as beyond the comprehension of human thought and at the same time as the invariably good. . . . Nearly always evil is inherent in matter in the manner of a physical quality. The cosmological opposition between God and matter is correlated with the ethical opposition of good and evil. God's transcendence may be qualified by the appearance of various beings intermediate between God and the Cosmos, usually called aeons. These beings are as a rule conceived as divine emanations.'

6. 'The world is regarded with a completely pessimistic view. The cosmos was not created by God, but, at most, it is the work of a demiurge who made the world either against God's will, or in ignorance of it. . . .'

7. 'In the world and in mankind pneumatic and material elements are mixed. The pneumatic elements have their origin in God and are the cause of the desire to return to God. . . .'

8. 'Human beings are divided into three classes, according to whether they have gnosis or not. The pneumatics, who possess full gnosis, are by their nature admitted to full salvation. Those who have only pistis ("faith"), may at least attain a certain degree of salvation. Those who are fully taken up with the material world have no chance of salvation at all.'

9. 'Gnosticism makes a clear difference between pistis and gnosis.'

10. 'The essentially dualistic world-view leads as a rule to an extremely ascetic system of ethics, but in some cases we find an "Umwertung aller Werte" expressed in complete libertinism.'

11. 'Gnosticism is a religion of revolt.'

12. 'Gnosticism appeals to the desire to belong to an elite.'

13. 'In connection with the basic dualism there is a strong tendency to differentiate between the Heavenly Saviour and the human shape of Jesus of Nazareth. This has led to varying solutions of which docetism is the most prominent one.'

14. 'In most systems Christ is regarded as the great point of reversal in the cosmic process. As evil has come into existence by the fall of a former aeon, so Christ ushers in salvation because he proclaims the unknown God, the good God who had remained a stranger until that moment.'

15. 'In connection with the person of the saviour we often find the conception of the salvator salvatus or salvandus (the "redeemed redeemer").'

16. 'In connection with the basic dualism salvation is usually conceived as a complete severing of all ties between the world and the spiritual part of man. This is exemplified in the myth of the ascension of the soul.'¹

Now how many of these elements are truly essential, since it is obvious that not all of these items will be found in any given system of Gnosticism? Goedicke suggests four basic propositions:

'First, the postulation of an Absolute outside of the immanent world which is the source of Gnosis.'

'Second, man as an intellectual immanent being partaking of the Gnosis.'

'Third, the partaking as the way to overcome the material world, and as such, Gnosis as salvation.'

'Fourth, Gnosis as understanding of the spiritually structured cosmos.'²

Most scholars would agree that quite essential to Gnosticism is a radical ontological dualism between the divine and the created, inasmuch as the creation of the world and matter has resulted from ignorance and error. According to Daniélou, 'It is this radical dualism, therefore, which is the properly Gnostic element, not the various images through which it is expressed.'³ This dualism also implies an anticosmic enmity against the material world and its creator-demiurge.⁴ Jonas draws the distinction between mysticism and Gnosticism on the basis of this dualism:

'A Gnosticism without a fallen god, without benighted creator and sinister creation, without alien soul, cosmic captivity and acosmic

¹ T. P. van Baaren, 'Towards a Definition of Gnosticism', in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo* (hereafter abbreviated *OG*; 1967), pp. 178-180.

² H. Goedicke, 'The Gnostic Concept - Considerations about Its Origin', in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Studi di Storia Religiosa della tarda antichità* (hereafter abbreviated *SSR*; 1968), pp. 67-68.

³ J. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (1964), p. 73.

⁴ U. Bianchi in *OG*, p. 3. Cf. U. Bianchi, 'Le problème des origines du gnosticisme et l'histoire des religions', *Numen* 12 (1965), p. 176.

salvation, without the self-redeeming of the Deity – in short: a Gnosis without divine tragedy will not meet specifications.’⁵

Scholars who accept a ‘high’ or ‘narrow’ definition would distinguish a developed system of Gnosticism from merely ‘gnostic’ elements. Daniélou, however, when he speaks of a pre-Christian ‘gnosticism’, is speaking of esoteric Jewish knowledge which was later incorporated into mature Gnosticism.⁶ His Jewish ‘gnosis’ refers to cosmological speculations based on an esoteric exegesis of Genesis.⁷ Likewise when he speaks of ‘gnosis’ in Paul’s writings he is referring to the knowledge of eschatological secrets rather than to the developed Gnosticism assumed by Bultmannian scholars. He writes:

‘Gnosis in Jewish Christian writings belongs to the same complex of ideas. It is the knowledge of eschatological secrets, with an especial emphasis, already examined, on the exegesis of Cosmic mysteries in the opening of *Genesis*; but it is also more than this, it is the knowledge of the fulfilment of these eschatological events in Christ.’⁸

On the other hand, a scholar such as Pétrement would not regard ‘gnosis’ or ‘knowledge’ in such a Jewish sense as ‘Gnosticism’. She writes, ‘Gnosticism does not consist merely of the use of the word “gnosis”; it is a teaching that is concerned with the relations of God, man, and the world, and this teaching is nowhere found, it seems, before Christianity.’⁹ She points out that in no alleged reference to Gnosticism in the New Testament is there any statement which places the Creator God, the God of Genesis, in the ranks of inferior powers.¹⁰

Those who recognize a development of Gnosticism roughly synchronous with Christianity but attested only in its incipient stages in the later books of the New Testament wish carefully to distinguish between what may be ‘gnostic’ in a broad sense and what can be proven to be ‘Gnostic’ in a developed sense. Wilson, who represents the more cautious British and Ameri-

⁵ H. Jonas in J. P. Hyatt (ed.), *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (1965), p. 293.

⁶ J. Daniélou, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁹ S. Pétrement, ‘Le Colloque de Messine et le problème du gnosticisme’, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 72 (1967), p. 371.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

can approach to the issue of Gnosticism and the New Testament, expounds this position:

'To sum up, while the gnostic movement in the broader sense is certainly wider than Christianity, and while we may reasonably speak of "gnostic" or "gnosticising" tendencies in the pre-Christian period, it is dangerous in the extreme to attempt too rigid a drawing of the lines, or to attempt to find anything like the developed Gnosticism of a later period at this early stage. In particular there are dangers in a loose and ill-considered use of the label "gnostic" in relation to concepts and terminology, for some "gnostic" concepts only become gnostic in the context of the Gnostic systems, and may be entirely neutral in other contexts.'¹¹

German scholars in particular, however, have been accustomed to use the terms 'Gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' in a much broader and looser sense. Bultmann, for example, discerns an early type of Gnosticism in the prologue of John's Gospel, the *Odes of Solomon, etc.*, which is so reduced or denatured that there is no tragic split in the Godhead. He has been able readily to detect Gnostic elements in Philo, the Hermetica and the New Testament. The Dutch scholar, G. Quispel, by using a psychological approach is able to discern modern Gnostic types of religiosity in the Rosicrucians, the Freemasons, and in Carl Jung.¹² Gnostic elements in the broadest sense have been found even among Buddhists and the Aztecs!¹³ It is apparent, as C. H. Dodd notes, that:

'The terms "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism" are used by modern writers in a confusing variety of senses. If they refer, as by etymology they should refer, to the belief that salvation is by knowledge, then there is a sense in which orthodox Christian theologians like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, on the one hand, and Hellenistic Jews like Philo, and pagan writers like the Hermetists, on the other, should be called Gnostics; and in this wide sense the terms are used by many recent writers, especially in Germany.'¹⁴

¹¹ R. McL. Wilson in *OG*, p. 525. Cf. R. McL. Wilson, 'Gnostics - in Galatia?' in *Studia Evangelica* IV. 1 (1968), p. 362: 'Numerous terms employed in the New Testament are current in the later Gnostic systems, and for that reason may be legitimately characterised as "gnostic"; but are they in the New Testament used in the Gnostic sense? And when we trace in a New Testament document ideas of a "gnostic" character, are we to assume the existence of a fully-developed Gnostic system?'

¹² G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (1951).

¹³ *OG*, pp. 651ff., 676ff.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953; repr. 1968), p. 97.

Because of such divergent and confusing uses of these terms, the congress on 'The Origins of Gnosticism', held at Messina in 1966,¹⁵ attempted to secure an agreement among scholars to use the terms 'pre-Gnostic' and 'proto-Gnostic'. 'Pre-Gnostic' would be used to designate elements in existence in pre-Christian times which were later incorporated into Gnosticism proper; 'pre-Gnostic' elements do not constitute 'Gnosticism' in the strict sense. On the other hand 'proto-Gnostic' would designate the early or incipient forms of Gnosticism which preceded the fully developed Gnosticism of the second century.¹⁶

Not every scholar would subscribe to such distinctions without a murmur. J. Munck, who wrote before the Messina conference, wished to reserve the term 'Gnosticism' for the fully developed phenomenon of the second century and to use the term 'syncretism' for earlier phenomena. He objected that a term such as 'proto-Gnostic' implies too many overtones of the developed system.¹⁷

On the other hand, K. Rudolph, who prefers a broader use of the term, argues that every form of 'gnosis' as a form of knowledge for an élite as 'soteriologisches Mittel' presupposes a system, and is therefore not merely 'gnosis' but 'Gnosticism'. Like Bultmann, Rudolph designates trends of heterodox Judaism as 'Gnostic', where others would call them 'pre-Gnostic'.¹⁸ In a similar fashion Kümmel, in speaking of the Colossian heresy, describes it as a form of Jewish Gnosticism: 'The preference for the term "Prägnosis" . . . is only a terminological difference.'¹⁹

¹⁵ Most of the papers have been printed in *OG*; a few have been printed in *SSR*.

¹⁶ G. W. MacRae, 'Gnosis in Messina', *CBQ* 28 (1966), p. 332; H. J. W. Drijvers, 'The Origins of Gnosticism as a Religious and Historical Problem', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 22 (1968), pp. 327-328.

¹⁷ J. Munck, 'The New Testament and Gnosticism', in W. Klassen and G. Snyder (eds), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (1962), pp. 236-237.

¹⁸ K. Rudolph, 'Randerscheinungen des Judentums und das Problem der Entstehung des Gnostizismus', *Kairos* 9 (1967), pp. 106-107. Cf. Drijvers, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

¹⁹ P. Feine, J. Behm, and W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (14th ed., 1966), p. 240.

Most recently, H. Koester seems to have despaired of establishing any clear-cut definitions:

'No less ambiguous and vague is the use of the term *gnostic* as a convenient tag for early Christian heresies. There may be different opinions about the origins of Gnosticism, whether it antedated Christianity . . . or whether it was an inner-Christian development in the second century A.D. Such questions are secondary. More important is the recognition of the indebtedness of Christianity as a whole to a theological development that bears many marks of what is customarily designated as "gnostic." The line between heretical and orthodox cannot be drawn by simply using the term *gnostic* for certain developments customarily designated in such fashion.'²⁰

But surely this is going too far in the direction of blurring all lines of differences. Though it is true that there is a great danger of extrapolating backwards into the first century connotations of later 'orthodoxy', 'heresy', and 'Gnosticism', and granted that certain indeterminate borderline cases did exist, there is none the less an essential difference between the core of Christianity and the core of Gnosticism which cannot be melded together.

Our own position follows closely that of Wilson's in distinguishing between pre-Gnostic elements and a fully developed Gnosticism. Where the cosmological dualism is not explicit but may be inferred, we would accept the possibility of proto-Gnosticism with the qualification that one cannot build elaborate hypotheses from ambiguous evidence.

Our primary task in this study is descriptive and analytical rather than expositional. In the chapters that follow we will first survey the attempts which have been made to interpret the New Testament on the basis of an assumed pre-Christian Gnosticism, and then examine the evidences which have been adduced to support the thesis of pre-Christian Gnosticism. We shall then conclude with a chapter criticizing some of the methodological fallacies which have been involved in the use of such evidences.

Before proceeding further, however, we shall need to give a brief outline of the history of research which has led to the opposition between the traditional view of post-Christian Gnosticism and the critical view of pre-Christian Gnosticism.

²⁰ H. Koester in J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (hereafter abbreviated *Trajectories*; 1971), pp. 115-116.

II. POST-CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

Until the twentieth century the traditional view of Gnosticism had been that presented in the writings of the Church Fathers who viewed Gnosticism as a Christian heresy. Among scholars who have affirmed this position are: A. Harnack, G. Kretschmar, H. Leisegang, F. C. Burkitt, J. Duchesne-Guillemin, T. W. Manson, E. Percy, H.-Ch. Puech, C. Schmidt, E. de Faye, R. P. Casey, J. Munck, and A. D. Nock.²¹

The most vigorous contemporary advocate of a post-Christian Gnosticism which developed only as a parasite upon Christianity is Simone Pétrement. She views even the non-Christian or pagan forms of Gnosticism as posterior to Christianity.

Mlle Pétrement argues that the Church Fathers were the contemporaries of Gnostics, and knew them at least as well as we do! Their view that Gnosticism was a post-Christian phenomenon would explain why we do not have a single pre-Christian Gnostic text. This would also be in accordance with the evidence that Gnosticism seems to have developed but gradually in the first century and seems not to have come into full bloom until the second century.

Non-Christian varieties of Gnosticism would have resulted from the progressive paganization of Christianity, as it was dispersed in various countries.²² This would explain the difficulty of pin-pointing an area for the origin of Gnosticism. It was not *from* Egypt, Iran, Syria, or Mesopotamia that Gnosticism originated, but *to* these areas that Gnosticism was dispersed. The various local elements would be 'pre-Gnostic', but would not attest a 'proto-Gnostic' development in these areas, inasmuch as these elements would have been assimilated only after the rise of Christian Gnosticism.

There is nothing in the Pauline Epistles, whether in the

²¹ In an article which was published posthumously, A. D. Nock, 'Gnosticism', *HTR* 57 (1964), p. 276, Nock commented on some of the initial publications of the Nag Hammadi Coptic texts as follows: 'The relation of these and other new texts to the New Testament seems to me to vindicate completely the traditional view of Gnosticism as Christian heresy with roots in speculative thought.' Nock's judgment is in turn cited by Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII* (1966), p. LV, as reaffirming the patristic picture of Gnosticism.

²² S. Pétrement, 'Le Colloque de Messine', p. 362.

Letters to the Corinthians or to the Colossians, which can be said indubitably to attest a developed Gnosticism.²³ Contrary to Reitzenstein and Bultmann, Christianity is quite independent of Gnosticism. It is true that Christianity and Gnosticism appeared at about the same time, but it is the latter which is derived from the former.²⁴

III. PRE-CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

As opposed to the long-accepted tradition of a post-Christian Gnosticism, W. Anz in 1897 first proposed a pre-Christian origin of Gnosticism. This was a view which was widely expounded by members of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule or 'History of Religions' School. The two leading spokesmen were Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920), a New Testament scholar who examined the early church as a Hellenistic-Jewish phenomenon, and Richard Reitzenstein (1861-1931), a philologist who studied the role of mysticism in Hellenism and sought to trace the origins of Gnosticism in Iranian and Mandaean traditions.

In his work, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (1907), Bousset explained the Gnostic teachings reported by the Church Fathers as the result of a transformation of older oriental myths by Hellenistic philosophy. He sought to prove the pagan character of the Gnostic Redeemer by referring to Mandaean materials. He held it as self-evident that Gnosticism was prior to Christianity. 'Gnosticism is first of all a pre-Christian movement which has its roots in itself. It is therefore to be understood in the first place in its own terms and not as an offshoot or a by-product of the Christian religion.'²⁵ As evidence for the pre-Christian nature of Gnosticism Bousset cited Philo, the Hermetic literature and the Chaldean Oracles.²⁶ But above all he emphasized the combination of Babylonian and Persian traditions.²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

²⁴ S. Pétrement, 'La notion de gnosticisme', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 65 (1960), pp. 405ff.

²⁵ W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (1st ed. 1913; 2nd ed. 1921 after Bousset's death; English translation, 1970), p. 245.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁷ W. Bousset, 'Gnosticism', *Encyclopedia Britannica* XII (1910), p. 155.

Of far-reaching significance and influence have been the numerous works of Richard Reitzenstein: (1) *Poimandres: Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (1904); (2) *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (1910; 3rd ed. 1927); (3) *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (1921); (4) *Die Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe* (1929); and (5) with H. H. Schaeder, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus* (1926). Though these works have not been translated into English, all except *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* have recently (1965–1967) been reprinted by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft of Darmstadt. Reitzenstein's interests were wide indeed. In the words of an unfriendly critic:

'The evolution of Reitzenstein's thought parallels in many respects that of the Viennese historian of art, Strzygowski. Both flitted over the Oriental landscape, pausing now in one country, now in another contemplating the cultural scene of each and attempting to detect its contribution to Hellenistic civilization. Reitzenstein's field of investigation was Egypt: Philo, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the magical papyri, and Egyptian Gnosticism, but he soon turned his attention thence to Syria, Babylonia and Persia.'²⁸

In his first major work, *Poimandres* (1904), Reitzenstein tried to prove the pre-Christian origin of the Gnostic myth of the Primal Man by using: (1) the Naassene sermon in Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V (third century AD); (2) book omega of the alchemist Zosimos (fourth century AD); (3) book 8 of the Neoplatonist Jamblichus (fourth century AD); and (4) especially the Hermetic tract of *Poimandres*. He deleted the Christian references in the Naassene sermon and expounded it as a non-Christian and pre-Christian source.

The Hermetica are Greek texts from Egypt issued under the name of Hermes Trismegistus, who represented the Egyptian god of wisdom, Thoth. They are extant in Greek manuscripts of the fourteenth century. Reitzenstein held, however, that they contained teachings which were the culmination of a long development in pre-Christian Egypt. He maintained that the doctrine of the *Anthrōpos* or Primal Man found in the Hermetic tract *Poimandres* was pre-Christian, and that this tract was the oldest extant Gnostic text. In the *Poimandres* the

²⁸ R. P. Casey, 'Gnosis, Gnosticism and the New Testament', in W. D. Davies and D. Daube (eds), *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (1956), p. 53.

Primal Man sinks into nature from heaven but is given a saving revelation and re-ascends to his celestial sphere. Reitzenstein claimed that this teaching was borrowed from the Persian Avestan teaching of the Gayomart. He suggested that the teaching of the Son of Man in the Gospels was a reflection of this myth.²⁹ His exposition of this teaching was the first of what became known as the Gnostic Redeemer myth.

Reitzenstein sought to show that a very early salvation mystery existed among the Zoroastrians of Iran. Just before World War I he was in contact with Carl Andreas, who was working on recently discovered documents from Chinese Turkestan. For his book, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (1921), he used notes on these Parthian texts sent to him in 1918 by F. W. Müller.³⁰ At first Reitzenstein did not realize that these documents were Manichaean. When this was discovered, he and his followers argued that Mani (third century AD) must have transmitted earlier pre-Christian Iranian materials.

In the early twentieth century Mark Lidzbarski published a number of important texts of the Mandaeans, a Gnostic community which has survived in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran. In 1905 he published the text of *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, and in 1915 its translation and a commentary.³¹ This narrative describes John the Baptist as a Mandaean and Jesus as a false Messiah. In 1920 Lidzbarski published some Mandaean liturgies.³² Then in 1925 he published the *Ginza*,³³ the major Mandaean work on cosmology. Lidzbarski believed in a western, pre-Christian origin of the Mandaeans. The publication of these texts had a tremendous impact, especially on and through Reitzenstein.

Even before Lidzbarski's translation of the *Ginza*, Reit-

²⁹ R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres: Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (1904; repr. 1966), p. 81.

³⁰ Mary Boyce, *The Manichaean Hymn-Cycles in Parthian* (1954), p. 1.

³¹ M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer* (I, 1905; II, 1915; both reprinted in 1966). An English translation of parts of Lidzbarski's German translation was made by G. Mead, *The Gnostic John the Baptizer* (1924).

³² M. Lidzbarski, *Mandäische Liturgien* (1920; repr. 1962). This has been superseded by the more comprehensive translation of E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (1959).

³³ M. Lidzbarski, *Ginza: Das grosse Buch der Mandäer* (1925).

zenstein was able to make use of an earlier edition of the text, published by H. Petermann in 1867, for his provocative essay, *Das mandäische Buch des Herrn der Grösse und die Evangelienüberlieferung* (1919). In portions of the Right *Ginza* Reitzenstein thought that he could recover a 'little apocalypse' – 'the Book of the Lord of Greatness' – which he believed gave him information about the early pre-Christian proto-Mandaeans. He held that Enosh-Uthra, the Mandaean messenger from heaven, who appears as a judge to destroy Jerusalem, was the prototype of the New Testament doctrine of the Son of Man.³⁴ Reitzenstein further suggested that his reconstructed 'little apocalypse' with parallels with Matthew 23:34–39 was no more and no less than the basis for the Gospel source 'Q'.³⁵ He concluded that John the Baptist and his followers had originated the earliest Mandaean doctrines and rituals. His collaborator, H. H. Schaeder, proposed that the prologue of John's Gospel was a Mandaic hymn taken over from Baptist circles.³⁶

It was Rudolf Bultmann who distilled the classic model of the Gnostic Redeemer myth from the works of Bousset, Lidzbarski, and Reitzenstein. As far as Bultmann was concerned, Reitzenstein had proved the antiquity of the Redeemer myth. According to Meeks, 'Bultmann, therefore, never appears to doubt that the "redeemer myth" in all its essential parts existed long before the Hellenistic Age.'³⁷ On the assumption that the existence of such a Redeemer myth had been established, Bultmann in an important article published in 1925 sought to prove that this myth underlies the Gospel of John by adducing parallels from Mandaean and Manichaean texts, the *Odes of Solomon*, and the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*.³⁸ The fact that these proof texts are them-

³⁴ Reitzenstein's formulation impressed O. Cullmann, who in *Le problème littéraire et historique du roman pseudo-Clémentin* (1930), p. 202, expressed regret that G. Dupont in his work, *Le fils de l'homme* (1924), had not used Reitzenstein's materials.

³⁵ R. Reitzenstein, 'Iranische Erlösungsglaube', *ZNW* 20 (1921), p. 3: 'Dieser Schluss aber wird durch einen Vergleich der Evangelienquelle Q mit der alten mandäischen Apokalypse weiter gesichert. . . .'

³⁶ R. Reitzenstein and H. H. Schaeder, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus aus Iran und Griechenland* (1926; repr. 1965), pp. 306–341.

³⁷ W. Meeks, *The Prophet-King* (1967), p. 8.

³⁸ R. Bultmann, 'Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen

selves much later than John, Bultmann regarded as irrelevant since the myth to which they attest was, in his conviction, indubitably older.³⁹

The parallels between the Mandaeen texts and John showed Bultmann that the simpler, fragmentary pattern of John must be derivative.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the prominence accorded John the Baptist in the Mandaeen sources, notably in *Das Johannesbuch*, confirmed for Bultmann his hypothesis of a Baptist origin for the Johannine prologue. The so-called *Offenbarungsreden* or 'revelation discourses' in John, which have stylistic similarities to the prologue, were also believed to have been originally documents of the followers of John the Baptist who had exalted John and originally given to John the role of a Redeemer sent from the world of light. Therefore a considerable part of the Gospel of John was not originally Christian in origin but resulted from the transformation of a Baptist tradition.⁴¹ Such are the guiding assumptions which control Bultmann's exposition of John in his famous commentary.⁴² Furthermore Bultmann argued that the conflation of the mystery religions' myth of a dying and rising deity, the Gnostic myth of a Redeemer who comes to earth to save man, and the Jewish apocalyptic myth of a heavenly Son of Man was embodied in Paul's Christology, and was to prove determinative for Christianity.

A succession of able and influential students taught by Bultmann have well-nigh dominated German New Testament

und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums', *ZNW* 24 (1925), pp. 100-146; reprinted in E. Dinkler (ed.), *Exegetica: Aufsätze zur Erforschung des Neuen Testaments* (1967), pp. 55-104.

³⁹ Even in later years Bultmann has remained convinced of the pre-Christian nature of Gnosticism. R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* (1956), p. 162: 'Further research has, however, made it abundantly clear that it (Gnosticism) was really a religious movement of pre-Christian origin, invading the West from the Orient as a competitor of Christianity. . . . Gnostic sects . . . arose partly in the form of "baptist" movements in the region of the Jordan.'

⁴⁰ R. Bultmann, 'Johanneische Schriften und Gnosis', *OLZ* 43 (1940), cols 150-175; reprinted in Dinkler, *Exegetica*, pp. 230-254.

⁴¹ W. Eltester, 'Der Logos und sein Prophet: Fragen zur heutigen Erklärung des Johanneischen Prologs', in *Apophoreta: Festschrift für Ernst Haenchen* (1964), pp. 109-134.

⁴² R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium Johannes* (1941; repr. 1968); ET *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (1971).

scholarship. Hans Jonas, under the influence of Bultmann and Heidegger, provided a synthesis of Gnostic themes in 1934.⁴³ His study was based on a phenomenological approach and largely utilized Mandaean texts.

In 1939 E. Schweizer, working under Bultmann, published a work in which he attempted to prove the proto-Mandaean origin of the Good Shepherd discourse in John.⁴⁴ In 1956 Bultmann published posthumously the work of a student, H. Becker, who had died in the War in 1941.⁴⁵ Becker, using Mandaean parallels, attempted to show that the writer of the Fourth Gospel had expanded and transformed a pre-Christian Gnostic source.

In the 1950s and 1960s Pauline studies have been largely under the influence of students and followers of Bultmann who assume the pre-Christian existence of Gnosticism, e.g. G. Bornkamm, E. Haenchen, H. Schlier, U. Wilckens, D. Georgi, and W. Schmithals. There has, of course, been a great deal of varying degrees of commitment to the basic proposition. Schmithals, as we shall see in more detail, has been the most thoroughgoing and consistent in applying Gnosticism as the key to the Pauline Letters. Other Bultmannian students, such as H. Koester and the American, James Robinson, are much more careful in not going beyond the available textual evidence. And some of Bultmann's students have in fact defected. E. Käsemann, impressed by C. Colpe's criticism of the History of Religions School, has recently abandoned some of his earlier positions. K. G. Kuhn was convinced that the Dead Sea Scrolls do not support his teacher's thesis. Schweizer has come to doubt the existence of a pre-Christian Redeemer myth.

In recent years the renewed publication of Mandaic texts by Lady E. S. Drower, and studies based on these texts by R. Macuch and K. Rudolph, have been invoked as support for the pre-Christian and Palestinian origin of Gnosticism.⁴⁶

⁴³ H. Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist I: Die mythologische Gnosis* (1934).

⁴⁴ E. Schweizer, *Ego Eimi: Die religionsgeschichtliche Herkunft und theologische Bedeutung der joh. Bildreden* (1939; repr. 1964).

⁴⁵ H. Becker, *Die Reden des Johannesevangeliums und der Stil der gnostischen Offenbarungsreden* (1956).

⁴⁶ Cf. E. M. Yamauchi, 'The Present Status of Mandaean Studies', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 25 (1966), pp. 88-96.