

THE EGYPTIAN FOUNDATIONS OF GNOSTIC THOUGHT

by

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ABBREVIATIONS

AJSL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages</i>
BD	Book of the Dead
BES	<i>Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar of New York</i>
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'institut d'archéologie orientale</i>
BSFE	<i>Bulletin de la société française d'Égyptologie</i>
CdE	<i>Chronique d'Égypte</i>
CR	<i>Christian Religion</i>
CT	Coffin Texts
Ench.	<i>Enchoria</i>
EV	<i>Evangelium Veritatis</i>
FENHC	<i>Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices</i>
GM	<i>Göttinger Miszellen</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Revue</i>
JARCE	<i>Journal of the American Research Centre Egypt</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archeology</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSSEA	<i>The Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
Keph.	<i>Kephalia</i>
MB	<i>Münchener Beiträge</i>
MDÄIK	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen Instituts für ägyptische Altertumskunde</i>
MH	<i>Manichäische Handschriften</i>
MIFAO	<i>Memoires de l'institut français d'archéologie orientale</i>
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codex
NHS	<i>Nag Hammadi Studies</i>
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OMRO	<i>Oudheidkundige Mededelingen het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden</i>
Or.	<i>Orientalia</i>
PB	<i>Papyrus Berolinensis 8502</i>
PDM	<i>Papyri Demoticae Magicae</i>
PGM	<i>Papyri Graecae Magicae</i>
PT	Pyramid Texts
RdÉ	<i>Revue d'Égyptologie</i>
RT	<i>Recueils et Travaux</i>

VC *Vigiliae Christianae*
ZÄS *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache*
ZDMG *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*

These are the myths that Basileides tells from his schooling in Egyptian wisdom, and having learnt such wisdom from them he bears this sort of fruit.

Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 7.27

Part I - Problems of Interpretation

Chapter One Introduction and Hermeneutic Prospectus

He thinks he is in Alexandria on the Panium, an artificial mountain coiled round by a staircase, rising in the centre of the town.

In front of him stretches Lake Mareotis, to the right the sea, to the left open country – and just beneath his eyes a confusion of flat roofs, cut through from north to south and from east to west by two intersecting roads which display down their entire length a series of porticoes rich in corinthian capitals. The houses overhanging this double colonnade have coloured glass in their windows. A few of them are fitted externally with enormous cages of wood where the outside air rushes in.

Monuments quite various in their architecture crowd close together. Egyptian pylons loom above Greek temples. Obelisks emerge like lances between red brick battlements. In the middle of squares appear the pointed ears of a Hermes or a dog-headed Anubis. Antony can see mosaics in the courtyards, and carpets hanging from beams in the ceilings.

I then decided to study under good old Didymus. Blind though he was, no one could master his knowledge of the Scriptures. When the lesson was over he would request my arm to lean on. I would walk him to where, from the Panium, one can see the Pharos and the high sea. We would come back by way of the harbour, elbowing men of every race, from Cimmerians wrapped in bearskins to Gymnosophists of the Ganges rubbed over with cow-dung. But there was always a fight going on in the streets, on account of Jews refusing to pay tax, or of seditious parties who wanted to expel the Romans. The town is in fact full of heretics, the followers of Mani, of Valentine, of Basilides, of Arius – all of them accosting you to argue and convince

Their talk now and again crosses my mind. Try as one will to pay no attention, it's unnerving.

Gustave Flaubert¹

The “orientalising” glosses and historical liberties in Flaubert’s description of Egypt and the denizens of Alexandria during this time period are obvious²; yet apart from the excesses, perhaps, of surrealism and lyricism which enliven this work, there is something quite fresh and authentic about the scene that he describes. Both in the strokes with which he effects the temptations of Anthony, and in the honest expressions of his own inner ambiguity, Flaubert’s “savage sensuality” is well read, obsessed with history, and therefore mythopoeically entitled. Lacking even a fraction of the resources possessed by modern Gnostic Studies, Flaubert approaches the “heretical” *Sitz* with a keener sense of Egypt and the Orient, one uncompromised by

¹ Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of St. Antony*, trans. Kitty Mrosovsky (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 77, 63.

² “Nerval and Flaubert continually elaborated their Oriental material and absorbed it variously into the special structures of their personal aesthetic projects. This is not to say, however, that the Orient is incidental to their work... their Orient was not so much grasped, appropriated, reduced, or codified as lived in, exploited aesthetically and imaginatively as a roomy place full of possibility. What mattered to them was the structure of their work as an independent, aesthetic, and personal fact, and not the ways by which, if one wanted to, one could effectively dominate or set down the Orient graphically.” Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 181.

modern rhetorics of inclusion which would ameliorate these figures, bringing them into the fold as overly imaginative early Church theologians, serving them up as opaque objects of study beneath the rubric of “influences”. For Flaubert these voices tantalise because they have been given back their time and place; they are historically enabled *persons* not at all lacking in either flair or mundanity, or dedication to strange – dare we say, Oriental – causes and systems of thought. Flaubert persuades us that with genuine socio-historical apperception a certain romantic excess and lack of accuracy can be easily forgiven; no amount of accurate detail, however, can mask an insufficiency of connection or “feel” for the historical period in question.³

One of the main effects of this study is to dilate the notion of “Hellenistic syncretism” in order to show that Gnostic emanationist mythologies, expressly dualist, drew much of their essence from ancient Egyptian emanationist theologies, themselves implicitly dualistic in nature.⁴ Although traditional Egyptian cosmologies were much mitigated by exposure to diverse influences in the Hellenistic and Roman era, a basic insight about theogony obtained great systematic clarity, as well as fantastic obscurity, in a broad array of sects, many of which survived until the conquest of Egypt by Islam. The scholastic dichotomy so often encountered in Comparative Religious Studies, at least until quite recently, is that of oriental *syncretism* existing as the antithesis to occidental *system*. This supposedly “main characteristic feature of Hellenistic religion”⁵, result of Alexander’s conquest, is now being appreciated by some scholars more for the undergirding cohesive structures, for their synergism or fusion, as opposed to mere conglomeration or sedimentation.⁶ With respect to an entire array of emanationist thought in Egypt, Hellenistic cosmogonic structures must be viewed as a continuation of ancient Egyptian models.⁷

Egypt in the Graeco-Roman era shared in the broader apprehension of Heimarmene, and the proto-Gnostic revolution in thinking now saw Egypt ruled by

³ As Schopenhauer was to put it: “People who pass their lives in reading, and have acquired their wisdom from books are like those who learn about a country from travel descriptions: they can impart information about a great number of things, but at bottom they possess no connected, clear, thorough knowledge of what the country is like. On the other hand, people who pass their lives in thinking are like those who have visited the country themselves: they alone are really familiar with it, possess connected knowledge of it and are truly at home in it.” *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol.2, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), §262.

⁴ We are speaking here of ontological and ethical dualisms; that is, of a view of reality that posits two different orders of beings, in terms of their “beingness” and split embodiment of Good and Evil.

⁵ Frederick C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), xiii.

⁶ Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 10: “It is not useful to understand any coherently identifiable cultural form as grounded in superficial borrowings occasioned by circumstantial contact.”

⁷ L. Kákosy is one of the few Egyptologists directly concerned with this problem: “Everything points out that a new examination of Egyptian influences upon Gnosis be established on the grounds of the historical circumstances and the evolution of Egyptian religion in the later period.” In *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquium of Messina, 13-18 April, 1966*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 240.

underworld demonic forces. A fragmentary magical papyrus very succinctly illustrates the overriding concerns about a world encircled by Uroboros the time-snake. A two-column list of the baneful effects appears following a magical appeal that has not been preserved:

death	rudeness
darkness	evil
mental illness	the evil eye
grief	debauchery
fear	slavery
illness	indecenty
poverty	lamentation
disturbance	troublesomeness
	emptiness
	malignancy
	bitterness
	arrogance (PGM CXXI.1-14) ⁸

Amongst numerous other examples that might be given, this represents a comprehensive compendium of underworld experience, a litany of Hellenistic anxiety that prompted a turning to new cosmogonies, new divine models that could be fitted into the old religious architectonics. All of this, it is posited here, began to occur within a segment of the Egyptian priesthood and their ancillary classes. The very “magicians” who felt the need to propitiate the ancient Egyptian gods near Thebes, evidenced in the magical papyri, had access to the still thriving and popular Egyptian temples of the day. This depicts an outward-looking-in dynamic on the part of a new religious sensibility in Ptolemaic Egypt. Within the inner core the great work of restoring the Egyptian textual tradition upon the walls of the new temples being built operated within a bubble. While Egypt swirled with insurrection and revolt, as well as agricultural reform and scientific advances, one pictures this stolid cadre of hereditary priests single-mindedly focused upon restoring the central architectural touchstones of their faith, undoubtedly believing that true autochthonic pharaonic rule would one day again prevail. In this work these priests were ironically sustained by the Ptolemaic decrees which supplied the funds, labour, and political protection needed for so vast an undertaking. However, on the front lines of popular religion the distress about a new Egypt ruled by pernicious Fate grew. These new religious developments ineluctably drew from the ancient wells of Egyptian theology.

A signal indicator here is the wide-spread appeal of Manichaeian thought in the southern heartland of Egypt. Even with the Egyptian mythological glosses that we shall examine, the lure of this radical dualist creed to all social stratas in Egypt powerfully demonstrates the shift in religious temperament in Egypt to one acutely concerned with the problem of evil. From this broad and fertile soil the Manichaeians in the third century C.E. drew many of their adherents. Here was a creed espousing the new dualist mood, and at once rigidly hierarchic and didactic in its religious practice. One imagines many spiritually and economically disenfranchised Egyptian priests and their sub-classes drawn to this teaching, undoubtedly entrenching the Egyptian elements that the creed of Mani manifested in Egypt. The implicit dualism of Egyptian religion evolved into new forms. The working sociological hypothesis

⁸Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, vol. 1, *Texts* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1986), 316.

with which the present study was commenced was that the Egyptian priest stands behind the Egyptian Gnostic. If the textual overlaps and influences could be charted, I felt that a socio-historical case might be made for their superimposition.

Of interest in studying Gnostic thought in a religious-theological light, is the ever-present gravitational pull of Egyptian motifs, mythological elements, and theogonic substructures. What shall be defined as Archaic Gnosis manifests as much of a radical change in *mood* as does Hellenistic Gnosis, its more sophisticated spiritual sister; however, this priestly-derived outlook was one unwilling to let go of the ancient social structures of Egyptian religious experience. The underlying cosmogony and methodology of the Gnostic *Pistis Sophia*, or the *Books of Jeu*, strongly suggests the authority and hegemony of an inner elite with access to the new sacred texts, their traditional role being a proper furthering of ritual and rote understanding. The static, inner component of Egyptian religiosity attempted to remain true to the letter of the ancient word, handed down in the hieratic continuum. Underlying this thesis is the assumption that a revolutionary change occurred within literate classes beyond these sacred precincts, an offshoot of speculative thought intent upon dynamically engaging the perceived limitations of the conservative priestly tradition. For these groups Ma'at was patently not manifest in the now empty shell of pharaonic rule: for them one might say the emperor had no clothes, or rather, in this case, the clothes had no emperor, as a distant Lagid ensconced in Alexandria could hardly be seen to completely fulfil the deeper mandates of the Egyptian theogony. Cleopatra VII could be said to have attempted to wear the double crown of Egypt, acknowledging and mastering the critical prerequisites of language. Beyond this short-lived mirage of total Greek and Egyptian synthesis however, the palpable experience of evil in Egypt under the Romans following the death of Cleopatra and the murder of her son required, for some, the restructuring of the ancient mythos so as to pull the traditional components of Egyptian thought into a new synthesis. The enabling ideal of pharaonic Ma'at was now seen to be everywhere elided by the oppressive realities of Roman rule. If some priests were barely able to accept the *religious legitimacy* of a Ptolemaic king in Alexandria, far fewer could have believed in the Roman *praefectus Aegypti* acting on behalf of an absent liege-lord of Egypt. This mood, surfacing within the religious-minded literati, found expression in both the underworld-obsessed magical papyrus and later Gnostic tractate.

There was also a more philosophical mode of Gnosis exhibiting the same pronounced tendency to draw upon Egyptian theogonic models. Hellenistic Gnosis, as we shall call it, moved far from the Egyptian temple precinct, entering into open debate in the agora where it displayed the heterodoxy of its make-up in its openness to engage and incorporate other religious models, and in its disdain for religious authoritarianism. It is in the area of Hellenistic Gnosis that the Egyptian foundations of Gnostic thought attained their greatest synthesis with the diverse strata of metaphysical thought in Hellenistic and Roman times. Here we have the beguiling and obscure phenomenon of literate Jews who were no longer Jews in any real sense of the term, Greeks who were no longer Greeks in their religious affiliations and bloodlines, Egyptians who were no longer "pure" Egyptians, and proto-Gnostic magicians and priests in the period from 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E., all of who contributed to the evolution of Gnostic thought. Above all, there remains the essential enigma of the literate and bilingual, if not multi-lingual, "Graeco-Egyptian". In a sense, this group represents both and neither of the scholastic categories of "Greek" and "Egyptian", so removed were they from traditional modes of thought and even clear ethnic divisions.

Gnosis, in its most advanced Hellenistic fruition, was quintessentially revolutionary. Irenaeus set the tone for Heresiology in focusing upon the *subversive* in Gnostic thought⁹, and the attitudes that continue to circle about the Gnostic phenomenon are directed by essentially theological interests, seconded by a traditional Classicist's disdain for a "syncretistic" group of philosophical poseurs. Patristic censure and vehement polemic, while not at all clear on Gnostic origins or theological motivations, were quite correct in apprehending the subversive qualities of Gnostic thought. Wedded to Hellenistic individualism, itself corrosively antinomian as developed in the secular-humanist atheism of Euhemerus and Sophist/Skeptic intransigence with respect to Truth-claims, there now appeared a host of seminal thinkers well-versed in Greek philosophy and rhetoric, who drew upon arcane oriental thought to advance various metaphysics which in total effected an end-run around evolving Christian orthodoxy. Time and space, history itself, was the enemy of Gnostic soteriology, and thus social order, military occupation, political hierarchy, and ecclesial authority all had their claims to the Good deconstructed, and the stripped-down paradigm of their shared historical functions was seen to be "demiurgic" or "archontic". As Jonas puts it:

Gnosticism has been the most radical embodiment of dualism ever to have appeared on the stage of history... It is a split between the self and world, men's alienation from nature, the metaphysical devaluation of nature, the cosmic solitude of the spirit and the nihilism of mundane norms; and in its general extremist style is shows what radicalism really is.¹⁰

In this study I do not intend to simply posit Egyptian historical antecedence for foundational dualist/emanationist views and leave it at that; rather, I am proposing that a large amount of direct historical connectedness in the lineage of this mode of Egyptian philosophical/theological thought is in fact the case. As such, I am advancing a socio-historical model for the appearance of the Egyptian Gnostics, and for the incorporation of Egyptian religious/philosophical motifs in Gnostic thought in Graeco-Roman Egypt. A philosophical hermeneutic does not usually rise or fall upon the specific dating and genealogy of various documents, nor upon viable social models, as it is enough to know that these speculations occurred, and in that sense the textual analyses presented herein can stand on their own. However, I am concerned with establishing the historical evolution of an essential aspect of Egyptian religious thought, from earliest dynastic times to the final phases of Egyptian religious independence, and it is clear that we must go beyond an exclusively textual appreciation in order to effectively contextualise part of the Gnostic phenomenon as a manifestation and continuation of Egyptian religious thought in Egypt at a particular phase of her history. It is my contention that the Egyptian Gnostics, evolving as they did out of the Egyptian priesthood and associated religious-minded classes, supplied the most essential theogonic framework for the mythopoeic explorations of Gnostic thought.

⁹ See Gérard Vallée, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius*. Studies in Christianity and Judaism, no.1 (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1981), 29-33.

¹⁰ Hans Jonas, "A Retrospective View," in *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism, Stockholm August 20-25, 1973* (Stockholm, 1977), 14.

The existence of dualist groups in Egypt *ca.* 100 B.C.E. - 400 C.E. is well established. The Gnostics, Hermeticists, Middle-Platonists, Manichaeans, and those who shared in the demonised *Lebenswelt* of the Greek, Coptic, and Demotic magical papyri have all received serious study from various academic quarters. I want, however, to develop a historical and philosophical pan-optic with which to appreciate the common political and religious factors that unite these groups in Egypt. This study therefore proceeds firstly as a “history of philosophy” to detail the genealogy of dualist/emanationist thought in Egypt from the Old Kingdom to the Graeco-Roman era, condensing a vast period of early Egyptian history in an attempt to thread out the emanationist trajectory and then develop its final manifestations in the period 100 B.C.E. to 400 C.E.. I also attempt to develop a socio-historical picture at various junctures with which to underscore certain key aspects of emanationist/dualist thought. Part II presents a diachronic study of dualism in Egypt; that is, a basic following of emanationist and dualist thought in chronological order although it is essentially philosophical in its interpretative focus. This is seen to be a necessary preparation with which to then delve into the internal patterns, the structure, of what shall be loosely defined as Egyptian Gnostic thought as opposed to the ever-augmenting scholarly construct of a Gnostic-*ism*, at present only vaguely connected with Egypt. The focus of Part III is essentially synchronic in analysing Gnostic thought through various thematic filters, all of them pertaining to traditional Egyptian thought, while again drawing in various socio-historical considerations where appropriate. The Gnostics are centre-stream in the development of Hellenistic Gnosis and can be seen to merge their boundaries into a diverse array of associated kindred speculations at the time; likewise, the essential Egyptian religious/philosophical outlook, detailed in Part II, permeates beyond its geographical/cultural boundaries and is as readily discernible in the writings of the Greek philosophers Plutarch and Plotinus, as it is in the Egyptian Gnostics Basileides and Valentinus. However, Plotinus was born and raised in Egypt, Plutarch very sympathetically disposed thereto, and Valentinus and Basileides, both Egyptians, had the benefits of Greek educations. A critical hermeneutic problem, and one that must be addressed in its full historical breadth, is the issue of what “Greek” and “Egyptian” means in the context of Graeco-Roman Egypt. Given the perforated cultural boundaries of Hellenistic Alexandria it would be foolish to argue an exclusive cultural rootedness in any specific direction, but we can at the outset surely suspect a very strong Egyptian presence in Gnostic thought for social, linguistic, philosophical, and obvious geographical reasons. This thesis sets out to demonstrate the Egyptian foundations of Gnostic thought within all the above scholarly parameters.

It must be said that my initial explorations within the Gnostic labyrinth were almost entirely philosophical and literary-critical. I believed that the whole problem of “Gnostic origins” was largely a creation of the scholarly hermeneutics brought to bear upon the phenomenon of Gnostic thought, and that the issue, for lack of textual, sociological, and archaeological evidence, was in any event unresolvable.¹¹ In its turn, the theory of a largely Greek, Persian, Jewish, and purely Christian genealogy for the appearance of so-called Gnosticism, usually placed in the second century C.E., has attained some level of consensus among scholars since the last century although it must be said that many of these hypotheses appear to proceed, *a priori*, from the

¹¹ See Geo. Widengren, “Les origines du gnosticisme et l’histoire des religions,” in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile, 1966*, 28-60.

background of those scholars who turned their sights upon the phenomenon of “Gnosticism”. This attempt to define a discrete intellectual/historical trajectory, one that would also justify suffixing an “ism” onto Gnostic thought at large in this period has allowed various hypotheses to coexist. We are, after all, dealing with a “syncretism”, and the “History of Religions” approach to this phenomenon in particular has rather condescendingly generated a loose conceptual model within which the elusive Gnostic remains essentially unidentifiable in any clear historical light. However, the nagging perception stayed with me: much of the locus of this phenomenon, many of its greatest teachers, the very language of the extant texts themselves, are Egyptian. An uneasy feeling about the whole business kept resurfacing as I noted certain distinct affinities with ancient Egyptian religious thought, and it was clearly possible that this might well represent the tip of the iceberg. All this kept refocusing my interest upon Egypt.¹² It seemed less and less justifiable to accept the orientalist assumptions of “Christian Origins” studies – although it is far more inclusivist than was the case even twenty years ago – in its strongly felt need to groom the uninvited guest now again at the table; nor was it appropriate to deal with this textual array in a purely structuralist fashion, or to take to heart Thoreau’s adage, that “thought greets thought over the widest gulfs of time with unerring freemasonry”, as a hermeneutic dogma.¹³ The “dramatistic context” to adopt the overarching view of the modern literary-critical theorist Kenneth Burke, the overheated political matrix which generated the terministic screens employed by the Gnostics as they pursued their very particular textual strategies – this can in large measure to be located in Alexandria, and in Egypt, even if this is sometimes more a state of mind than a specific geographical location. A historical enabling process in my methodology had to enfranchise my philosophical understanding of these texts – the Gnostics had to be adumbrated, and finally defined, as actual socio-historical beings in Egypt. A study of those Gnostics who lived, literally and figuratively, beyond the sway of Egyptian theology, and the pull of Alexandria’s assimilating vortex, is beyond the scope of the present work.

¹² I was struck early on by a remark made by Alexander Böhlig, in the peroration of his chapter “Gnostische Probleme in der Titellosen Schrift des Codex II von Nag Hammadi,” in *Mysterion und Wahrheit: Gesammelte Beiträge zur spätantiken Religionsgeschichte* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 133: “But above all one should not forget, that these representations of the Gnostics in Egypt are quite refined and developed, and therefore question whether Egyptian theological thought was not also able to make a contribution. I wanted these questions answered.” Or an even more evocative view presented by Jan Zandee, “Der Androgyne Gott in Ägypten ein Erscheinungsbild des Weltschöpfers,” in *Religion im Erbe Ägyptens: Beiträge zur spätantiken Religionsgeschichte zu Ehren von Alexander Böhlig*, ed. Manfred Görg (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988), 278: “The ancient Egyptian temple-cults strongly maintained themselves into the time-period that Gnosticism in Egypt spread... It is possible that former priests of the Egyptian gods had themselves joined the Gnostic Movement, bringing with them the representations of their belief.”

¹³ A rather glaring flaw that exists in the seminal work of Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis*, trans. H.S. Wiesner and Ioan P. Couliano (1990; reprint, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992). Ironically, and tragically prescient, Couliano inadvertently endorsed my own socio-historical focus here with an opening statement: “this book cannot dwell on vague, romantic hypotheses meant to show some interaction between dualism and society,” (xvi) that is contradicted only two pages later when he admitted that his own attraction to Gnosticism was derived from the twenty-two years he had spent within a totalitarian regime.

I speak of endemic scholarly constructs that tend to impede our understanding of Gnostic thought for two main reasons. First, there has not been enough emphasis upon understanding more deeply the philosophical essence of Gnostic thought – this in itself might largely define the historical/social boundaries of the movement.¹⁴ The hermeneutic hindrances here arise out of the above-mentioned “History of Religions” agenda with their traditional valorisation of Religion over mythology, Orthodoxy over heresy, System over syncretism, Science over magic, and the Philosophical over the pre-philosophical, all of which manifest implicitly occidental agenda that tend to be more scholastic than insightful. The kernel and pith of Gnostic philosophy, its “misprision” and “hermeneutics of suspicion” as applied to the sacred cows of the time, has not been adequately linked to irreverent and anarchic Alexandria (at least in the Roman view at the time), to the Eclectic Potamon, the Sceptics Arius Didymus and Arcesilaus active there, to the ever-widening anti-religious polemical bow-wave of Euhemerus, or to the earlier Sophistic assault on *aletheia* for example. There are also a number of obvious temperamental and conceptual overlaps between Gnostic dualism and Greek Philosophy that have yet to be considered within a socio-historical pan-optic; in particular, an entire range of dualist, so-called “Middle Platonic” philosophers from Empedocles to Numenius demand attention. Secondly, and for myself this resulted from a deeper philosophical understanding of the movement along the above lines, there has been no serious attempt to situate the movement in Egypt; that is, not just geographically connected with Egypt, but spiritually linked with her millennia of religious thought and expression. This is by far the most surprising omission given the textual and historical conspicuousness of Alexandria, and the fact that the tremendous Hellenistic ferment of the time involved an acute Graeco-Egyptian religious/philosophical fusion just prior to and concurrent with the rise of the Gnostic sects in Egypt. With Egypt in particular, *ca.* 525 B.C.E. - 300 C.E., we might expect that centuries of foreign subjugation and revolt had a rather profound watershed effect upon the Egyptian psyche, in large measure explaining the rise of dualist temperament and speculation. Far from acknowledging this manifest premise, the field has disenfranchised the very Egyptian language through which Gnostic texts come down to us, claiming unconvincingly that all the Nag Hammadi texts are redactions from Greek originals for which, incidentally, not one manuscript survives. This might be the case, but the socio-historical picture points towards bilinguality, if not multi-linguality, not a hermetic Greek world, and the larger inference that only *Greek-speakers* were involved in the rise of the Gnostic movement is a socio-historical thesis that is as bold as it is unsubstantiated. All those who have seriously studied Graeco-Roman Alexandria know how problematic it is to speak of pure “Greeks” beyond the immediate coterie of the Lagid dynasty – by Roman times this ethnic distinction was more acutely blurred, the overcompensating pretensions of the metropolitans under Roman rule in Egypt notwithstanding.¹⁵ To assume an ethnic-

¹⁴ An astute point made by Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 144. One only wishes that he might have taken his own advice with respect to treating Egyptian thought, even cursorily, in this otherwise important study.

¹⁵ That an endogamous core of Greeks attempted to maintain their own cultural integrity amongst a sea of Egyptians is hardly a surprise. However, given the evidence for intermarriage and the fact there was at this time a very strong political motive for distancing oneself from the status of “Egyptian”, we may surmise that the number and influence of

based textual exclusivity for the Nag Hammadi texts composed in Egypt is to put the Gnostic movement in Egypt in a convenient glass bottle, for it denies a connection between the rise of Gnosis there and the evolving *Weltanschauung* of a significant segment of non Greek-speaking Egyptians. The larger issue is that the Gnostics, indeed all the dualistic groups in Egypt at this time, manifest a profound dualist “world-view” metamorphosis which had occurred within the Egyptian psyche, not just the Greek-Hellenistic. This fact is central. A hermeneutic which insists upon viewing this development as a rogue species of Greek thought, a parasitical syncretism, or an eccentric Christian mutation or influence, is a hermeneutic without socio-historical foundations. Our thesis will lead us to the consideration that Coptic was likely a parallel, if not primary, language of composition for an Egyptian mythopoetic genre which was as un-Greek as it was non-Christian in much of its output in the first centuries of our era. Alexandrian Gnosis in particular affirms this Egyptian assimilation of diverse cultural elements, including the Greek, which in itself supplied the means for the initial pre-Christian development of the Coptic script.

There is a decided lack of co-ordination and co-operation amongst the disciplines I must draw together in this work. The tendency to downplay, if not entirely omit, the role of Egypt in Gnostic thought has had a totalising effect upon the vehicle and tenor of “Gnostic Studies” as it now stands. In its general treatment of Gnostic texts the field by far and large operates within an unconscionable socio-historical void.

An examination of Gnostic thought as an Egyptian phenomenon would appear to be an obvious exploration to make yet, by far and large, it remains an open frontier. With the exception of a small number of Egyptologists who have written articles on some important connections,¹⁶ and a handful of limited forays by those working in

these groups was limited. See Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 43.

¹⁶ A.A. Barb, “Mystery, Myth, and Magic,” in *The Legacy of Egypt*, ed. J.R. Harris (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 161, demonstrates the ease with which Egyptology is able to view this issue: “After all, considering the basic Egyptian mentality, it was no mere coincidence that Egypt became the country where Gnosticism flourished and proliferated more than anywhere else.” See also C.J. Bleeker, “The Egyptian Background of Gnosticism,” in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile*, 229-37; Alexander Böhlig, in the chapters “Gnostische Probleme in der Titellosen Schrift des Codex II von Nag Hammadi”, and “Urzeit und Endzeit in der Titellosen Schrift des Codex II von Nag Hammadi,” in *Mysterion und Wahrheit: Gesammelte Beiträge zur spätantiken Religionsgeschichte* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968); L. Kákosy, “Gnosis und Ägyptische Religion,” in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile 1966*, 238-47; Pahor Labib, “Egyptian Survivals in the Nag Hammadi Library,” in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis: Papers read at the First International Congress of Coptology*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 149-51; Frantisek Lexa, “La Légende Gnostique sur Pistis Sophia et le Mythe ancien Égyptien sur l’oeil de Ré,” in *Egyptian Religion*, vol.1, no.1-3 (April 1933); Michel Malaise, “Isisme et Gnosticisme,” in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique, Actes du Colloque de Louvaine-la-Neuve (11-14 mars 1980)*, ed. Julien Ries (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1982), 47; Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, “The Pagan Elements in Early Christianity and Gnosticism,” in *Colloque Internationale sur les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (Laval: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1981), 71-85; Rachad Mounir Shoucri, “From the Hieroglyphs to the Cross, Egyptian Philosophy and Christian Gnosis,” (Paper presented at the 3rd International Congress of Egyptology, Toronto, 1982); Jan Zandee, “Der

Gnostic Studies,¹⁷ there has been few attempts to explore the *literary* relationships between late-phase Egyptian religious thought and Gnostic-Coptic expression for example, or to attempt to tackle the extremely complicated issue of Gnostic thought appearing against a particular socio-political backdrop in Egypt. This lack appears at times to be a wilful deficiency, often simple neglect with respect to a host of methodologies whose boundaries happen to coincide here, and I have been unable to simply discuss “Gnostic connections” in various areas without directly raising the larger impediments that exist in the modern scholarly appreciation of dualist speculation as a whole. And yet it must be said that this general situation is much mitigated by the excellent work of a host of exceptional scholars who have worked on specific elements that support my case; indeed, this thesis rests upon their work at critical junctures and would not have been possible without it. Even so: while not out to be overly captious, indeed cynical, in the development of an antidotal hermeneutic, however “Gnostic Studies”, the study of Egyptian Gnostic thought in particular, is a field still shaped by strong antipathies. It often exists as a stalking-horse for narrow theological and philosophical concerns, a veritable Potempkin textual village directly comparable to the Roman orientalist apprehension of Alexandria which existed *ad Aegyptum*, but not *in Aegyptos*.

It will therefore simplify the task at hand to dispense with the whole Christian Origins issue as the root emanationist structures we are concerned with in Egypt predate by millennia the widespread acceptance of Christianity in Egypt in the 4th century C.E.. Middle Platonic, Hermetic, and Egyptian magical cosmologies, all of which subtend Gnosis in Egypt, are completely devoid of Christian influences, and Manichaeism in Egypt is, in addition, polemically and formidably arrayed against evolving orthodoxy. Textual analyses of extant patristic sources and Gnostic works outside of a limited number of “canonical” Gnostic tractates that Christian Origins is wrestling with, clearly indicates that the Christian influence upon the dualist systems of the first centuries of our era, with the possible exception of the so-called Gnostic “School of Thomas” located in Syria, was in many ways limited, and often marginal, literally worlds removed from the later synoptic Christ Myth. One must bear in mind, too, that the role of a saviour in Gnostic thought quite clearly exists apart from all developed christologies where it appears at all. The inclusion of Christ is usually effected as a supporting player amongst players on the Gnostic stage, and his role is more often supererogated by a female salvific figure, or at least distinctly shared with her. That this manifest dynamic is scarcely recognised by the field is a hermeneutic issue.¹⁸ In short, the mere inclusion of Jesus in a Gnostic metaphysic does not a full-

Androgyne Gott in Ägypten ein Erscheinungsbild des Weltschöpfers,” in *Religion im Erbe Ägyptens*.

¹⁷ Jan Helderman, “Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth?” in *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 26-46; R. McL. Wilson “Gnostic Origins an Egyptian Connection?” in *Religion im Erbe Ägyptens*; Douglas M. Parrott “Eugnostos and ‘All the Philosophers’,” in *Religion im Erbe Ägyptens*, and “Gnosticism and Egyptian Religion,” *NT XXIX*,1 (1987); Benno Przybylski, “The Role of Calendrical Data in Gnostic,” *VC* 34 (1980): 56-70; Albert Torhoudt, *Een Onbekend Gnostisch Systeem in Plutarchus’ De Iside et Osiride* (Lovanii: Studia Hellenistica, 1942).

¹⁸ PHEME PERKINS, “Sophia as Goddess in the Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 102: “Both the christianization of the gnostic myths and the fact that most scholars who study them have interiorized the religious symbolics of a Jewish or a Christian “patriarchal orthodoxy”

blown *Christian*-Gnostic text make, any more than a sprinkling of Jewish magical names make a tractate *Jewish*-Gnostic. Somehow this obvious point has been lost in the interminable debate over the historical precedence of Gnostic or Christian “believer”, which in any case is not currently concerned with the majority of Gnostic manuscripts. The most essential Gnostic texts can be laid out as follows according to Christian influence:

1. Gnostic Non-Christian:

On the Origin of the World

Eugnostos

The Paraphrase of Shem

The 3 Steles of Seth

Zostrianos

Thought of Norea

Marsanes

Exegesis on the Soul

Apocalypse of Adam

Allogenes

2. Gnostic w/ Marginal Christian Glosses:

Books of Jeu

Pistis Sophia

Untitled text

Hypostasis of the Archons

Tripartite Tractate

Gospel of the Egyptians

2nd Treatise of Great Seth

Valentinian Exposition

Trimorphic Protennoia

3. Gnostic with Enhanced Christian Elements:

Gospel of Truth

Apocryphon of John

Sophia of Jesus Christ

Melchizidek

4. Gnostic Christocentric:

Gospel of Thomas

Gospel of Philip

Book of Thomas the Contender

Dialogue of the Saviour

Apocryphon of James

1st/2nd Apocalypse of James

Apocalypse of Peter

Gospel of Mary

frequently occlude the feminine side of the gnostic saviour,” from PHEME PERKINS, “Sophia as Goddess in the Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 102.

The other Gnostic texts that we have are heterodox, or simply unclassifiable in their makeup, neither emanationist, nor convincingly Christian, and are in any case embody a small minority of extant manuscript as held up against the above. The point to be made here is that Gnostic Studies is four times more likely to draw upon the “Christian” tractates (groups 3 and 4 above) as opposed to the “non-Christian” texts (categories 1 & 2). In addition, a small core group of the above texts generates a preponderance of the discussion while the rest receive drastically less attention. Appendix A presents a full demonstration of this dynamic.

To the extant Gnostic texts we can add the Patristic evidence on various teachers and groups, in particular Valentinus and Basileides in Alexandria. The Nag Hammadi corpus was buried towards the end of the fourth century and is thus a late-phase collection of various texts, containing elements that are far older, and with only one-quarter or so convincingly christocentric in their conception, numerous others demonstrate what has to be seen as no more than Christian glosses. This is in accord with patristic sources: in detailing the Ophite Gnostics (as described by Irenaeus), Werner Foerster ends by noting, “is Jesus Christ not here superfluous?”¹⁹. The Ophite system is rather typical in its depiction of Jesus: “As Christ descended into this world, he first put on his sister Sophia, and they both rejoiced as they refreshed each other. That is what they designate as bridegroom and bride”.²⁰ Karen L. King²¹ concludes that Christ “is superfluous” in the Apocryphon of John (NHC II,1 and IV,1) following S. Arai.²², and Hans-Martin Schenke²³. Seth “put on” Jesus in *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III 64.1-3)²⁴; in *The Trimorphic Protennoia* the chief female aeon in the work proclaims, “I put on Jesus. I brought him forth from the cursed cross and I established him in the dwelling places of his Parent” (NHC XIII,1 5.12)²⁵; Christ as Logos in the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) is an obvious fusion with the traditional Valentinian Sophia, and the function of the Logos throughout this large text is seen to operate on the grand super-cosmic level in keeping with its philosophical

¹⁹ Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic texts*, vol. 1, *The Patristic Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 86.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I, 30.12. Trans. Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic texts*, vol. 1, 92.

²¹ Karen L. King, “Sophia and Christ in the *Apocryphon of John*,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 168.

²² Sasagu Arai, “Zur Christologie des Apokryphons des Johannes,” *NTS* 15 (1968-69): 302-18.

²³ Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol.2, *Sethian Gnosticism*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 588-616.

²⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IV: *Nag Hammadi Codices III,2 and IV,2*, ed. Alexander Böhlig and Frederick Wisse (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 146.

²⁵ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII: *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, ed. Charles W. Hedrick (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 432.

originations²⁶; finally, the *Pistis Sophia* presents a characterisation of Jesus that is less developed than Mary, his most prized disciple. More important than this upstaging of roles however, a main feature of the middle groups with Christian glosses is in fact an emphasis upon the cosmogonic with a sparse super-addition of Jesus into the pre-existing framework. The pre-Christian Gnostic work *Eugnostos* and its redaction into *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* points up the main rhetorical relationship between group one and two in this sense.

The conclusion advanced herein is that the Christian influence upon Gnostic thought was at best one of many – on par, by the time the Nag Hammadi find was buried, with the influences of Persian and Jewish thought in many examples. In the centuries leading up to this *terminus ad quem*, the Christian message is more obviously contained within a diffracted constellation of apocalyptic Jesus sects set amongst a host of deeply arcane and ancient systems currently flourishing in Alexandria from the first century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E.. A far stronger case, textually and socio-historically, can be made for the religious importance of Jesus in Egypt being carried within a Gnostic milieu in these centuries than holds true in reverse. Emanationist systems were expounded and refined for millennia before the first appearance of Jesus sects in Egypt, and there is little or no evidence that Christian thought was a prevalent force in Egypt prior to the third and fourth centuries; indeed, the very notion of “Christianity” in this era is an obvious polemical proposition, as are the usual facile discussions about “Gnosticism”.²⁷ Christianity simply cannot be called a system at all in the first two centuries (there was no *orthos doxa* which is precisely why the Gnostic temperament readily assimilated certain aspects of it), but was likely a succession of charismatics arriving from the north, in the usual manner of teachers journeying to Egypt to teach and be taught, many of whom were rather dualistically inclined themselves if Paul and John are any indication. It is the legitimate task of Christian Origins to come to terms with Gnostic influence upon Christian thought, and theirs is a valid contribution to Gnostic Studies; however, these concerns have been allowed to dominate the field and the result has been a biased view of the Gnostic phenomenon, an optic that peripheralises most of

²⁶ The wit of Celsus, often driven to excess, satirises the Christian conception of Christ as Logos in this regard: “The Christians put forth this Jesus not only as the son of God but as the very Logos – not the pure and holy Logos known to the philosophers, mind you, but a new kind of Logos: a man who managed to get himself arrested and executed in the most humiliating of circumstances”, R. Joseph Hoffmann, trans., *Celsus, On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 64.

²⁷ The proper question to raise for this time period is the far more pervasive influence of a loosely-defined “Gnostic” thought upon the self-professed “Christian.” Clement of Alexandria is particularly instructive in his manifestation of Middle Platonic and Gnostic affinities. See S.R.C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Also Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 53: “Thus in Egypt at the beginning of the second century--how long before that we cannot say--there were gentile Christians alongside Jewish Christians, with both movements resting on syncretistic-gnostic foundations... We first catch sight of something like ‘ecclesiastical’ Christianity in Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria from 189 to 231. Certainly there had already been orthodox believers there prior to that time, and their community possessed a leader. But we can see how small their number must have been from the fact that when Demetrius assumed his office he was the *only* Egyptian ‘bishop’.”

the socio-historical and philosophical-textual concerns that the present study shall raise, and which bases its conclusions by far and large upon a limited “canon” of Gnostic tractates.²⁸

I am not out to define the origins of Gnosticism, nor shall the term be used herein, for the simple reason that in my view “Gnosticism” did not exist in the broad sense of the term.²⁹ There are numerous other fabulous creatures in the Hellenistic thicket that upon closer inspection change shape, or even cease to exist; however, the *ism* on the Gnostic must rank as one of the most misleading. The *overall* heterodoxy of Gnostic thought is not bounded by any such doctrinal regulation, proselytising-motivated self-definition or other rhetorical agenda resulting from political common coin, as to make this modern scholarly fixation at all useful. The penchant for *orthodoxa*, with its concomitant phenomena of canonicity, ecclesial authority, and sought-after rapprochement with societal *praxis*, is implicitly repellent to Hellenistic Gnosis, a high profile feature of Gnostic thought which embodied a spirit of individual revolt against traditional values.³⁰ The appearance of Gnostic thought in Egypt is to be held up against a historical tapestry of political upheavals, more particularly a visceral

²⁸ Gnostic Studies has been drawn into the essentially theological vortex of Christian Origins. Literally hundreds of scholars are working on the synthetic “Q” model follows in the footsteps of the early orthodox propagandist Eusebius in attempting to posit a coherent orthodoxy, an authoritative textual-historical continuum that can be traced back to the direct teachings of Jesus. The vast percentage of articles and books on “Gnosticism” which have been spawned in this crypto-theological environment, most of which were found to be of no use at all in the present work, seem simply unable to impartially deal with the historical picture which emerges for the first two centuries of our era. This picture is one of utter ferment and confusion with respect to religious boundaries. In appropriating Gnostic texts for the above cause, it is equally unpalatable for these scholars to contemplate Christian thought, at least in Egypt, as a subset of a generalised “Gnostic” *Weltanschauung*. Paul Johnson’s *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin Books, 1976) presents a refreshing departure from the narrow tedium of normative histories for this time period.

²⁹ I cannot hope to express the situation better than Morton Smith, “The History of the Term Gnostikos,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 2, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 798: “By our academic prerogative, without considering ancient usage, we recognize certain schools as “gnostic”; hence the ideas held by those schools become “typically gnostic”; hence “gnosticism” will be defined; and the resultant definition of “gnosticism” will prove the “gnostic” character of these schools. Since Plato said “the most perfect of forms” was that most completely circular (*Timaeus*, 33b), we may describe the research program as Platonically perfect”.

³⁰ The question of Gnostic *thought* has been ably treated by quite a number of scholars, and there is a general consensus that a dualist world-view forms the core of what I prefer to call the Gnostic temperament. I intend by this to highlight the larger question of *mood* which prompts and shapes dualist thought in general, as much present in the contemporary “gnostic” philosopher Emil Cioran’s work *Fall into Time* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), as it is in *The Hypostasis of the Archons*. The consideration of this root temperament leads one to directly examine the historical factors that go into shaping it. It is my far from novel premise that the social history which generated the dualist mood in Egypt is an integral facet of Egyptian history and must be treated as such. It would be hard to imagine attempting a study of, say, Middle Kingdom theological expression, or eighth century east European Latin texts, with an almost complete avoidance of socio-historical analysis, yet in Gnostic Studies this is exactly the case.

resentment against pernicious Fate and harsh Roman rule. Above all, there is a despairing reassessment of Ma'at in the context of Egypt as being no longer embodied in traditional pharaonic rule over the Two Lands. There is a strong foreshadowing from this remove of the Nietzschean revaluation of all values with its elitist focus upon a veritable pneumatic *Übermensch*, if the term can be stripped of its Nazi misappropriations. The Hellenistic Gnostic stands as the supreme literary revolutionary who sought not to substitute one form of historical justification with another, but rather endeavoured to overthrow the thralls of historical process entirely, this as a result of an *Entweltlichungstendenz*, an estrangement from the world that is to be historically and socially situated.³¹ Within Alexandria there developed a pluralism of religious speculation rarely seen concentrated upon the world stage in one time and place, a hothouse of exotic incubation that owed its allegiance to an extraordinary heterodoxy forced upon it by historical circumstance. Ironically, much of the resulting dualist mood, in particular the Gnostic temperament at the core of it, was anti-historical.

The Romans were undoubtedly sapient from a political point of view in attempting to vitiate Alexandria's influence through denial of city-council status for centuries on end. Roman rule, for dualist thought across the board in the Near East, was synonymous with the "archontic" – Roman satrapies and prefects were the debased and "hylic" executors of a demonic Historical Rule. It was precisely time and place that the Gnostic temperament indicted, and the *ism* tagged onto Gnostic thought is therefore a misnomer insofar as the antihistoricism of this genre of mythopoeic/mystical thought precluded any attempt on their part to define themselves as a historical movement, although there are some subsets of Gnostic thought at large that exist as exceptions as we shall see. In light of this it can be said that while some nuances of Gnostic thought were self-consciously sectarian, the overall movement can be more effectively treated as a literary phenomena.³²

Apart from the pressing need to establish the socio-historical foundations of Gnostic thought in Egypt, my task is also to supply the textual substructure in earlier phases of Egyptian religious history for the rise of Gnosis in late antiquity. In the final analysis however (as it appears in the conclusion), I am not intent upon merely engaging in a search for various religious motifs that might be superficially matched up; I wish to apply certain modalities of modern literary-critical theory in my approach to the array of ancient texts before me once the historical and philosophical analyses are concluded. The deconstruction of various orientalist assumptions which subtend the boundaries of the Occident (Edward Said), the fictive or distorted "author-function" that a scholarly discourse tends to inflict upon a given text (Michel Foucault), the symbolic and metaphorical polarity in language existing here as the equivalent of Gnostic pleromic and demiurgic ontologies (Paul de Man), the "non-philosophy" of the Egyptians and the Gnostics operating in an antithetical fashion as a

³¹ Hans Jonas sees this as the main feature of Gnostic thought. See Ioan P. Couliano, from his interview with Jonas, in *Gnosticismo e pensiero moderno: Hans Jonas* (Rome: Lérma di Bretschneider, 1985), 146.

³² A point made by Frederick Wisse, "The Use of Early Christian Literature as Evidence for Inner Diversity and Conflict," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity*, ed. Charles W. Hendrick and Robert Hodgson Jr (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1986), 188. Wisse also notes the spuriousness of orthodox and heretical divisions prior to 200 C.E..

“poetic metaphysics” (Harold Bloom), the Gnostic devaluation of any stated “real” objectivised historical *Sitz* as anticipating modern phenomenology (Edmund Husserl), a concern with a social hegemony at work in discourse that bids us keep the political/sexual “heat” of the historical *motive* alive in textual exegesis (Antonio Gramsci), the possibility of translation from one textual-setting to another (George Steiner), and finally Literature’s larger concern with radical evil (Georges Bataille), all of these “modern” concerns can and should be taken to Gnostic texts. Indeed, the existence of the Skeptical schools in Alexandria at the time, and the implicitly Gnostic “deconstructionist” approach to the Word, fairly compel us to not only return full-circle with respect to our own modern hermeneutic agenda, but to more fully acknowledge the texts from the time period and place in which “hermeneutics” first surfaced. This literary-critical optic forms the natural end-point of this study although I am of necessity unable to give this vast undertaking anywhere near its full due.

Indeed, the overall scope I have set for myself might be considered excessively broad were it not for the fact that the system of movements before us all extend out from a central historical and mythological axis. The “historical” I speak of here is more specifically existential and arises, quite simply, from the human experience of evil in historical processes; the mythological refers to all texts that detail an emanationist structure underlying their divine pantheon or philosophical metaphysic. In this discussion I am enfranchising the much-maligned notion of the “mythological” to connote ideas of philosophical and theological consequence and merit. In dealing with the Gnostics and the Manichaeans in Egypt I am mainly concerned with the presence of an autochthonic Egyptian textuality, as well as a social history to support it; the backdrop of the Gnostic and Manichaean movement at large will only be peripherally examined. Likewise, Middle Platonic and Hermetic thought are culled for Egyptian and specifically dualist content. The Gnostic movement is the main focus here and it is within the boundaries of their emanationist theogonies that I propose to establish Egyptian precursors.

Finally, the *Oriental* backdrop against which an identifiably Greek mode of ratiocination operated must be examined, for amongst an array of ancient civilisations, the Babylonian, Persian, Syrian, Jewish, and Egyptian, all is pertinent, but pride of place must go to Egypt. The Egyptian influence upon Greek thought, commenced with the importation of Greek mercenaries by Psammetichus I (664-10 B.C.E.) who allowed Greek settlements and set up a scribal school,³³ reaching its high point in Ptolemaic Alexandria in the last centuries before our era when the Egyptianisation of the Greek settlers was proceeding apace³⁴ As well, we are able to trace the clear precursors of Gnostic and Middle Platonic thought in this locus as in no other. Greek, Coptic, and Demotic magical papyri all exhibit a wide-spread shift in mood towards dualistic cosmologies just prior to and during the earliest stages of Roman rule in Egypt. Towards the beginning of this period (200 B.C.E. to 400 C.E.) Coptic was developed in the rough, likely for business documentation as well as the translation of religious texts by a bilingual Graeco-Egyptian literati.

The philosophical and historical thesis I advance is that the root emanationist metaphysic found in a large number of Hellenistic explorations of Gnosis can be traced far back to the Egyptian Memphite, Hermopolitan, and Heliopolitan theologies

³³ John Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books), 131.

³⁴ See Naphtali Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt Case Studies in the Social History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

which supply the earliest examples of this particular worldview. The emanationist view in turn finds its expression between two poles – the dualist and the monist. This division, of course, is not always a neat one as I shall demonstrate. However we may note at the outset that the monist idealism of Stoicism places it far to the right of this spectrum, whereas the radically dualist Manichaean system is about as far “left” as one can go – off the scale in fact. Egyptian Gnostic thought, representing various shades of mitigated dualisms is more towards the centre between the two extremes; Hermeticism and the Chaldean system, along with the thought of Philo of Alexandria and the Platonists, Speusippus, Xenocrates, Harpocration, Atticus, Plutarch, Ammonius, and Numenius for that matter, are all left of centre – that is, distinctly dualistic – whereas other modes verge to the right, never more strongly than when Neoplatonism finally attempted to define itself as being anti-Gnostic under Plotinus.

A note on the terminologies used in this study. “Cosmology” is not used here in the modern philosophical sense to designate a branch of metaphysics, but rather that of a descriptive model of the universe. “Gnostic” shall be capitalised to indicate a formal quality or affiliation with known Gnostic sects; “gnostic” indicates a general tendency considered apart from the historical phenomena of Gnostic thought; “Gnosis” indicates the doctrinal (for the more religionistic sects) and historical attributes of this special knowledge; “*gnosis*” refers to the specific idealised synchronic experience, or to a specific textual reference in Coptic or Greek. Finally, “philosophy” is used on par with mythology in the context of this time period. The more formalised and self-conscious occidental modalities of Philosophy, proper, shall be referred to as Greek Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, or simply Philosophy.

I begin this study, then, by discussing that which holds all emanationist systems in common, and in drawing out and defining the implicitly dualist thrust of all such speculations.

Part II - Historical Manifestations of Emanationist and Dualist Thought in Egypt
Chapter Two: Emanationist Theologies and Proto-dualism in Egypt

Egyptology has gone through many changes in the last one-hundred years or so in its appreciation of Egyptian conceptions of the divine. The modern definitions of monotheism, henotheism, pantheism and polytheism, have shaped long debates as to the essential nature of Egyptian religion. Of course the same hermeneutic is at work in defining Hinduism, for example, where the abstract and remote monotheistic nature of Brahman is appreciated by Sanskrit scholars and Hindu theologians rather more than it is for the layperson practising an ostensible “polytheism”. We may likewise presume that abstruse theological issues, as we perceive them in Egyptian thought, were more the concern of a temple elite than the layperson, or at the very least that this elite comprised the main formulators of Egyptian cosmology.¹ Certainly the number of people who were *literate* at any given phase in Egypt’s history was relatively small.² In treating the written records of this elite we have a most essential problem in defining *ntr* as “god” which, for the Egyptians, simply meant “whichever god you wish”.³ A neo-monotheist interpretation might be derived from the fact that this “god-ness” is used by the Egyptians as a common denominator upon which various divine entities subsist, however the over-riding Egyptian emphasis upon the genealogy of their gods simply cannot allow for Egyptian religion to be interpreted as monotheistic in the modern occidental sense.⁴ There is, then, the fundamental question of a theogony, or genealogy of the gods, which can be traced back through ever diminishing numbers of divine personages to a Source that is itself only ambiguously singular.

At the outset we can note in passing that the Egyptian Gnostic of 200 C.E., likewise a member of a literate elite, was both “neo-monotheistic” and “neo-polytheistic”, when pressed, as much as was an Egyptian priest of Amun some 2000 years earlier. For both, the conception of a Primal Source, in itself necessary and good, still required a principle of Disorder or perversity in its very depths, and both developed an acute emphasis upon a plurality of divine personages which functioned

¹ Gertie Englund, “God as a Frame of Reference,” in *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions*, ed. Gertie Englund (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1989), 8: “The thoughts that emanated from the temples and the temple schools were all-embracing and explicating. They constituted a systematic thinking and this system of thought was normative. Those thoughts represented the Egyptian way of thinking. Actually it represented the thinking of the elite and it is still an open question to what extent it permeated the entire society.”

² See John Baines and C.J.Eyre, “Four notes on literacy,” *GM* 61 (1983): 65-96. The authors estimate that 1% of the population at any given time was able to read and that the nature of this literacy was multi-leveled.

³ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (1971; reprint, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 59.

⁴ Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, 53: “One must note that Egyptian religion, which retained its plurality of gods to the end, never became a monotheistic faith, even in its most ‘philosophically’ tinged utterances.”

between a temporal and spatial Source, and the created world. Both are in fact proponents of the same emanationist framework, although in entirely different circumstances.⁵ Besides the philosophical architectonics of emanationism which can be drawn from both groups of theological thinkers, there is the underlying social esotericism of these quintessentially literate endeavours.⁶

I define emanationism as follows. It is essentially based upon one insight: although there is a complete Monad, Source, Parent, Primal Waters, or One at the centre of all reality, and although it is inexpressibly perfect in every sense, still there arose the need for differentiation. This streaming forth, “extension”, hypostasising, procreation, or emanation through the sheer power of Thought, Word, Generation, or Intellect, in the Source, resulted in the appearance of various lesser entities, natures, or levels of metaphysical reality culminating in the natural world. These are referred to as specific *natures* in the more philosophical systems (e.g. *nous*, *logos*, *dynamis* etc.) and their numbers are limited by the ancient Egyptian emphasis upon ogdoads and enneads, and later Pythagorean number-systems as a rule; as more personalised entities they appear in the so-called “mythological” systems (e.g. Atum, Ma’at, Isis, Sophia, Barbelo, Seth, Anthropos etc.) wherein the “aeons” or “syzygies” are more numerous, their *dramatis persona* taking on a sexualised role. The emphasis then is upon the need for theogonic process, for differentiation arising out of the Undifferentiated. This need, put simply, is one of *distancing*. The idealism of the Perfect One is perceived to be at a certain remove from this world which in some sense must be lower or inferior than the perfect State of Being represented in the Primal Source.⁷ Further, the dysteliological phenomena in human life – war, famine, plague, disease etc. – these bid the emanationist eventually consider the reality of evil and incorporate some theory for its existence into the distancing process of the theogony. Humankind, then, is afflicted by evil because it is at a certain remove from the Source, either spatially or spiritually (a “Fall” theory), to which it must ultimately return if it is to regain its pristine spiritual state of being. In various measures, life in the flesh is regarded as a lower level of incarnation which must be elevated onto the higher level of spiritual being. Of course the Egyptians believed that the physical body could attain this, as well as the soul; it was only in the final phases of Egypt’s

⁵Three Gnostic tractates name the highest diety in their theogony as “The Hidden One”, and so the identification with Amun is likely, although Atum shared in apophatic epithets as well. See *The Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII,5), *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1), and *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3).

⁶In this sense, we may see the Gnostic view of the “hylic” *lumpenmensch* as being of a piece with the traditional exclusivism of the Egyptian priesthood. A.A. Barb “Mystery, Myth, and Magic,” 152: “Egyptian cult and ritual as a whole was fundamentally esoteric, the privilege of a hereditary priesthood which was only too anxious to avoid profanation by the uneducated and illiterate masses.”

⁷Hans Jonas, “Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon,” in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina*, 93: “Whatever the beginning, whether one, two, or three ‘roots’, the crisis history of original being issues into a divided state of things. With the ‘cosmos’, reality is clearly polarized; the towering, many-storied structure of the spheres and aeons images the width of the rift between the poles, its very multiplicity serves to express the separative power of the antidivine and thus, for the earthbound view, the remoteness from God.”

autochthonic expression that this was changed, and it was felt that the body must be cast off on the road to salvation.

Emanationist thought is imbued with two seemingly incompatible tensions, the dualist and the monist. The monist is in a difficult position here, for all the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” must be reconciled with a Perfect Will which, while somewhat diminished in this lower realm, is still inexplicably all-powerful and is “as it should be”. In the ancient Egyptian view, the goddess Ma’at manifests this principle of correct order in the cosmos and pharaonic rule was seen to be the executor of Ma’at. The inconsistency of a perfect Source and imperfect world, of “otherness”, to adopt Rudolf Otto’s expression, and the natural world, was never reconciled in the thought of Plotinus, a most vigorous and systematic proponent of this view. This is certainly an indication – for he was a most able philosopher and thinker in his time – that emanationism implicitly verges on dualism.⁸ Plotinus, himself a Graeco-Egyptian protégé of the Persian dualist-influenced philosopher Ammonius Saccas in his earlier days in Egypt, and who had many Gnostics appearing in his classes, represents the classic Egyptian struggle with this ancient problem; his was an attempt to re-establish an idealised Egyptian emanationism, one free from the darkness that occluded it in the centuries of subjugation in the Late Period. Plutarch, Numenius, Valentinus, Basileides, Carpocrates, Plotinus, and the Hermeticists, all on a direct philosophical trajectory traceable to the earliest Heliopolitan priesthoods, were essentially working on the same theological problems, and approaching them with the emanationist theogony and various dualisms, explicit or implicit, as “givens”.⁹

For the dualist, the patent impracticality of monist idealism requires a definition of a more radicalised evil that accords it an autonomous life of its own, possible precisely because of the established distance from the Source. This distance often moves this realm into the vicinity of Chaos, Dis-Order, the Depths, or the Abyss, a common feature in all systems which likewise derive from the ancient Egyptian concept of the Primeval Creator effecting his own creation out of the undifferentiated waters of Nun with which Creation remains forever bounded. The

⁸With regards to the two Plotinian concepts of the soul’s descent into an “inferior” world, and the rather Stoic praise given to the excellence of the cosmos, J.M. Rist makes the following observation: “The two positions may be incompatible, the result of conflicting pressures which Plotinus was never able to resolve,” *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 112.

⁹S.S. Jensen, *Dualism and Demonology: the Function of Demonology in Pythagorean and Platonic Thought* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), 13, gives a pedantic discussion of dualism in Greek thought, replete with such over-rationalised conceptions as “pure reason”, “purely intellectual motives”, “the psychological background of the mechanism of predisposition”, and whose view of the ancient world apparently drops off entirely before 500 BCE, as the first-line in his book indicates: “The doctrine of demons as mediators between God and man seems to originate about 500 B.C. in the Pythagorean school.” One must suppose that he has not heard of the Book of the Dead, or the Coffin Texts: even if one is to argue their status as formal “mediators”, there is no escaping the intermediary realm of demons in the Egyptian afterlife, or their functions which are seen to be critical in the soul’s attempts to reach the divine. See Dimitri Meeks, “Génies, Anges, Démons en Égypte,” in *Génies, Anges et Démons*, Sources Orientales VIII (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971).

creator-god Atum can be seen as the creative power of Nun,¹⁰ however this generates a duality in Nun for he is forever to be associated with chaos and disorder as well as being the “father of all the gods”, the hypostasiser of Atum for example. The distance in the theogonic process, as it has now become, involves the new question of Limit, another implicit Egyptian concept – that which is beyond redemption by virtue of the fact that evil operates at too great a vitality to be assimilated and which must be thus delimited and cast out. The daily struggle with the serpent Apep, the autonomous force of evil in Nun, depicts the need for this limit. In the Late Period the struggle with Seth more acutely depicts the need to maintain this boundary against evil; “Books and Spells against the God Seth” describes Seth as having “devised evil before he came forth from the womb, he who caused strife before he came into being”.¹¹ From the earliest times, Seth was associated with the desert, a vast zone of death beyond the limits of the “black land”. In the Late Period Seth’s final expulsion is into Asia from whence he returns to break into Egypt wreaking havoc, illustrates the culmination of this trend in Egyptian religious thought, one immediately prior to the rise of dualist thought in Egypt. The Sethian threat underlay the need for “The Ritual for the Overthrow of Seth and his Confederates”, a text dated to the reign of Nectanebo I, a rite which was performed daily in the Osiris temple at Abydos.¹² However, all emanationist systems agree upon the *necessity* for the theogony. Whether or not the resulting world is to be regarded as evil in itself, or simply forever threatened by evil, the soteriological task is the same: to affirm the Light of the Source in this realm, and to go about returning to it after death, possibly redeeming the world, or part of it, in the process.

In contradistinction to this, Manichaeism as such is an emanationist system of a radically different order, for it posits *two* eternal pre-existent realms of Good and Evil that do not intersect. Emanation proceeds out of these two geographical and spiritual antitheses, and there is no necessity for an intersection. Evil has no possible genesis within the Good which is effectively the central emanationist position. This last point clearly defines the difference between a radical and a mitigated dualist system. Whereas one might say that the guiding Manichaean maxim is “ne’re the twain shall meet”, the focus in Egyptian emanationist thought is upon the theogony, upon the dialectical process of differentiation.¹³

¹⁰ Brigitte Altenmüller, *Syncretismus in den Sargtexten* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 89.

¹¹ Siegfried Schott, *Bücher und Sprüche gegen den Gott Seth. Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums. Urkunden Mythologischen Inhalts I, Heft I* (Leipzig, 1929), 9.

¹² Donald B. Redford, *Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books* (Mississauga: Benben Publications, 1986), 279.

¹³ Jan Assmann, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im alten Ägypten* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1975), 31: “Some dualist thought appears to establish its other-worldliness as a category of Chaos, Evil and Non-being, an unreconcilable opposite of Being, while in more monistically derived conceptions they appear as the transcendent *Urgrund* of Being, as a constituent world-principle, one that the principle of plurality is dialectically attached to.” The overall tendency as Assmann maintains, and as I maintain here, is towards the latter. This is not to concede that Egyptian thought is “monistic”; rather, what bears emphasising is that it is not radically dualistic, a development consonant with later Egyptian Gnostic thought.

We are of necessity examining mythological conceptions of philosophical consequence and it is no longer appropriate to regard Egyptian “myth” as lacking in philosophical merit, or of historiographical value for that matter, although the texts we are to examine were of course not generated with either of these formal aims in mind. The battle to have Egyptian thought appreciated philosophically has been fought and won within Egyptology proper, but it still bears re-emphasising. “Myth became ‘myth’ only when philosophy had arrived” as J. Mansfeld puts it¹⁴, and the philosophical consequences of myth are forever being pulled out in hindsight, as with the famous philosophical rediscovery of Gnostic thought by Hans Jonas, following the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of the great nineteenth century German philologists, although Schopenhauer’s rediscovery of Indian philosophy is perhaps the best precedent to note. This process is currently in mid-stride within Egyptology.¹⁵ Erik Hornung draws upon the 19th century German philosopher F.W. Schelling at the beginning of his work, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*.¹⁶ From Schelling’s *Introduction to the Philosophy of Myth*, Hornung quotes the following passage: “they [the Egyptian gods] cannot be dismissed with a simple pronouncement of distaste; detestable or not, they exist, and since they exist they must be explained”.¹⁷ The obvious significance of this passage quite simply is that Schelling, as a philosopher, took Egyptian thought quite seriously, and Hornung uses this as an overture to his study.¹⁸ Siegfried Morenz establishes an essential point with respect to Egyptian philosophy:

¹⁴ J. Mansfield. “Bad World and Demiurge: A ‘Gnostic’ Motif from Parmenides and Empedocles to Lucretius and Philo,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 262.

¹⁵ Writing two decades ago, J. Gwyn Griffiths illustrates the tendency to compare the two in terms of *results*, in this case the likelihood that the Presocratic Thales based his philosophy upon the ancient Egyptian mythological figure of Nun, “deriving it from mythology, he applied it in a sense which pioneered a philosophical, as opposed to a mythological point of view,” from *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970), 428. This said, the assumption that real philosophy is essentially about modes of argumentation is simply wrong, even if this is in fact standard fare in Philosophy departments these days – Philosophy is about *insight*. As a recent study on Schopenhauer observes: “It *cannot* be the case that what is most important about what a philosopher has to convey to us is introduced by his arguments, unless his problems are primarily technical ones of logic: it must already lie in the insights, judgements, perceptions, points of view, choices, formulations and so on that stock his premisses.” Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (1983; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39. That Philosophy and Mythology often proceed and concern themselves with the same insights need hardly be argued.

¹⁶ Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, 16-17.

¹⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythology*, Zweite Abtheilung I (1856; reprint, Darmstadt 1957), 24. Schelling was reacting to a line of Goethe’s in which he spoke of “extolling dog-headed gods”.

¹⁸ Hornung’s mention of Schelling is not at all surprising for his later philosophy drew upon the writings of Jakob Boehme whose mystical writings were an obvious influence upon Schelling. See F.W. Schelling, *Philosophical Enquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, trans. James Gutman (1809; reprint, La Salle, IL: Columbia University Press, 1986). It is also interesting to consider that Boehme was advancing a quintessentially gnostic concern

Let us note the remarkable link between two relative adjectives: “that which is [and] that which is not (*intt wtt*)”. This means “everything” and takes account formally of what does not exist in a way which would do credit to Greek philosophy. But the Egyptians did more than supply the linguistic prerequisites for philosophical thinking; we also encounter genuine philosophical modes of reasoning and posing problems.¹⁹

This is one of the stronger statements to be found among Egyptologists concerning the philosophical status of Egyptian thought and is an apposite point with which to mention a number of inherent dualisms in Egyptian thought.²⁰ The separation of Horus and Seth, delimiting heaven and earth (and foreshadowing the Gnostic function of Horus – Limit – and demiurgic vicissitudes beyond the Pleroma as we shall later see²¹), earth and underworld, and most strikingly in the black and the red, the essential dualism of the long-standing Egyptian world-view:

Looking across the Nile, for most of its length they [the ancient Egyptians] could see the boundaries of their world in the rich red-brown mud that was deposited each year. Beyond this narrow fertile belt was tawny desert, mostly sterile, inhospitable and dangerous. The division between cultivation and wilderness, fecundity and barrenness, life and death, good and evil, was therefore clear and complete, and gave the Egyptian his characteristic awareness of the essential duality of his universe.²²

Egyptian thought, which was much preoccupied with death and the soul’s journey thereafter, focused upon heaven and the realm of the dead, the latter being a sort of archetypal “twilight zone” linked with chthonian deities, geographically associated with the necropolises located along the edge of the western desert²³, but also with the primeval ocean Nun which extends under the disk of the earth.²⁴ The Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts at times amount to a guide for the dead in the netherworld, delimiting paths and supplying passwords for the inimical forces that are to be

with the genesis of evil, and that his thought is highly reminiscent of Basileides of Alexandria (ca. 132 CE) who, in turn, espoused a system which shows numerous derivations from the Memphite theology as we shall later examine.

¹⁹ Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. Ann E. Keep (1960; reprint, London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1973), 10.

²⁰ See also Erik Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1984), 17 and *passim*.

²¹ A point anticipated by J.Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 60: “it is the elder Horus that is originally implicated in the struggle against Seth-Typhon.... The elder Horus as the picture and vision of the world to come (54, 373c) is perhaps a Gnostic feature.”

²² Cyril Aldred, *The Egyptians*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 71.

²³ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 207.

²⁴ Jan Zandee, *Death As An Enemy: According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 94.

encountered. This, too, was a later Gnostic and Chaldean preoccupation. In the New Kingdom the “Livres” depict a subterranean realm of the dead in which the sun traverses twelve divisions from west to east (representing the hours of the night) above an underworld river. In both Middle and New Kingdom texts there are gates guarded by serpents. Old Kingdom texts demonstrate the Egyptian desire to free themselves after death from the gods of the earth (*3kr.w*), Geb, and even the word *t3* (lit. “earth” or “ground”) is used as the inhibitor of supernal flight. The hostile actions of demons are to be found in all descriptions of the Egyptian underworld and it is this feature that supplies us a clear lead in developing the precursors of Gnostic thought in ancient Egyptian cosmologies. As such we shall return to the subject of Egyptian demonology at the end of this chapter. Another important feature, later reflected in Gnostic thought, is total destruction through fire of the dead whose crimes are judged to be beyond redemption. The Am Duat depicts the enemies of Chepri being burned by nine serpents. The Egyptian concern was with total elimination of unredeemable elements, precisely the same soteriological end-game developed in Manichaeism. The immortal powers of evil, in the Egyptian view, are confined to the extreme cosmogonic depths where they fulfil their function of bounding and revivifying Order.²⁵

A distinction between physical death and spiritual death in Gnostic thought can also be seen to have its Egyptian roots. Papyrus Smith, a 17th century BCE medical text, its original conception perhaps dating back to the early Old Kingdom, shows that physical affliction and death was not simply viewed as resulting from bodily decay, but was attributable to demoniac or pneumatic influence.

As for ‘something entering from the outside,’ it means the breath of an outside god or death, and not the introduction of something which his (own) flesh has produced.²⁶

For all Gnostics, radical or mitigated, the world represents a tyrannical power-system, a virtual prison within which the *pneuma* or spirit of Anthropos has been incarcerated. Set against this much polarised Late-Period struggle of good vs. evil, the Egyptian-Gnostic attitude towards death can be seen to embody the traditional Egyptian view of death as an existential tripwire beyond which hostile powers lurked. The sharp division between fertilised land and desert had cosmogonic repercussions in the Egyptian psyche one might say, and the Egyptian ideal of Order always had edgy undertones as a result of this fear of immanent Disorder.²⁷ The implicit monism of the Egyptian pharaonic/Creator ideal was never able to overcome this essential

²⁵ Erik Hornung, “The Discovery of the Unconscious in Ancient Egypt,” in *Spring: an Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought*, 16-27 (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1986), 24: “They [the powers of evil] have a place in the underworld; and this makes sense because confrontation with the powers of destruction and disintegration, with the disorganized chaos before creation, and with the threat of total destruction belongs with regeneration.”

²⁶ Papyrus Edwin Smith, trans. John A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1951), 57-58.

²⁷ See Günther Roeder, “Kosmogonische Vorstellungen in Ägypten – Die Kosmogonie von Hermopolis,” *Egyptian Religion* 1 (1933), 2.

dualism in outlook, one which resulted from the Egyptian view of death as the enemy of life.²⁸

The anti-Gnostic early Church polemicist Irenaeus (*floruit* 185 CE) informs us that certain Gnostic groups attempted to redeem people at the point of death through a christening-process accompanied by the recital of invocations which included lists of sacred names. The dying person is also instructed with certain passwords which will enable him or her to ascend past the barriers of the archons.²⁹ These details are of course quintessentially Egyptian, as found towards the end of the Saite period in particular, when the Book of the Dead (literally the Book of Going Forth By Day) was regularised, and an increasing number of magical incantations used against divine judgement appear. PGM IV, the “Mithras Liturgy”, a magical text with pronounced Egyptian influences, depicts the ascent into heaven by the seeker of Gnosis, this accomplished through the use of proper passwords, *voces magicae*, and appeals to various divinities. All of this is quite traditional in an Egyptian context, however the ecstatic condition depicted in association with this journey through the heavens was earlier foreign to Egyptian religion³⁰, as was the Gnostic view of casting off the body, like a chrysalis, to let the entrapped pneuma ascend to its rightful place in the airy regions. The ancient Egyptian theologian had a far more positive view of life in the flesh in cosmogonic terms, hence the desire to preserve one’s physical form in the afterlife. These more practical views of Gnosis are to be contrasted with more sophisticated forms in which *gnosis* is seen to be an inner attainment, in itself assuring one’s place in the Pleroma after death. This knowledge, according to various Gnostic tractates, imparts an immediate vision and certainty regarding the holistic necessity for life and death on earth, and no sacraments or passwords are required.

However, this too has its roots in Egyptian soteriology, for Egyptian theology differentiates between “the man of knowledge” (*rhw*) and the ignorant (*ihmw*); as well, the Memphite Theology depicts the creator dispensing “life to the righteous and death to the transgressor” in spiritual terms as opposed to the merely physical. We are witness to a split which later shows up in Gnostic thought between Archaic and Hellenistic Gnosis (discussed in Chapter 8). The archaic Egyptian soteriology places its emphasis upon reference to sacred text, to procedure, and external propitiation. Under the sway of a host of theologians with Greek philosophical educations, a more sophisticated form of Gnosis saw salvation dependent upon inner resources, upon knowing, and upon being recognised as pneumatic. Both theological propensities are inherently elitist and this essential characteristic is at the heart of the socio-historic model which shall be developed herein.

The outer sweep of the Egyptian ostensibly polytheistic *mélange* belays a relatively stable contemplative centre based in large measure upon the socio-historic phenomena of various classes of priests unremittingly associated with the political power-centres of Egypt. These strata were to sustain themselves for millennia, from Old Kingdom into Roman times. Taken in its entirety, these “formulators of the

²⁸ Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 1: “Without death no victory over death. Death becomes the foundation of eternal life, life in its potential form ... this monistic conception stands in contrast with a dualistic one, in which death is considered the enemy of life. This dualistic view is the primary one, sprung from the natural fear of death in mankind.”

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer* I, 21.5.

³⁰ Kákosy, “Gnosis und Ägyptische Religion,” 243.

Creed” evinced a distinctly philosophical *attitude* even while largely neglecting to attain a certain rigour and consistency in their expression as judged by our own analytic predilections.³¹ The process by which Egyptian creation-models were originally conceived, maintained, and altered, fuses both philosophical and theological endeavours against an historical backdrop; one might say that this skyward-reaching architectonic of the mind roots itself in the social, religious, political, geographical, and essentially *rhetorical*, soil of the times.

Above all, the constant threat of disorder to the Egyptian world bounded and subtended their profound appreciation of Ma’at. In the reign of Senwosret II (c. 1906-1887 B.C.E.) for example, Khekheperre-sonbu wrote about his own profound sense of the moral unworthiness of human society, of afflictions and calamities.

I am meditating on the things that have happened, the events that have occurred in the land. Transformations go on, it is not like last year, one year is more burdensome than the next.... Righteousness is cast out, iniquity is in the midst of the council-hall. The plans of the gods are violated, their dispositions are disregarded.... Calamities come in today, tomorrow afflictions are not past. All men are silent concerning it, although the whole land is in great disturbance. Nobody is free from evil.³²

The break-up of the First Intermediate Period involved a recognition amongst the Egyptians of its internal causes, most particularly of the reality of evil within human beings themselves.³³ This process of drawing out the implicitly dualistic in Egyptian thought can be seen to progress from this traumatic period. By the New Kingdom we are witness to a split between humankind and the divine as can be seen in the myth of the Celestial Cow. In this myth, the power of the ageing Re is waning and humankind revolts; the result is the destruction of much of humankind and the god’s retreat to a higher realm.³⁴ The Memphite Theology demonstrates that the Egyptians did not have a strictly materialistic view of the cosmos, but rather saw a split between the psychic and intellectual/spiritual on the one hand, and the physical on the other. Ptah brings the gods into existence, then he brings forth the towns, temples, and sanctuaries, whereupon the gods descend into inanimate nature, “taking body” in all trees, stones, clays: thus they came into existence.³⁵ As well, Iamblichus confirms

³¹ J.P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), ix: “We have divorced philosophy, as a discipline, from religion. In the former we appreciate reality *objectively*, as something capable of study; in the latter we understand it *subjectively*, as something that can only be experienced. This dichotomy did not govern Near Eastern thought.”

³² BM 5645, trans. by James H. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (1912; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 200-201.

³³ Hornung, “The Discovery of the Unconscious in Ancient Egypt,” 17: “This new insight into the negative traits of human character which can no longer be suppressed is frightening.”

³⁴ See Erich Hornung, *Der Ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh* (Freiberg: Universitätsverlag, 1982).

³⁵ Hieroglyphic transcription from James Henry Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” *ZÄS* 39 (1902): plate II, column 59.

this positioning of intelligence, *a priori*, above nature.³⁶ This forms a compelling link between Egyptian thought and the Hermetic doctrine of the celestial inspiration of matter.³⁷

This split between the two realms is emphasised in the special nature of humankind's relationship to the gods, expressed in the *Instruction to Merikare*,

Provide for men, the cattle of God
for he made heaven and earth at their desire
He suppressed the greed of the waters
he gave the breath of life to their noses
for they are likenesses of Him which issued from His flesh.
He shines in the sky for the benefit of their hearts;
He has made herbs, cattle, and fish to nourish them. (lines 130-34)³⁸

While the physical body belongs to sensible creation, the spiritual elements originate from on high, from the intelligible sphere of cosmic intelligence. When released from the physical, the Ba and Akh (generally, the psyche and pneuma) return to their spiritual originator. A point to be made here is that this special nature of humankind does not come from the demiurge, but from the highest theogonic levels of the Creator.³⁹ The special nature of humankind is thus a key element in the rise of later Gnostic sects, for in itself it anticipates the contradiction of higher and lower originations. One has to agree with Iverson in his assessment of this split in terms of its later impact upon philosophy:

The fundamental dualism responsible for the distinction made between intelligible and sensible, spiritual and physical existence is of eminent importance, not merely for the understanding of the Egyptian approach to cosmological problems and phenomena, but also, historically seen, as an anticipation of the philosophical theory of ideas.⁴⁰

The “dysteliological” as we might term it, within the Egyptian universe, arose from two givens in their cosmology – one was essentially external, the other threat arose from within. In the first case, the Egyptian sphere of life floated as a “bubble” surrounded by the limitless dark waters of the inert Nun.⁴¹ This all-inclusive realm,

³⁶ *On the Mysteries: De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, trans. T. Taylor & A. Wilder (Chthonios Books),: “The Egyptians, likewise, do not say that all things are physical. For they separate the life of the soul and the intellectual life from nature, not only in the universe, but also in us. And admitting intellect and reason to subsist by themselves, they say that generated essences were thus fabricated.” VIII, 4.267.

³⁷ Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 11.

³⁸ Translated by R.O. Faulkner in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. William Kelly Simpson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 191.

³⁹ Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 16.

⁴⁰ Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 16.

⁴¹ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 7.

while giving rise to the cosmogony, forever maintained the threat of disorder in its chaotic inert presence. It is the supreme Mystery in Egyptian speculation:

How the upper side of this sky exists is in uniform darkness,
the southern, northern, western and eastern limits of which are unknown,
these having been fixed in the Waters, in inertness.
there is no light of the Ram there: he does not appear there –
(a place) whose south, north, west and east land is unknown by the gods or
akhs,
there being no brightness there.
And as for every place void of sky and void of land, that is the entire Duat.⁴²

The initial triumph of light over darkness, procreative energy over inertness, is not a decisive one. This is what prevents Egyptian thought from being monistic, for the threat from darkness and disorder is forever maintained.⁴³

The second internal factor arises within the theogony itself in the form of Seth, the disrupter, destroyer, and god of confusion. We shall return to this once the basic theogonic structure has been described.

The Heliopolitan system, likely the historical root system for all others, details the initial act of creation by Atum, in sexual terms, but without a partner. This onanistic act initiates a procreative principle which is thereafter enacted amongst male and female pairs of hypostases, commencing with Shu and Tefnut. The act itself takes place against a backdrop of the disorderly abyss, a pre-temporal condition, a substance-less state of potential which awaited a catalyst in order to bring forth natural forces through creation:

I was born in the Abyss before the sky existed, before the earth existed, before that which was to be made firm existed, before turmoil existed (PT Utt. 486, §1040).⁴⁴

Out of the watery wastes of Nun, the pre-creation state of undifferentiation, a creative principle initiates a theogonic process, thereby establishing a realm of order.⁴⁵ Atum,

⁴²From the cenotaph of Seti I, in J.P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 1.

⁴³Helmer Ringgren, "Light and Darkness in Ancient Egyptian Religion," in *Liber Amicorum: Studies in Honour of Professor Dr. C.J. Bleeker* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 144.

⁴⁴R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 173.

⁴⁵This is strongly suggestive of Plotinus' concern with emanation and necessity arising within the One. Rist sets out to demonstrate that, "if emanation follows from the One's nature and the One's nature is caused by the One's will, then emanation will be an act of a kind of a free will and Plotinus will be freed from the shackles of a deterministic universe," *Plotinus: the Road to Reality*, 76. Rist's analysis demonstrates very convincingly that this was likely the intent of Plotinus. It seems to me that Plotinus, who was of course born and educated in Egypt albeit within a Greek social milieu, advanced an embellishment upon the perennial Egyptian depiction of the free-will of Atum (the first appearance of a "will to differentiate" within Nun), the result of which was a non-deterministic universe for the Egyptians (or vice versa), and a distinct lack of fatalism in their outlook.

in the Heliopolitan version, is the positive principle of completion paradoxically at work within the nothingness of a pre-existing chaotic state. Atum also actualises the latent polarity of male/female by being essentially androgynous.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most important feature of this system is the emphasis upon the androgyny of the primal creative power, and a balancing of masculine and feminine energies in each subsequent creative act which occurs as follows:

Nun
o
ATUM (androgynous)

SHU – – – TEFNUT

GEB – – – NUT

OSIRIS – – -ISIS SETH – -NEPHTHYS⁴⁷

The group of gods engendered by Atum form an ennead, and it must be understood that while the first moment of differentiation is contained as potential in the androgyny of Nun and Atum, and attains plural form in the birth of Shu and Tefnut, the formation of the ennead establishes the cosmogonic grounds for an enhanced plurality.⁴⁸ This impression is reinforced by the fact that not only are the specific gods changeable, in particular Nephthys and Seth, but that the “enneads” depicted in various cosmologies often do not number nine and are not, strictly speaking, defined by the nonary *psd.t*. The great ennead of Karnak, for example, numbered fifteen gods.⁴⁹ It is compelling to consider the idea early put forward by H. Brugsch that this “nine-ness” is in fact a squared plural: 3². With this we must agree, for the critical moment of differentiation and generation occurs with Atum as androgynous Parent, giving birth to Shu and Tefnut – squaring this threeness

⁴⁶ There is a similar ambiguity in various Gnostic texts which develop a Heliopolitan-style Pleroma of sexually generated pairs of aeons. The Primal Source, or “Parent” is presumably androgynous, yet there are hints that he has a consort at various junctures. In some Valentinian versions, this consort is named *Sige* (Silence) which perhaps mirrors the role of an undifferentiated Nun (i.e. voiceless) as a de facto consort. Atum is on par with the Gnostic figure of Autogenes in Valentinian thought, who likewise is “self-begetting”.

⁴⁷ A coffin text from the Bubastite period, gives a first-person account of this process: “I am one [Atum] who became two [Shu-Tefnut]. I am two who became four [Shu-Tefnut-Geb-Nut]. I am four who became eight [Shu-Tefnut-Geb-Nut-Osiris-Isis-Seth-Nephthys],” From the coffin of a priest of Amun in the 22nd Dynasty: Hermann Kees, *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten* (1941; reprint, Berlin, 1956), 171.

⁴⁸ Winfried Barta, *Untersuchungen zum Götterkreis der Neunheit* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1973), 24: “Einem ‘Neungötterkreis’ stand damit ein ‘Vielgötterkreis’ gegenüber.”

⁴⁹ Barta, *Untersuchungen zum Götterkreis der Neunheit*, lists 84 known enneads in Egyptian thought.

effectively emphasises the idea of plurality (in hieroglyphs three equals the plural⁵⁰). Another Heliopolitan variant depicts Atum forming a triad with the two goddesses, Hathor-Nebet-Hetepet and Saosis, and their names can indicate the male and female sexual organs: *htpt* “bliss” etc., and *iw.s-C3.s* “she comes while she grows large”. Likewise the word for Atum’s mouth, from which Shu and Tefnut emerge, denotes the vulva in erotic literature. This emphasis upon the original latent duo, the theogonic extension into three, and then various enneads, ogdoads, hebdomads etc. is at the very heart of a large number of Gnostic cosmologies.

Of equal importance in establishing Egyptian mythological precursors of Gnostic thought is the equivocal figure of Seth. It is not necessary to go into the murky origins of this god except to say that a distinct lack of assimilation may have resulted from his origination with the original inhabitants of Egypt near Ombos. From Old Kingdom to Graeco-Roman times he remained a deity apart to the extent that he was finally identified as the Greek Typhon as a personification of evil.⁵¹ From the earliest times Seth is the enemy of Osiris and Horus and was well known for his negative qualities.⁵² The Seth-animal determinative is used for words “indicating concepts divergent from the normal order”⁵³ and overall, the impression of Seth’s rhetorical presence is that of a disturber of the peace. In philosophical terms he embodies the principle of the dysteliological – plague, illness, abortion, catastrophe, storm etc. In theological terms he embodies the spirit of *non serviam*, a lawless presence associated with his desert abode, literally beyond the pale of social order and justice. In Egyptian texts he is often associated with the power of darkness forever threatening the sun and the moon.⁵⁴

Seth’s most important theogonic function is as the manifestation of disjunction among the gods. It will be recalled that Seth and his consort Nephthys appear alongside Osiris and Isis and this in itself disturbs the harmony of the hypostases, for two pairs are produced by Geb and Nut as opposed to the previous pattern of only one, and Seth is born prematurely by striking a blow to break through Nut’s side (*De Iside* 355E⁵⁵). In anticipation of this Isis lives in fear of Seth in Nut’s womb and Seth becomes associated with abortion.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Seth and Nephthys do not form a divine syzygy or pair and, according to Plutarch (*De Iside* 358B⁵⁷), Seth is abandoned by his concubine Thoeris. The homosexual episode with Horus is yet another

⁵⁰ More specifically, it reifies adjectives and denotes abstraction.

⁵¹ W.B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt* (1961; reprint, Hammondswoth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), 120; Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 259: “the reasons for the identification of Seth and Typhon are not far to seek. Both were protagonists in war against the established order among the gods, Typhon opposing Zeus, and Seth Horus.”

⁵² Jan Zandee, “Seth als Sturmgott,” *ZÄS* 90 (1963): 155.

⁵³ te Velde, *Seth, the God of Confusion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 24.

⁵⁴ Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 487.

⁵⁵ Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 136-37.

⁵⁶ te Velde, *Seth, the God of Confusion*, 29.

⁵⁷ Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 146-47.

disruptive act which has major theogonic consequences. As we shall detail more closely in Chapter 10, all of the main components of the high-profile Valentinian Gnostic myth are established here: pairs of syzygies emanate forth from the Primal Parent until a disjunction occurs in the theogonic process, this centred about an hypostasis who exists apart from the established order without a partner, and who causes an abortion to occur following an illicit sexual act.

The murder of Osiris by Seth is of course the theogonic act of disjunction par excellence. Osirianism was based upon the worldly passions of fidelity and treason, love and enmity, attainment and emulousness; this core myth, undoubtedly the most powerful one in almost any phase of Egypt's history, especially on a popular level, enacted a soteriology of nothing less than the eventual triumph of Good over Evil.

A further key conflict is anticipated here in the struggle between Horus and Seth following Seth's murder of Osiris. Horus himself is brought forth in solitude by Isis without a consort, and mother and child exist in close proximity to the Abyss as symbolised by the Khemmis marshes. We need not go into the details of this battle. Seth is driven out of Egypt and castrated, symbolising the setting up of a boundary between chaos and the cosmos. This critical cosmogonic event establishes the essential polarity in the Egyptian worldview, for the spirit of Horus and Seth permeate all reality and are forever in contention. Again, this anticipates a central Valentinian mythological event in the "fall" of Sophia after her "formless abortion" and subsequent demiurgic creation of the world. The Pleroma, greatly disturbed, sets about separating itself from this dysteliological locus, and the aeon Horus is dispatched in order to establish the boundary. The fact that the Greek *horos* means boundary rather fortuitously facilitated this textual fusion with obvious expedience. A Late-Period magical papyrus depicts a petitioner asking the assistance of Horus to unbar the door to allow his escape from Typhon:

Be opened, be opened, O bar, for I am Horus the great one, Archephrenepsou Phirinx, the son of Osiris and Isis. And I wish to escape from the godless Typhon quickly, quickly, at once, at once.⁵⁸

While Horus and Seth are eventually reconciled, we note the transition to a more Gnostic view in the later periods of Egyptian history, when the tendency was to assign Seth as the permanent abode of evil.⁵⁹ However, the necessity for Seth in the daily functioning of the Egyptian cosmos is clearly demonstrated in Seth's rendering decisive assistance to Re in his solar barque against the incessant attacks from the serpent Apophis, quintessential being of chaos. Apophis is always thwarted but never killed; he and chaos are indestructible.⁶⁰ It has been postulated that Seth, as the "chosen of Re" in this context, is to be seen as a violent aspect of Re. Even so, he remains a *nbd*, an evil being, and it is in his fight against Apophis that he is known as an "instigator of confusion" (*sd hnnw*).⁶¹

⁵⁸ Griffiths, *Conflict of Horus & Seth*, 118 From *Papyri Osloenses* (Oslo, 1925), I, 316ff.

⁵⁹ te Velde, *Seth, the God of Confusion*, 67.

⁶⁰ Erik Hornung, "Chaotische Bereiche in der geordneten Welt," ZÄS 81 (1956): 28.

⁶¹ *Medinet Habu* I, pl.32,5; 46,31. I am indebted to te Velde for this reference: *Seth, God of Confusion*, 101.

The creative principle as enacted in the Heliopolitan ennead is depicted in profoundly sexual terms, indeed incestuous in that all sexual pairings occur “within the family” as it were.⁶² The first level of this process can be viewed as the essential development of differentiation as principles, the male and female primal pair of Shu and Tefnut. The second level of this theology involves the primordial laying out of *physis*, earth and sky, as embodied in Geb and Nut. The third level depicts the establishment of *nomos*, the political-historical embodied in Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys.⁶³ This last level underlies the establishment of the Egyptian state and it is here that we look to ascertain the purpose of the entire process.

The power of the Egyptian state, which was quintessentially theocratic, required its own justification within the larger theogonic process.⁶⁴ Indeed, one could say that, at least in the Old Kingdom oligarchies, a fourth level existed beneath the third, peopled by the “royals” who enacted their own powers as extensions from the archetypal level above in terms of the royal pair mirroring the procreative functions of their heavenly counterparts. Above all, the divine theology was to be located in the sexual polarities of their specific physical beings. This was a recipe for a vigorous nepotism in the power-politics of the time.⁶⁵

There can be little doubt that the Heliopolitan system arose out of the Egyptian experience of the natural order. The very birth of the sun god each day was depicted in these terms, and the dramatic contrast of the Nile with its sheath of “black land” as set against the “red land” of the desert, would have amplified the Egyptian experience of the procreative as a cosmogonic principle underlying its appearance within a virtual wasteland. Here, too, we might expect an experiential ground for Egyptian views on the Abyss. In both theologies, creation took place “at the first time” (*sp tpy*) which, according to Morenz, does not just mean the beginning... it only means the beginning

⁶²This need not be viewed as the “grossly sensual” onanism as Morenz would have it, *Egyptian Religion*, 163. Morenz attempts to ameliorate this image by showing that the verb *msi* may mean “to bring forth” in various applications; however the Heliopolitan view of creation clearly emphasises the sexual pairing of male and female powers above all else. See Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 65, for a more convincing discussion on the employment of the verb *msi* “to beget” or “to bear” in Egyptian thought.

⁶³With the exception of the Greek terms employed, I am following Tobin’s discussion here, *Theological Principles*, 63-64.

⁶⁴For a more modern version of this I would mention Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), whose main work *Leviathan* sets out to justify sovereignty; this he does by positing divine will at work in the very manifestation of sovereign rule which, good or bad in various instances, is always preferable to anarchy and disorder.

⁶⁵Incest was widespread amongst the royals, although not necessarily *de rigueur*, it is difficult to ascertain if it was a distinct effort to ritually enact the larger theogonic process. On the subject of divine kingship in the Old Kingdom, a recent and important work in the area draws the following conclusions: Barry J. Kemp, “Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period,” in *Ancient Egypt: A Social History*, ed. B.G. Trigger, B.J. Kemp, D. O’Connor, A.B. Lloyd (1983; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 73: “Any functional explanation must begin with the Osiris-Horus-Seth motif which, as it were, underpinned kingship and one of whose main themes was to relate the person of the living king in the closest possible way to his country’s royal ancestors, and thus to ensure that the historical process of royal succession remained always embraced within a central and authoritative body of myth.”

of an event”.⁶⁶ This distinction is important, again following Morenz, for if the beginning arises out of an event, there is an eventless existence prior to the beginning of what is essentially a theogony, the genealogy of the gods: “Chaos is therefore to be thought of not only as confused but also monotonous”.⁶⁷ The Egyptian experience of the desert, which embodies the almost complete lack of a procreative principle, is the backdrop against which the divine generation of political power along the Nile is set. Seth, the ‘God of Confusion’ is situated in the desert itself, and his abode becomes the very boundary between the transitory and the everlasting. It is this same boundary, as Hornung points out, that exists between order and chaos, the existent and non-existent.⁶⁸

One need not argue that these metaphysical speculations necessarily preceded their incorporation into a political framework, nor need one insist that they necessarily arose therefrom; rather we assume that the two occurred more or less simultaneously. The absolute dependence of a procreative order upon the Nile, as set about by a vast zone of death which in turn isolated the Egyptians from other world-views, these factors profoundly shaped the Egyptian view of a natural world-order and, most importantly, the feeling of certainty that their political will to power was the end result of a theogonic process.

The Hermopolitan theology is also extremely important in previewing certain key Gnostic mythological elements. The formation of an Ogdoad, formed from the four pairs of so-called *Heh*, or Chaos gods, is the main distinguishing feature.⁶⁹ A Coffin Text depicts the creation of the eight gods “in chaos, in the Abyss, in darkness and in gloom”.⁷⁰ In this system, Atum is likewise engendered out of Nun, and he also brings forth Shu and Tefnut. However, the theologians were obviously much concerned with explicating the nature of Nun and in positing a female presence coterminous with Nun. Nun thus had his consort Nunet who, in contradistinction to Nun’s primeval ocean, was the counter-heaven beneath. Nun and Nunet (or Naunet as the Greeks called her) become the primordial couple of the Ogdoad which takes on three other couples whose nature is likewise intended to define the nature of the primeval substance out of which the main theogony was to proceed:

Nun/Naunet (watery abyss)	Huh/Hauhet (formlessness)	Kuk/Kauket (darkness)	Amun/Amaunet (hiddenness)
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There is an interpenetration of ideas that exist in the Heh-gods; for example, Nun was seen to embody an inert or indolent quality, while Huh, with his expanding qualities

⁶⁶ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 166.

⁶⁷ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 166.

⁶⁸ Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 158.

⁶⁹ There is no word for “chaos” as such in Egyptian; *heh* means “million” or “many”, and their qualities indicate that this numerical surfeit was one of formlessness.

⁷⁰ CT II Spell 65; R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, vol. 1, *Spells 1-354* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1978), 78.

of formlessness, betokens movement.⁷¹ It shall later be demonstrated that this fundamental view of eight Chaos-divinities at work in the creation of things is directly carried on into Gnostic thought,⁷² as is also for example, the Hermopolitan positing of the origin of life from an egg which later shows up in the thought of the Gnostic Basileides of Alexandria.

We turn now to examine the Memphite Theology.

Thus the Ennead was born, so that the eyes could see, the ears hear, the nose breath air, (and) so they could all ascend to the heart. He is the one who causes all full knowledge to be attained. It is the tongue which enunciates that which the heart thinks, and thus all of the gods were born and his Ennead was fulfilled.⁷³

The above passage from the Shabakka stone, what has come to be known as the “Memphite Theology” is at the core of a revolution in Egyptian emanationism. The text goes on to state that it is this process “that gives value to everything”. One senses in Egyptology distinct gratification in the appearance of this text, for it obviates the need to exclusively focus upon Atum’s graphic and unsophisticated generation of the Heliopolitan ennead. Besides prefiguring the “Word” in John’s gospel (and of a piece with the generation of all sorts of erroneous debate about Egyptian “monotheism” in conjunction with Akhenaten), the cerebral Memphite Ptah subsumes the onanistic Atum, and the concept of power existing in words as opposed to the loins, can be seen to indicate a transition from the static power dynamics of a pervasive nepotism in the Egyptian state, to a more dynamic rhetorical environment within which those of proven ability, even without the usual family connections, might exercise the power of the word.⁷⁴ In this sense the historical conclusion to be drawn is that the Heliopolitan system is quintessentially Old Kingdom in its emanationist endorsement of family rule and nepotistic hegemony. Throughout the entire Fourth Dynasty, for example, “is a line of viziers, most of them also in charge of the king’s building

⁷¹ Winfried Barta, “Die Bedeutung der Personifikation Huh im Unterscheid zu den Personifikation Hah und Nun,” *GM* 127 (1992): 7-12.

⁷² *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 2-7) for example.

⁷³ Hieroglyphic transcription from Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” plate II, column 56.

⁷⁴ John Baines, “Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy, and Decorum: Modern Perceptions and Ancient Institutions,” *JARCE* XXVII (1990), 6-7: “A good point for departure for placing evidence for restricted knowledge in a rudimentary model of the Egyptian elite is the general one that knowledge is an instrument of power.... It would be surprising if there were not some homology between access to religious centers and to religious knowledge.... Much display of knowledge will not be in written form, although it will often relate to written materials. When it is written, what is shown must not reveal what is known. What has not been identified in Egypt and seems implausible is a formal restriction on who might acquire the basic knowledge of literacy, which would be a prerequisite to access to the more recondite material I discuss...”

projects, who are king's sons".⁷⁵ This trend waned in the following three centuries, and by the Middle Kingdom the significance of princes in the administration was "even more inconspicuous".⁷⁶

We suspect, then, that the development of the Memphite system may have been intimately bound up with the dissolution of that state. Certainly Egypt's capital throughout the Old Kingdom remained at Memphis but by the Fourth Dynasty, this highly centralised state began to disintegrate when "provincial governorships and other offices came to be regarded as hereditary appointments"⁷⁷ It is tempting, then, to view this as an inevitable development for a social structure which emulated a cosmology that was itself nepotistic, indeed incestuous. The appearance of parallel power-centres, in the form of the nobility eroding the power of the king, surely indicates that the hereditary succession of rulership failed to produce the level of competency required to rule a vast kingdom from the centre.⁷⁸ As well, we have strong indications that this development manifested a growing freedom of thought and expression in various social classes beyond the immediate circle of the King. The autobiography by Ankhtifi, the nomarch of Hieraconopolis, embodies this transition to the Middle Kingdom:

I am the vanguard of men and the rearguard of men. One who finds the solution where it is lacking. A leader of the land through active conduct. Strong in speech, collected in thought, on the day of joining the three nomes. For I am a champion without peer, who spoke out when the people were silent, on the day of fear when Upper Egypt was silent.⁷⁹

In the approach to the First Intermediate Period other critical changes are apparent. In the Old Kingdom the king attained his afterlife in a celestial heaven, whereas all others were destined for earth. This interpretation may be overstated, and we may be dealing with a tendency as opposed to an absolute. Be that as it may, following the decline of the Old Kingdom it seems as though the doctrine of the *ba* ("soul") came to be applied to everyone, and the absolute theocratic power of the king was now shared by powerful priesthoods.

Our overall question in this regard: does the subsequent rise of Memphite theology from the Old Kingdom Heliopolitan system represent a reaction to the political failures inherent in an autocratic, nepotistic rule? Does the power of the

⁷⁵ Cyril Aldred, *Egypt to the End of the Old Kingdom* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-31: "The provincial governors, now fast becoming feudal potentates, no longer sought burial near the tomb of their overlord, but made their own cemeteries in the district capital, and clearly regarded themselves as little inferior to so many minor kings... the central authority had become too weak to hold back the rising tide of anarchy, and the civilisation of the Old Kingdom collapsed with the political system that had created it."

⁷⁹ Ankhtifi created an alliance of the three southernmost nomes against the nome of Edfu. From Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol 1, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 86.

word itself now enable a larger class of people to find salvation, politically and spiritually, beyond the primordial blood boundaries of the kingly clan? Certainly Ankhtifi's emphasis upon his *speech* seems to bear this out. A later treatise on kingship from the 9th-10th Dynasty, *The Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, probably a pseudepigraphic work according to Miriam Lichtheim, for which "a fully sustained compositional coherence as found in comparable works of the Twelfth Dynasty has not been achieved"⁸⁰ exhibits precisely the interest in the spoken word we would expect with an underlying ascendant Memphite cosmology in place:

If you are skilled in speech, you will win,
The tongue is a king's sword;
Speaking is stronger than all fighting,
The skillful is not overcome...
The wise is a school to the nobles.
Those who know what he knows will not attack him,
No crime occurs when he is near;
Justice comes to him distilled,
Shaped in the sayings of the ancestors.
Copy your fathers, your ancestors,
See, their words endure in books,
Open, read them, copy their knowledge,
He who is taught becomes skilled.⁸¹

This passage is from near the beginning of the text. The following is from the very end of the document:

For god knows every name.
Do not neglect my speech,
Which lays down all the laws of kingship,
Which instructs you, that you may rule the land,
And may you reach me with none to accuse you!⁸²

Here indeed is a direct depiction of divine power operating through the king through the medium of language as opposed to an unembellished genealogy.⁸³ The Memphite theology is instructive in preserving the power of the king and, indeed, the entire Ennead from which he is descended, yet it prepares the theological grounds for social

⁸⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁸¹ Ibid., 99.

⁸² Ibid., 106-7.

⁸³ Compare the above, then, with an Old Kingdom pyramid text which displays the Heliopolitan emphasis upon the king's cosmic genealogy: "The King's mother was pregnant with him, even he who was in the Lower Sky, the King was fashioned by his father Atum before the sky existed, before the earth existed [etc.]... for the King is an Imperishable Star, son of the star-goddess who dwells in the mansion of Selket... He who is in his service has commended this King to Him who is in his litter that they may serve the King, for the King is a star," (PT Utt. 571). Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 226-27.

revolution, *a priori* or *posteriori* as the case may have been. What it undertakes is a sort of cosmogonic surgical operation in which a procreative initiative has been subsumed by a principle of intellection. Politically, of course, this would have set up a more effective consensus-making body with which to affect policy decisions, military and economic, as well as spiritual. The growing power of the priesthoods and the dawning Great Age of the Middle Kingdom is the sort of result one would expect.

I am working from the hypothesis that the Memphite theology was part philosophical treatise, part political manifesto. In the latter instance we detect an effort being made to remove the theogonic justification for absolute power manifesting itself in the king and his family. A principle of *accountability* was established in a transference of power made manifest in the word; the custodians of the word thus made themselves an intermediary, a rhetorical arena within which kingly power and its divine genealogy were to be contextualised or shared. In effect the king became partially accountable to the priesthood in a way that the American president is accountable, at least in theory, to the Congress. The dynamics of accountability here are purely rhetorical, theological consensus being the necessary social aperture to encompass the evolution of creative human thought.

The evolution of the Memphite theology, or something similar, was perhaps inevitable in the development of religious thought in Egypt. Following the demise of the Old Kingdom autocracy, the new power-groups would have seen the advantages of a cosmogony that diluted the nepotistic *droit de seigneur* of the king's family.⁸⁴ If the earlier Heliopolitan system can be said to have had its roots in the literal soil of Egypt, in its geography and cult of kingship, the Memphite Theology symbolises a subsequent partial emancipation of the Egyptian mind itself from the stasis of absolute pharaonic rule. Likewise, the paralysing inertia of Akhenaten's "atheism" required the reinstatement of such a priestly intelligentsia.⁸⁵ The much-discussed "democratisation of the afterlife" which arose following the collapse of the Old Kingdom--although this is likely not a neat division--literally found its voice in this nuance of Egyptian theological expression, for it empowered the literate who had access to the special knowledge contained in the texts. The roots of Gnostic thought are to be found here, and their claim of absolute access to the divine, and afterlife return to the Pleroma through *gnosis*, represents the supreme apotheosis of Egyptian aspirations in this context.

We turn now to examine the very foundation out of which all divinity is seen to appear, the primordial waters of Nun within whose depths the so-called chaos gods

⁸⁴ John Baines, "Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy, and Decorum: Modern Perceptions and Ancient Institutions", notes the privileges of the Ptah priesthood in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties: "By claiming 'priesthoods' of rare separable aspects of Ptah, these men asserted special religious privileges. So far as the evidence goes, they were the only people who had those privileges (apart from the king, who would probably have had them as of right)," 8. Yet we must ask: how much respect, ultimately, would these high-priests have had for kings who possessed the right without possessing the actual knowledge?

⁸⁵ Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: the Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 234: "Such documents as the Memphite Theology and the New Kingdom hymns to Ptah and Amun are philosophical treatises of the highest achievement. What did Akhenaten substitute for them, once he had declared them anathema? Nothing! If mythology (in the broadest application of the term) is the only means of divine revelation, apart from the vision of the mystic, then what Akhenaten championed was in the truest sense of the word, atheism."

appear. Nun is to be seen as the very upholder of consciousness and light as manifest in the daily periploi of Re in his barque, but he also contains the writhing presence of disorder and evil in his depths – the serpent Apep. The concept of the primeval waters is common to all Egyptian creation-models.⁸⁶

It is interesting and significant that a recent work by Robert Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis*,⁸⁷ contains virtually no references to the primordial *Ur-God* Nun, or to his consort Naunet. It is an example, by no means rare, of the peculiar position Nun occupies in the modern Egyptological assessment of Egyptian religious thought: there, but not completely there, one might say.⁸⁸ Wild is by no means alone in this. Siegfried Morenz's critical work *Egyptian Religion* does not mention him as a major god in his appendix listing out the characteristics of the gods, although of course Nun appears throughout the work, such appearances being otherwise noted in the index. The presence of Nun is so ubiquitous in all periods of Egyptian history that it is taken for granted and perhaps this in part accounts for a certain lack of emphasis placed upon this figure. Nun's presence was primordial and therefore required less articulation, yet when the Egyptians dug down for water it was in search of Nun, when the king sets sail into the realm of the afterlife it is to Nun that he appeals: this presence was actively sought in temple and field as the basis for life, religious and mundane.

At the outset I wish to justify my view that Nun is one of the more important philosophical insights contributed by Egypt to the Occident. It is surely no overstatement to say that the Presocratic Thales of Miletus was rather derivative in claiming that the ontological ground of being was water, and it cannot be considered a coincidence that this insight forms the veritable starting point for Greek philosophy as has been taught in the West for centuries. It was Plotinus of Egypt who first wrestled with what were essentially the philosophical contradictions of Nun in developing a set-piece theodicy of a One that contains all within it: goodness and light, as well as the somewhat less than perfect. The essential insight about Nun, as developed by the Egyptians over millennia can be traced through to Jakob Böhme's "Ungrund" and further to F.W. Schelling's "will of the depths"⁸⁹: an initial state of chaotic formlessness contained the latent seed of a theogony within it, one which was itself

⁸⁶ One notes then with interest the first Milesian philosophers in Greece, among whom Thales (ca. 585 BCE), according to Aristotle, speculated that "the first principle and basic nature of all things is water," and "the earth rests upon water." Diogenes Laertius reports that Thales "went to Egypt and spent some time with the priests there," trans. R.D. Hicks (*Diogenes Laertius*, vol. 1; Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 29; Proclus (*On Euclid*) claims that "Thales was the first to go into Egypt and bring back scientific knowledge into Greece," trans. Philip Wheelwright *The Presocratics*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 49.

⁸⁷ Robert A. Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981).

⁸⁸ No better illustrated than in te Velde's remark that "Nun is sometimes called the father of the gods, but there is no question of a relation between Nun and Atum, for Nun is not real," "Relations and Conflicts between Egyptian Gods, particularly in the Divine Ennead of Heliopolis," in *Struggles of Gods. Papers of the Groningen Work Group for the Study of the History of Religions*, ed. H.G. Kippenberg (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 247.

⁸⁹ Schelling influenced the early Egyptologists von Strauss and Torney, with respect to a "mythological monotheism" with NUN at the head.

sparked by the unruly impulse of *freedom* in these depths. The godhead, the very theogony of the gods, is enacted against this *donné* and all must be referred back to it as it operates as an ontological foundation along the very boundaries of non-existence. Nun, as a principle of formlessness mysteriously merging towards form, is the progenitor of all differentiation, divine and earthly, and the image of water, manifesting both form and formlessness simultaneously, perfectly contains this idea in itself, most especially as it can be linked with the very “greening” of life. We shall more closely examine Nun in chapter 10, especially as it appears in Gnostic texts, but for now we must probe the concept as the starting point for a host of Egyptian emanation theogonies.

An equally abstruse line of thought, and one which likewise flows into Gnostic speculation, pertains to the ancient Egyptian view of eternity, for which the Egyptians had two conceptions. *Nhh* eternity pertains to the cyclic nature of earthly existence, of the phenomenological, of the realm of actual beings. In contradistinction to this *dt* denotes the stasis of the non-existent, of nonbeing. However, we have noted, as does Hornung, that the non-existent permeates all that is, and we therefore expect *nhh* and *dt* to be intertwined. A sexual gloss to this is not inappropriate given the widespread appeal and duration of the Heliopolitan theology. *Nhh* is in many ways a masculine demiurgic temporal quality, whereas *dt* is a feminine archetype that is rather more static and passive in its makeup. One has to be careful in making broad generalisations based upon gender however: while Re is quintessentially *nhh*, Geb is ostensibly a passive *dt* figure beneath the overarching dynamic *nhh* Nut.

It is entirely in keeping, then, that in the Memphite theology we find (Ptah)-Nun and (Ptah)-Naunet depicted as the parents of Atum. From the Old through Middle Kingdom we can see Nun now represented as an “inert” *dt* figure, then as a dynamic *nhh* demiurge.⁹⁰ It is worth mentioning at this point that Nun’s function was later taken up in Gnostic cosmologies wherein such primordial figures as First-thought, Self-created, First-father, Logos, Nous, and the female Sige (silence) are to be found as the first discrete entity adjacent to the Primal Source. The upshot of this is that a sort of translucent entity is visualised, existing simultaneously in form and formlessness, being and nonbeing. For Nun, as in numerous later emanationist systems, the first move into differentiation, from one to two, is primarily sexual, and all of creation is imbued with the twoness of sexual differentiation thereafter.

In the Middle Kingdom Coffin texts, as well as the Book of Two Ways, and various magical spells, the recognition of Nun’s unique role was continued. It is hard for us not to think that only the ubiquitous and sensuous intuition of Nun all about them kept the Egyptians interested in such a difficult principle. But then the principle is also a personality, and the personality is regularly manifest in the seasonal inundation for example, and in the appearance of Re every morning from the depths.

One can see this poetic/sensuous appreciation in a text from the time of Amenhotep III near Luxor:

⁹⁰ In a late text these were interestingly combined in the story of Nun lusting after a goddess bathing in the river. He devises a stratagem to seduce her which fails and one wonders if his innate “innertness” might have been the problem.

How beautiful is Nun in his pool at every season; more is it wine than water, like a full Nile, born of the Lord of Eternity.⁹¹

It is an obvious conclusion to make that such architectural features as the sacred lake at Karnak, to name but one, was in fact a virtual shrine for Nun from which various re-enactments of theogonic progressions might begin and end.

In the New Kingdom The Book of the Divine Cow has Re speaking to “the Eldest One” asking his advice about how to deal with evil men, specifically indicating that he wishes to hear what Nun has to say before he dispatches them. Nun’s reply is interesting, for in effect he graciously chides Re as being greater and older than he who created him.⁹² From this we might assume that Nun’s realm was viewed as being essentially metaphysical, from whence all life-giving “moistures” and empowerment of deities were effected. However Nun is not demiurgic in the created realm in any direct way hence his reminder to Re, solar architect-deity supreme.

In turning to the Book of the Dead, it comes as no surprise to find Nun well-represented throughout. Spell 17 from the time of Seti I is quite explicit about the status of Nun:

The Great God, the self-created, is water, he is Nun, father of the gods.(BD Spell 17)⁹³

One-thousand years later the same view prevails, as this inscription from the Ptolemaic temple at Kom Ombo testifies:

Great Nun, father of the gods, the creator of the earth, who created the others⁹⁴

Indeed, as the modern visitor enters this temple, it is the name of Nun that appears largest, set upon the archway of the main temple entrance, larger even than the cartouches of the Ptolemaic kings who financed the rebuilding of the temple.

The theological/.philosophical functioning of Nun is an important one to develop in some detail, for this *Urstoff*, out of which the theogony proceeds, is essential in many Gnostic Systems, as ubiquitous as enneads, ogdoads and the like. This excursus on *nhh* and *dt* is effected with a view towards illustrating the recondite nature of the Egyptian apprehension of this-worldliness and other-worldliness, a key Gnostic feature already mentioned, one which owed its development in part to the enhancement of Egyptian demonology in the Late-Period. We turn then to briefly examine Egyptian demonology.

⁹¹ J.F. Borghouts “Magical Texts,” in *Textes et langages de l’Égypte pharonique: cent cinquante années de recherches, 1822-197* (Cairo: Institut Français d’archéologie orientale, 1974), 9.

⁹² Erich Hornung, *Der Ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh*, 38, lines 29-48.

⁹³ Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (1972; reprint, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 44.

⁹⁴ Adolphe Gutbub, *Textes fondamentaux de la théologie de Kom Ombo* (Institut français d’Archéologie orientale du Caire, vol. 1 & 2, 1973), 470.

The Egyptian netherworld is filled with a myriad number of inimical beings (demons or evil spirits) with names like “evil-doers” (*isfty.w*), “slaughterers” (*’dty.w*), “torturers” (*i3y.w*), “lords of the netherworld” (*nb.w d3.t*), “rebels” (*snt.w*), “enemies” (*tsty.w*), and “evil one” (*nbḏ*) to name but a few. Osiris and Seth, along with numerous other major gods, have demoniacal minions working in this realm to obstruct and torment the dead souls. Numerous funerary texts detail the names of demons and the passwords required to disarm them as the situation for the dead person was seen to be perilous indeed. The “enemies” in this realm, are both masculine and feminine demons (*hfty* and *hft.t*), whose eternal task it would seem is to waylay and snare the *k3* (spirit, soul) of the dead person.⁹⁵ While life is imbued with *ma’at*, death is closely associated with injustice in the Egyptian mind.⁹⁶ The evil actions of men and gods, are seen to reach their culmination and resolution in the afterlife. This resolution involves the dispensation of punishment and a division of all into that which is redeemed, and that which is to be held in check, sometimes destroyed, as unredeemable. Apart from the specifics of the overarching emanationist systems already looked at, this strong *feeling* in the Egyptian view pertaining to the status quo of a cosmology eternally battling on the cusp of light and darkness, good and evil, has to be seen as the kernel of later Egyptian Gnostic expression.⁹⁷ While not predisposed towards passive meditation, the ancient Egyptian evinced at once a scepticism and faith which proceeded from strong feelings about death and the afterlife.⁹⁸ In line with this, Egyptian art, architecture, and the inscriptions thereupon, can be seen in a very obvious way as an attempt to overcome time, and therefore death. In the Heliopolitan theology the ascent to heaven is enacted against the panorama of an underworld filled with spirits and ruled over by Osiris. The sun, in passing beneath the earth every day into night, was seen to pass through this realm, and even the sacred barque of Re was attacked and threatened nightly on its underworld traverse. As Re rose anew each morning with his powers intact, so the individual was expected to be preserved *qua* individual, with various “substances of the soul” (*3h*, *b3*, and *sw.t* for example: the spirit, soul, and shadow) able to function in the afterworld. The ascent from *nḥh* eternity to the *ḏt* eternal, from this world to the other, begins with death, and it is at the moment of death that the life of the spirit must be affirmed anew as it surmounts the ennead:

I am the son of Atum, the companion of Ma`et; I have come that I may climb up, I go forth upon the vertex of the Ennead.⁹⁹

The primary dualism at work in Egyptian thought considers death to be an enemy insofar as its effects – motionlessness, termination of consciousness, decay of the body, are seen to be permanent *nḥh* manifestations, without recourse to a higher supernal *ḏt* realm. The possibility of this afterlife is attained through close

⁹⁵ Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 218-19.

⁹⁶ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 189.

⁹⁷ See Ringgren, “Light and Darkness in Ancient Egyptian Religion.”

⁹⁸ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 196.

⁹⁹ CT II Spell 121. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 111.

identification on the part of the deceased with one or more of the gods, through passwords and an ability to identify demons and netherworld passages, and through the demonstration of virtue, often effected in the form of “negative confessions” made by the deceased in the hereafter before judgement (“I did not kill, I did not fornicate” etc.). The question of eternal life for the soul is the same for men and gods,¹⁰⁰ and in this we presage the Gnostic divine figure of Anthropos, celestial imago of humankind whose fate is of course inexplicably bound up with the soteriological *telos* of humankind below. As well, whether humankind is created from the tears of a god, or a potter’s wheel, both are found in the Gnostic concepts of the basic *substance* of creation as hypostasised divine substances and qualities, and in these substances being formed through the artifices of various demiurges. In Egyptian thought the history and worth of humankind mirrors the theogony and purpose of the gods:

The ennead is combined in your body:
your image is every god, joined in your person.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*, 7.

¹⁰¹Papyrus Leiden I 350, Chapter 90. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 51.

Chapter Three: Dualism in pre-Alexandrine Platonic Thought

The entire issue of Egyptian influence upon early Greek philosophical thought lies beyond the focus of this study and I shall do no more than trace the general dualistic elements in early Greek philosophy.¹ With some of the specific ingredients of Late Period Egyptian religious expression, we are witness to an original Egyptian conception of things that likely found its way into Greek thought in the Hellenic era, later to return to Egypt in the Hellenistic.² This process is far too complicated and obscure to be delved into although the ground-breaking and extremely important work of B.H. Stricker who earlier advocated a strong Hermetic dependence upon Egyptian thought and a direct Egyptian influence upon Greek philosophy and religion must be acknowledged.³ What is of importance to note is the formulation of dualist cosmologies in Greek thought during a period in which Greek interaction with Egypt

¹I consider a strong Egyptian influence a given, following, for example, the conclusions of Erik Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 53: “of the doctrines involved we have not merely seen the great majority recorded in Egyptian texts ages before their appearance in other sources; but we have also seen several of them quoted by classical authors, and defined as typical of Egyptian philosophical reasoning. The general agreement of these sources in their definition of identical concepts tends to vouch for their relative correctness, and is of particular significance from our particular point of view because it indicates that a direct exchange of ideas did in fact take place between Egyptian and Greek scholars.”

²To cite but one avenue of possibility the figure of Eudoxus of Cnidos, astrologer and mathematician, stands out first and foremost in the fourth century B.C.E. Eudoxus is mentioned by Plutarch in *De Iside et Osiride* more than any other ancient source, and six of these seven citations are concerned with Egyptian religion. According to Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.87), Eudoxus “proceeded to Egypt with Chrysippus the physician, bearing with him letters of introduction from Agesilaus to Nectanabis, who recommended him to the priests. There he remained one year and four months with his beard and eyebrows shaved,” trans. R.D. Hicks, *Diogenes Laertius*, vol. 2 (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 401, 403.

³See *The Corpus Hermeticum*, Mnemosyne, ser. IV, vol. II, 1949; also “De Brief van Aristeas,” *Verhandelingen d. Nederl. Akad., Afd. Letterkunde*, N.S. 62, no. 4, 1956. There has been a strong scholarly disinclination to accept an Egyptian backdrop in Greek philosophical thought, or even the Hermetica for that matter, in spite of the work of a number of scholars: see Flinders Petrie, *Transactions of Third International Congress of the History of Religions*, 1908, and *Personal Religion in Egypt Before Christianity*, 1909; Franz Cumont, *L'Égypte des Astrologues*, Bruxelles, 1937; Philippe Derchain, “L'Authenticité de l'Inspiration égyptienne dans le ‘Corpus Hermeticum’,” in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 161 (1962): 175-98; and François Daumas, “Le Fonds égyptienne de l'hermétisme,” in *Gnosticisme et Monde Hellenistique*, 3-25, all of whom adduce positive evidence in support of the Egyptian underpinnings of Hermetic thought. Erik Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, details the strong Egyptian presence in various Hermetic texts, in particular the *Poimandres*, the most Gnostic expression in the Hermetic corpus. Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) develops a very strong case indeed for the Egyptian foundations of Hermetic thought.

was increasing. The Egyptian king Psammetichus I (664-10 B.C.E.) employed Greek mercenaries in his army and allowed for the settlement of the first Greek communities in Egypt by rewarding these soldiers with two pieces of land for their services. According to Diodorus, Psammetichus encouraged trade with Greece, and “was so great an admirer of the Hellenes that he gave his sons a Greek education”,⁴ Herodotus records that the Greeks were well-treated and respected by the king, who also founded a school of interpreters.⁵ Whether or not the influence of dualist Greek philosophy arrived in this period cannot be proven on the basis of extant texts. In any case it is a moot point, for the conquest of Egypt by Alexander in 331 B.C.E. irrevocably brought the entire array of Greek religious and philosophical thought to Egypt where it was to increasingly interact with the Egyptian worldview.

In this section I shall be focusing upon the following philosophers:

Presocratics:

Parmenides (c. 500-450 B.C.E.)

Empedocles (c. 484-424 B.C.E.)

Heads of the Athenian Academy:

Speusippus (c. 367 B.C.E.) in Athens

Xenocrates (c. 356 B.C.E.) in Athens

We turn to the fifth century B.C.E. for the first clear examples of a philosophical exploration of dualist cosmologies involving demiurgic activities.

With Parmenides one is immediately struck by the role of a goddess figure in the formation of the cosmos, one who notes that the opinions of men are affected by “the deceiving structure of my words”.⁶ This goddess, according to Simplicius’ account of Parmenides, created the other gods and has power over “the souls of men, which she sends now from the visible towards the invisible and then the other way round”⁷ and she is directly responsible for “gruesome birth”.⁸ There is, as Mansfeld points out, a suggestion that we might be dealing with a different goddess, possibly Ananke (Necessity) who could be associated with Dike (Justice). This goddess guards the “Gates of Night and Day” through which the soul, called the poet, must ascend. The goddess must be persuaded to let the poet by and Mansfeld is quite correct in associating this with Egyptian religious views on the ascent of the soul.⁹ Mansfeld lists out a number of other antecedents to Gnostic thought in Parmenides:

⁴ Diodorus Siculus I. 67.9, trans. C.H. Oldfather (1933; reprint, Loeb Classical Library, 1989), 235.

⁵ Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas*, 131.

⁶ Fr.28B8, 53f; J. Mansfeld, “Bad World and Demiurge: A ‘Gnostic’ Motif from Parmenides and Empedocles to Lucretius and Philo,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, eds. R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 265.

⁷ *In Phys.*39, 20f; Mansfeld, “Bad World and Demiurge,” 266-67.

⁸ Fr. 28B10,4; Mansfeld, “Bad World and Demiurge,” 268.

⁹ Mansfeld, “Bad World and Demiurge”, 274-75: “We are not told what it is that they (the poets) say, but the implication is clear: they know *what* they have to say. This is a remarkable incident, which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been the study of scholarly

- 1) The physical realm is inferior to the perfection of Being.
- 2) “Something happened” which brought this about, and divine powers are responsible for the elaboration of the original error.
- 3) A plurality of divinities is involved in the theogonic extension (my phrase).
- 4) The goddess who plays a direct role in the construction of the world is situated in the lower realm.
- 5) The goddess “commands” to which I would add that a soteriological medium of “higher language” is also focused upon.

I would also point out another important motif which occurs in Parmenides: firstly, the poet is “a man who knows” (Fr. 28B1,3) and, as Mansfeld puts it, “he is called ‘initiated’ before he has been initiated”¹⁰ and this surely anticipates the Gnostic pneumatic. Parmenides, and presumably his fellow “poets” have direct access to this transition, whereas others must look to the language these poets leave behind. Taken in conjunction with this foreshadowing of “Gnostic elitism” the cosmogonic emphasis upon the goddess and the word is especially striking.

The ambiguous dual-aspect of the Parmenidean goddess is drawn out by Empedocles into an explicitly lower entity, Hate, who is seen to embody evil. While Love and Hate are subordinate to a higher divinity in Parmenides, they themselves are the dualistic framework of Empedocles’ cosmos.

For Empedocles, the two powers of Strife and Love appear out of the “single One” and fragment 22 suggests the Egyptian emphasis upon Order bounded by Disorder: “As things came together in harmony, Strife withdrew to the outermost region”.¹¹ This dualism is further developed in fragment 29:

When Strife had fallen to the lowest depth of the vortex and Love had reached its very center, then all things came together so as to be a single whole. This unity was attained not all at once, but according to the wishes of the things that were uniting, as they came some from one direction, some from another. Yet along with the things that became mixed there were many things that remained unmixed – all, in fact, of which Strife retained possession; for Strife had not yet retreated entirely from them to the outermost limit of the circle, but he had departed from some things while in others he remained.¹²

As with the identical Egyptian view on Disorder existing as a *theogonic entity*, there is no sense in Empedocles that Strife can be finally vanquished, indeed its interpenetration of the All is seen to be necessary. It is also worth emphasising that

inquiry... perhaps he had some information about Egyptian lore. This must remain speculation. The parallel with what is found in Gnostic thought is not less surprising for this reason, even if – as is, on the whole, the most probable explanation – the Gnostics took over their plurality of gates from Egyptian religion, transposing them from the Nether World to the Heavens.”

¹⁰ Ibid., 276.

¹¹ Trans. Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, 131.

¹² Ibid., 132.

pre-Socratic thought, here as elsewhere, leaves one with an ambiguous sense of what “goddesses” or “powers” are to mean; that is, are they to be taken mythologically or philosophically? It is clear that Greek philosophy’s earliest formulations are not to be easily separated in this regard.

The souls of men are *daimones* and, in conjunction with the baleful travails of Hate, together prevent or delay a larger cosmic reconciliation.¹³ In fragment 90 Empedocles gives a curiously gnostic-sounding lament: “From what high place of honour and bliss have I fallen, so that now I go about among mortals here on earth?”¹⁴ Earth is referred to as “this low-roofed cavern” in fragment 93¹⁵ and in fragment 94 we get the clearest glimpse of dualist *sentiment*: “Such a man am I, alas, a fugitive from the gods and a wanderer at the mercy of frenzied Strife”.¹⁶ An important feature which powerfully anticipates Gnostic thought is the positing of an evil demiurge, one intimately bound up with a dual-aspected creative goddess. The power is referred to as *neikos*, or *oulomenon*, which can be translated as Strife, or Banefulness (in Cicero referred to as *Discordia*). This power is responsible for humankind’s fall, exile, and continued indenture to Fate. This entity engages in endless struggle with the power of Love (*eros*) for the souls of men and *daimones*. While Mansfeld’s overall analysis is most penetrating, in one regard it fails to appreciate the main thrust of Gnostic mitigated dualist systems, by far the most numerous, which are to be associated with Egypt. Mansfeld breaks down Greek demiurgic speculation as follows:

- I Good world: - good Demiurge (Plato, Stoics)
- no Demiurge (Aristotle)
- II Evil world: - evil Demiurge (no Greek representation)
- no Demiurge (Epicureans)¹⁷

This appreciation of an “evil world/evil Demiurge” as not being represented in any Greek school of thought is quite inexplicable on two counts. Firstly, Mansfeld has already detailed the “evil Demiurge” of Empedocles,¹⁸ to which must be added a host of Middle Platonists, specifically, Xenocrates, Ammonius (not Sacchus), Plutarch, Numenius, and Atticus, whom we shall examine in Chapter 6.¹⁹ Secondly, Mansfeld

¹³ Mansfeld, “Bad World and Demiurge”, 284, 286.

¹⁴ Trans. Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁸ What has not, to the best of my knowledge, been emphasized sufficiently before is that this fall, this exile, and the continued fate of man, have been caused and continue to be caused by Hate, i.e. by Empedocles’ *evil Demiurge*,” (original emphasis). Mansfeld, “Bad World and Demiurge”, 286.

¹⁹ And so, if Dillon’s *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) is guilty of ignoring the Presocratic dualist precursors of Plato (Parmenides and Empedocles are not cited in his index), Mansfeld is guilty of not noting the Middle Platonic successors to these two pivotal philosopher-poets.

equates the notion of “evil Demiurge” with the Gnostics which is far too simplistic. There are numerous examples, especially in the mitigated Valentinian system, where the Demiurge is not at all evil per se, rather he is seen to be ignorant, attempting to do the best that he can with limited resources, or guilty of simple hubris. Other similar Gnostic demiurgic depictions abound.

In the following exposition of various Platonic thinkers we must keep in mind that the primary influence among the Greek philosophers of the time was the *Timaeus*.²⁰

Speusippus (c.407-339 B.C.E.) accepted the existence of two opposite principles, emphasizing their functions as “seeds” or “potencies” of all differentiation from the Primal Source.²¹ The Indefinite Dyad accomplishes all theogonic manifestations, and Speusippus’ concept of the One is reminiscent of Parmenides in the sense that the One remains a “blank” as it were, beyond all values. By means of “a certain persuasive necessity,”²² multiplicity is effected amidst matter, a material principle which is evil, and which responds to the Good. On the lower levels, his fourth and fifth realms of Soul and the physical world respectively, this problem arises as a by-product.²³ An important point here is that Speusippus places the One above Intellect, and is thus “at variance not only with Aristotle, but with all official Platonism up to Plotinus”.²⁴ It need only be added that he is in agreement with numerous Gnostic cosmologies on this point.

Xenocrates headed the Athenian Academy as the direct successor of Speusippus in 339 B.C.E. Without doubt, he is the most profound philosophical precursor of Gnostic thought on the Greek side of the divide.²⁵ Many of the details of his thought can be seen to be in accord with the Chaldean system and with the Gnostic *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1). For Xenocrates, a Monad is at the centre of all reality, quite possibly not transcendent but within the cosmological realm, an ambiguity also found in the Chaldean system. Below this is the Dyad, a female

²⁰ Dillion, *The Middle Platonists*, 8: “The *Timaeus* remained the most important single dialogue during the Middle Platonic period, supported by chosen texts from the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Thaetetus*, *Phaedo*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17: “an inevitable failure to master completely the substratum.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18. *Pace* Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: the Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison (1984; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 32, who claims that “the fact remains, however, that the expression “unknown God” is not found in Plato or in the Platonists up to Numenius.” This exact expression may not be extant in our sources, but the philosophical position it implies certainly is. Pétrement completely misconstrues the sense of this concept which can be traced back to Parmenides. It is patently *not* a question of temporal progression, of denoting god (the “true god” as her hegemonic hermeneutic insists) as being “hitherto unknown”, but is a depiction of an ineffable source, beyond the phenomenological, beyond the ability of language to express it. This goes back to ancient Egyptian concepts of Atum, Amun, and Ptah; it is found in Parmenides, Speusippus, and Eudorus of Alexandria (ca. 60 B.C.E), the *Chaldean Oracles*, and numerous Gnostic texts.

²⁵ Jensen, *Dualism and Demonology*, 103, sees Xenocrates as an absolute dualist as held up against the relative dualism of Plato.

principle who is “the Mother of the Gods”.²⁶ This female world soul is enfranchised by the Monad operating within, or against, the Indefinite Dyad which is an evil and disorderly principle, a sublunary Hades rife with demonic powers. This, and “a preoccupation with triadic distinctions”²⁷ also affords compelling evidence to link Xenocrates with the “Chaldeans” and with the Gnostics – the *Tripartite Tractate*, and the *Trimorphic Protennoia* in particular. Even more compelling is a differentiation made by Xenocrates between “knowledge” (epistême) and sense-perception (aisthêsis),²⁸ which finds its exact parallel in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1.36.2)²⁹: “I am the determination (aisthêsis) and the Knowledge”. “Knowledge” is from the Coptic COOYN which is used as a synonym for Gnosis throughout the text. The thought of the Protennoia exists as a sound in perception (aisthêsis) and as a word “hidden in the Silence of the Ineffable” (37.23 & 29)³⁰, for example. The sense in both speculations is that there is a form of lower knowledge based upon a phenomenology of the sublunary realm, and there is a higher knowledge revealed by the feminine principle, a special knowledge pertaining to the upper unseen realms. An interesting resonance is also obtained in Xenocrates’ maxim “that true sophia is a form of knowledge not attainable by humans”.³¹ Other specific terms such as *pronnoia*, *nous*, *logos*, *archai*, and *telos*, are also notable for their similar applications. Finally, the evil disorderly principle against which the higher god draws forth creation is highly reminiscent of Egyptian Heliopolitan conceptions. Plutarch’s report on the myth of Isis and Osiris was clearly influenced by Xenocrates,³² and an Egyptian derivation for this view here is thus further enhanced.

These two philosophers, direct successors of Plato’s Academy, are not part of the Middle Platonist movement proper,³³ but are important in the obvious influence they exerted upon the continuation of Platonic dualisms. While Greek intellectual intercourse with the potent Persian empire to the east was a factor prior to Alexander, the conquest of the east in cultural, and more specifically linguistic terms, obviously generated a new watershed period of interaction. A great intellectual cross-fertilisation between Greek and non-Greek, one that was later to devolve upon Alexandria and other key cities of the eastern Mediterranean following the break-up of this far-flung enterprise, was initially a broadly self-conscious act of synthesis and assimilation: Hellenism, thus willingly perforated by diverse influences, became the Hellenistic.

In the eighth year of Xenocrates’ tenure as head of the Athens Academy, Alexander founded Alexandria in 331 B.C.E., and it cannot be doubted that his dualist

²⁶ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 404.

³⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 406.

³¹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 37.

³² *Ibid.*, 26.

³³ Defined by Dillon as extending from c. 80 B.C.E. to c. 220 C.E., *The Middle Platonists*, 1.

views were aired amongst the literati of the fledgling Ptolemaic state. At this time many of the sacred books of the Orient were finding their way into koine Greek, the lingua franca of the new empire. The state of flux within the Academy can be seen by the shift from Xenocratian dualism to a more implicitly Stoic thrust under his successor Polemon who headed the Academy following the death of Xenocrates in 314 B.C.E.: one of Polemon's pupils was the Stoic Zeno. Arcesilaus and, later, Carneades, instituted the pre-eminence of skeptical method in the New Academy in the 2nd century B.C.E., and so we have all major philosophical contenders vying for control of this academic throne in a relatively short period of time.³⁴

It is at this juncture that Alexandria begins to loom large in the developing picture of dualist thought. With the fragmentation of Alexander's empire, the eastern links with the sources of Greek culture became far more tenuous by the beginning of the second century B.C.E. Alexandria, ideally suited to become the ancient world's intellectual and economic clearing house par excellence, was beginning to manifest the fruits of a particularly successful result of Alexander's push for synthesis with foreign elements. The Ptolemaic penchant for research resulted in the establishment of the famous libraries, and the intellectual research undertaken there also included a syncretistic assimilation of diverse religious elements, from the Persian Ahura Mazda, to even a consideration of Buddhist metaphysical claims from the far off realm of Ashoka.³⁵

³⁴ This skeptic influence is much reduced in Dillon's work and mars his overall appreciation of the period. One must ask why "the skeptical tradition has no place in Middle Platonism," (*The Middle Platonists*, 43 – Dillon himself does not answer this question) when Gnostic thought, Hermeticism, the Chaldean Oracles, even the "Persian influence," attain some measure of attention, be it ever so cursory.

³⁵ It seems certain that Buddhist emissaries from the Indian king Ashoka arrived in Alexandria around 200 B.C.E., a period of mounting religious excitement in Egypt. See Samuel K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism 334-31 B.C.* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 278.

Chapter Four: Graeco-Egyptian Synthesis in Alexandria

When Alexander visited the place and saw the advantages of the site, he resolved to fortify the city on the harbour. Writers record, as a sign of the good fortune that has since attended the city, an incident which occurred at the time of tracing the lines of the foundation. When the architects were marking the lines of the enclosure with chalk, the supply of chalk gave out; and when the king arrived, his stewards furnished a part of the barley-meal which had been prepared for the workmen, and by means of this the streets also, to a larger number than before, were laid out. This occurrence, then, they are said to have interpreted as a good omen.¹

Thus begins Strabo's description of Alexandria at its founding in 331 B.C.E. Indeed, although we shall be focusing in this section upon the intellectual developments among the literati of Alexandria and Memphis, we should not lose sight of the economic foundations for prosperity which made such achievements possible. Even before the Roman conquest, the corn trade from the interior made its way up the canal for transshipment from Alexandria to feed the citizens of Rome.² The port went on to become the greatest trading centre in the ancient world and, according to Diodorus, was the largest city in the world by the end of the Ptolemaic period.³ Ptolemaic Egypt was the most potent mercantile economic power the world had yet seen as a result of early Greek scientific and economic reforms in Egypt and Alexandria; as the hub of the new empire it became a clearing-house for goods and ideas, including a multi-national population. A substantial Jewish community established itself in the eastern part of the city⁴ and the Persians were also evident in the city as military colonists.

The laws concerning foreigners settling in Alexandria were apparently lenient and although it is likely that in the first century of Ptolemaic rule a great gulf existed between the Greeks and Egyptians,⁵ it is as probable that the Ptolemaic immigrants

¹*The Geography of Strabo VIII*, trans. H.L. Jones (1932; reprint, Loeb Classical Library, 1967), 17 1.6.

²This harbour was called "Eunostus," which probably refers to a corn deity. P.M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1972), 26. Following the Roman conquest, Egypt supplied one-third of the empire's grain requirements

³According to Diodorus Siculus, Alexandria had 300,000 free people (probably around 500,000 total) in the time of Augustus. The population of Egypt was 7 million – 100 years later it was 7.5 million, not including Alexandria. See also Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 91, Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt*, 26.

⁴Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilisation and the Jews* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), makes the point that Jewish emigration from Palestine to Egypt cannot be historically connected with Alexander himself; rather, it seems it occurred under Ptolemy I (323-283).

⁵With regard to the first point, it is Fraser's conjecture that the Ptolemies encouraged the influx of Greeks with talent; *Ptolemaic Egypt*, 52. The second point is part of Fraser's model which insists upon the Hellenic purity of the opening phases of Ptolemaic rule. Certainly the

were intermarrying with Egyptian women in particular from earliest times⁶; certainly by the second century of Lagid rule this was a widespread social phenomenon. Egyptian culture can be said to have almost literally seduced the Greek from the outset.⁷ This “seduction”, as we shall see, pertains to far more than the phenomenon of intermarriage; even so, it is the mingling of blood-lines which creates the real possibility for a more complete cultural fusion. This was a sociological dynamic that Alexander attempted to apply as the bonding agent for his far-flung empire. It is ironic that in Egypt at least, it sowed the seeds for eventual Ptolemaic dissolution. In this chapter it is our critical task to understand this many-nuanced process of Egyptianisation, both for purposes of historically and socially contextualising the preconditions for the rise of Gnostic sects in Egypt, but also to understand the characteristic Egypto-Hellenistic intertextuality of many Gnostic texts as having their roots in the Ptolemaic period.

The sporadic Greek contempt for Egypt had always been tempered by a sense of awe for the antiquity of this neighbouring culture; while Strabo thought the Egyptians were hot-tempered and hostile to foreigners, Polybius was impressed by the civility of the Alexandrians. The Egyptians for their part despised all foreigners, most notably the Persians who had subjugated the country (not without tremendous resistance at times) from 525 to 332 B.C.E. It should be emphasised here that the Greek influence was already manifest long before Alexander’s arrival in Egypt; the Ptolemaic era was to intensify this cultural interaction greatly.⁸ This general antipathy towards foreigners however, was always mitigated amongst an ever-widening group of Egyptians who interacted with the Greeks, and especially those who learned the Greek language. Above all, the arrival of Alexander set in motion a more ambivalent attitude among the Egyptians, for their earlier resistance to foreign domination had been essentially religious and their extreme hatred for the Persians facilitated Alexander’s victory. Alexander’s retinue included the Egyptian

city was thoroughly Greek in its earliest phases. While a gulf likely existed between the ruling Macedonians and the Egyptian man on the street, the question is whether this split existed from top to bottom in the social hierarchy. Fraser’s argument is based upon the silence of the sources in the first instance (*Ptolemaic Egypt*, 70), and upon an implicitly orientalist view of the Egyptians in Alexandria.

⁶ Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 313, points out that intermarriage was initially banned in the Greek cities (Alexandria, Naukratis, and Ptolemais), but that the trend developed from the middle of the third century onward (an interesting development considering Alexander’s own insistence that intermarriage take place).

⁷ Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilisation and the Jews*, 20, makes the point that although Greek settlement in early Ptolemaic times was significant, it didn’t really have a chance against the seven million indigenous Egyptians; that, mainly through intermarriage, the process of Egyptianization proceeded unchecked: “for the soldiers married women of the local population, and with the women Egyptian names, language, religion and customs entered into their family life. The children of such mixed families normally followed the mother.” It is also to be noted that Greek women had absolutely no say in the choice of husband (at least where hereditary rights were concerned) and that, therefore, the phenomenon of intermarriage between Greek women and native Egyptian men must have been rare. Egyptian women, for their part, had the choice. See Alan B Lloyd, “The Late Period,” in *Ancient Egypt: A Social History*, 311-14.

⁸ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, .244.

Smatutefnakht who, we can surmise, guided Alexander in his subsequent efforts to placate the religious sentiments of the Egyptians by making peace with the priesthoods and by consulting the oracle of Amun in the western desert. The keystone for the subsequent fusion of Greek and Egyptian culture, however, was the establishment of Alexandria. Beyond the suffering caused by the uprooting of local Egyptian populations drawn in to supply the muscle for the new administrative centre, and surviving the brutal corruption of the first Greek satrapies, the prosperity of the city began to alter and dominate the social and economic life of all Egypt.

In the earliest stages, the city must have exhibited the wildness inherent in all frontier towns as thousands of Greek immigrants arrived, lured by the promise of a more prosperous existence. Polybius and Strabo had condemnatory things to say about the immorality and irresponsibility of the Greeks in Alexandria.⁹ By the beginning of the second century B.C.E. the link between Alexandria and the sources of Greek culture had been broken following the fragmentation of Alexander's empire. This, along with the ever-increasing social effects of Greek-Egyptian intermarriage, delimits the transition in Alexandria from cultural mosaic to more of a melting pot, from frontier Hellenistic provincial capital, to an independent city *in* Egypt, but never quite *of* Egypt,¹⁰ although the threat of foreign invasion created a common front for the Egyptians and their Greek administrators.¹¹ It is presumed at this point (from the second century B.C.E. onwards) that the administrators were still "pure" in the tracing of their Macedonian descent, whereas the lower Greek strata were becoming increasingly Egyptianised through intermarriage in the rural areas.¹²

Egyptianisation was also proceeding apace on the religious level.¹³ The Egyptians continued to believe in the superiority of their culture in the face of perceived Greek barbarisms,¹⁴ and they rejected the Graeco-Egyptian god Sarapis, who was essentially a Ptolemaic court deity, created through the grafting of Greek and Egyptian religious ideas as an attempt towards creating the religious foundations for

⁹ Polybius, trans. F.W. Walbank (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), xxxiv.14, 1-5; Strabo: xvii.1.17.

¹⁰ As the Romans were later to call it, *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* – Alexandria by Egypt, not *in* it.

¹¹ Philopater (221-204 B.C.E.) defended the Egyptian kingdom against the Seleucid king Antiochus, winning a decisive victory at Raphia in 217. Twenty-thousand Egyptians were instrumental in this battle and they returned with a new military confidence in themselves. Within six months a great revolt was started in the Delta which spread throughout Egypt, lasting some thirty years as a sort of low-key guerilla campaign without any decisive engagements

¹² Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 313.

¹³ Garth Fowden writes of the durability of Egypt following the conquest of Alexander: "In the centres of power, Hellenism was triumphant; but in cultural terms Egyptianism, instead of being submerged by Hellenism, exercised so strong a gravitational and assimilative pull on it that the product of their interaction was at least as much Egyptian as Greek. Nowhere was this truer than in matters of religion." *The Egyptian Hermes*, 14.

¹⁴ There were mutual antipathies; while the Greeks were disgusted by Egyptian burial practices and animal worship, the Egyptians were in turn horrified at the Greek practice of infanticide.

imperial unity. This, in part, was the result of an early affiliation between the Egyptian priest Manetho and the Greek priest Timotheus. Manetho is of great interest here as he was writing books on Egyptian antiquity in Greek in the third century B.C.E., thus supplying the unilingual Greek intelligentsia with direct insights into Egyptian thought written by an Egyptian rather than an outsider.¹⁵ Manetho and Timotheus, as priestly advisers to the Lagid king, in effect anticipated and facilitated the later cultural fusion of Greek and Egyptian religious thought. Certainly Manetho, as a bilingual high-priest in Heliopolis, was in the perfect position to encourage the cultural “Egyptianisation” of the Greeks.¹⁶ The failure of Sarapis to take hold among the Egyptians, undoubtedly anticipated by Manetho, was paralleled by a strong reception of this Graeco-Egyptian god by the Greeks, and by a declining interest on their part in the Greek gods.¹⁷

An increasing number of Greeks in fact were turning to the Egyptian gods, and Isis figures prominently although she was half-Hellenised in the process.¹⁸ Yet even before Alexander Egyptian merchantmen were promoting acceptance of Isis abroad on her own terms and not as a Greek goddess equivalent.¹⁹ In particular, Isis was attractive to women, effectively elevating their stature in the Hellenistic world.²⁰ The emancipatory effect of Isis upon the status of women is perfectly expressed in a long hymn to Isis dating from the second century C.E., found at Oxyrhynchus, which proclaims that, “she made the power of women equal to that of men”.²¹

¹⁵ Manetho’s works were sponsored by Ptolemy Sôter (the first king of the Ptolemaic dynasty, 305-283) and the underlying rhetorical purpose is mirrored in the writings of Berossos, priest of Marduk at Babylon, who wrote for Antiochus I (281-261). “The works of Manetho and Berossos may be interpreted as an expression of the rivalry of the two kings, Ptolemy and Antiochus, each seeking to proclaim the great antiquity of his land.” Manetho, *Aegyptiaca*, trans. W.G. Waddell (1940; reprint, Loeb Classical Library, 1980), x.

¹⁶ While there is a fair amount of uncertainty about the details of Manetho’s life, his role in the establishment of Serapis seems beyond doubt. A marble bust was found with his name inscribed upon the base, in the ruins of the temple of Serapis at Carthage. *Manetho*, xiii.

¹⁷ I suggest that no Egyptian priest in Heliopolis (*iwnw* in Egyptian texts) would have deliberately aimed the mass of Egyptian believers towards a synthesis with Greek religious sentiment; rather, it is more likely that Manetho was in effect attempting to create an antechamber for foreigners, perhaps to facilitate their eventual entry into the great hall of Egyptian religion

¹⁸ “She could become Aphrodite and Venus, goddess of beauty and love. She could assume the queenly office of Hera consort of Zeus (himself then identified with Sarapis) ruling as mistress of all three dominions – heaven, earth and hell... She could be worshipped as the Great Mother of all Nature. She could be the personification of Wisdom (Sophia) and Philosophy.” R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 20.

¹⁹ Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 260.

²⁰ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 219.

²¹ *P.Oxyrhynchus* 11.1380. 214-16, trans. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 219.

The emancipation of Greek women, as part of the larger growing concern for the individual, was part of a remarkable social development in the Hellenistic age. From the fourth century onwards an increasing number of women were receiving a formal education at all levels. For the first time in Greek history, they were taking part in civic matters (performing as magistrates for example) and receiving civic honours. This was also paralleled by their impact upon the arts. Within the Alexandrian milieu the female poets Errina (“the girl genius”²²), Nossis of Locri, and Anyte of Tegea in particular are notable. We might speculate that the focus upon the feminine in Gnosticism finds its precursor in the appearance of the female poets of Alexandria in the third century B.C.E.²³ The literary use of a first-person female narrator is extremely rare in ancient texts and the appearance of this device in Ptolemaic and Gnostic Alexandria strongly suggests historical connectedness.²⁴ Within the boundaries of the Gnostic movement there appeared a substantial number of religious leaders who were in fact Greek-educated women.

A major factor in the growing influence of women in Ptolemaic Alexandria extended down from above, as it were, from the powerful and rather ruthless Ptolemaic queens and in their relationships to Isis and various other deities.²⁵ Extending upwards was the influence of Egyptian women through intermarriage; Egyptian women had traditionally been more emancipated than their Greek counterparts in social terms.²⁶ The above-mentioned growing concern for the

²² Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 566.

²³ See King, *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* which discusses the positive, and negative, aspects of the feminine in Gnostic thought. By “focus upon the feminine” we are concerned here with the sociological role of women in the movement as anticipated by Hellenistic emancipation, as well as the prominent appearance of female divinities.

²⁴ For the importance of Memphis in the development of Isis aretologies, see Jan Bergman, *Ich Bin Isis: Studien zum memphitischen Hintergrund der griechischen Isisaretologien* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1968).

²⁵ In particular, Cleopatra represented herself as “the new Isis,” Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 147.

²⁶ Apart from the fact that Egyptian female children were not subject to infanticide, Egyptian women were not marrying as early as Greek women (late as opposed to early teens for the Greeks), they were not subjected to a *kurios* (guardian) beyond age twelve, they could choose husbands, initiate divorces, own and sell land, and conduct legal suits. This is attested as far back as Old and Middle Kingdom literary sources, Gay Robbins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). A very narrow view of women’s roles is espoused by Antoinette Wire who marginalises the Egyptian situation as follows: “Although a broader public status accrued to a woman through the males with whom she was so linked, this status was due to the effective functioning of these roles and was exercised largely through them. The occasional individual exception of a Cleopatra or the regional exception of land-owning women in Egypt only highlight what was everywhere else the rule.” See Antoinette Clark Wire, “The Social Functions of Women’s Asceticism in the Roman East,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 308. This surprisingly prevalent view in Gnostic Studies does not very well understand or seek to establish the Egyptian setting as perhaps the most critical *Sitz im Leben* for “images of the feminine” in Gnosticism. The emancipation of women was a Hellenistic phenomenon in Alexandria, the

individual involved the “discovery” of women as individuals in power-politics and in religion.²⁷ The expression of this sentiment perhaps found its apotheosis in the works of the epigramist Meleager of Gadara (Jordan, c. 100 B.C.E.), most of whose poems are about love. In the variegated forms his epigrams take (one hundred have survived), his love for womanhood attains almost the level of a religious panegyric. Hellenistic art revealed a new interest in the eroticism of women. In conjunction with the influence of Ptolemaic royal women, the courtesan class of sophisticated women also influenced perceptions of women and female sexuality. While a certain frank libertinism in Ptolemaic times manifested in the Dionysian festivals at Eleusis near Alexandria perhaps finds its parallel in the rise of the later libertine Gnostic sects,²⁸ a more important connection is found simply in a focus upon the individual which included male and female sexuality. Many Gnostic sects took the crucible of male-female sexuality as the most critical component for spiritual salvation. Madeline Scopello details the similarities between heroines in the Gnostic novel and the Hellenistic novel, noting that “in the gnostic novels, there is a tension between prostitution and virginity which is unknown to Hellenistic novels”.²⁹ A strong connection is made in this regard with Jewish wisdom literature and her overall conclusion is that Gnosticism involved cultivated women in its circles, in particular the courtesan class.

For all this, Alexandria reflected the general widespread decline of Greek culture in the late Hellenistic age; at least such is the picture drawn by some Classicists.³⁰ Putting aside such Hellenocentric optics which sees this Graeco-Egyptian cultural fusion as a “decline” we now focus upon the Egyptian side of the cultural equation.

superior status of Egyptian women was a widespread historical reality in Egypt: both factors found their later expression in the Gnostic movement.

²⁷ Michael Grant, *From Alexander to Cleopatra: The Hellenistic World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982), 204: “The cultural background for this shifting of attitudes was a tremendous new discovery, strongly reflected both in literature and art, that women were actually interesting, not merely as remote figures in tragedies, but as real and attractive persons: and preoccupation with their looks, and with feminine standards of beauty, increased out of all recognition.”

²⁸ The heresiologist Epiphanius’ testimony overall is rather dubious in its specific details, but there is no reason to doubt that he had some sort of encounter with “liberal” Egyptian Gnostic women (Panarion XXV 2,7).

²⁹ Madeline Scopello, “Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 81.

³⁰ The thesis of Fraser, in *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, is that the “golden age” of Alexandrian creativity was a product of the Greek *immigrés* in the 3rd century B.C.E. Following this, “the *immigré* was being replaced by an inferior, locally-bred intellectual class,” (717). Yet, it should be noted, Fraser is largely arguing *e silentio* (that no great works of Alexandrian poetry survive from the first and second centuries B.C.E. *ergo* there were none, for example [607]). The “revival” (as Fraser phrases it) of certain philosophical schools in the mid-1st century B.C.E. in Alexandria indicates an obvious continued creativity associated with a library that remained intact even following the Roman conquest. For a complete refutation of the traditional view that Caesar inadvertently burned a substantial portion of the library in Alexandria, see Luciano Canfora, *The Vanished Library* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 81-82.

Following the strong showing by the Egyptian contingent at the battle of Raphia in 217 B.C.E., and faced with the determination of the long Egyptian revolt which followed, Greek respect for the Egyptian grew. In the face of continuous revolts throughout almost the entire Ptolemaic period, the dynasty became more and more Egyptianised in an effort to appease Egyptian intractability in this regard.³¹ The temples became the centre of Egyptian cultural life; they alone were exempt from taxes and could produce oil. The regular priestly synods were moved from Alexandria to Memphis in 197 B.C.E. signalling a shift in the balance of power.³² By the time the half-Greek, half-Egyptian named Dionysus-Petosarapis began his revolt among the Greeks in 169 B.C.E. (his name itself manifesting the diminishing fault-line between the two cultures), a revolt which quickly spread among the Egyptians,³³ the currency of the regime was appearing with symbols of Egyptian gods, reflecting the shift in the currency of culture as it were.

Egyptian priestly propaganda was in part responsible for the anti-Hellenist attitude amongst the people at large.³⁴ The core of Egyptian intransigence was the belief in *ma'at*. One might say that the sheer immovability of the culture in this regard, so strongly suggested by her massive monuments and temples, powerfully contributed to induce the turning of Greeks to Egyptian gods. While intermarriage supplied the primary social underpinnings for this development, it is important too that by the second century an increasing number of "Greeks" were in fact born and raised upon Egyptian soil and naturally identified with Egypt as their homeland.

"Egyptianisation" created different results on different levels. In fact much of the social struggles of these times suggest a class war, thus involving the two races on the same sides at times. Egyptianisation on the level of the lower classes involved the partial transculturalization of Greeks who embraced Egyptian religious beliefs; the great mass of lower-class Egyptians for their part, however, thoroughly resisted Hellenisation. On the administrative level a half-caste group of Graeco-Egyptians was created alongside the Greek, and Egypto-Greek alongside the Egyptian, each side moving towards the centre as it were. Ptolemaic appeasement of Egyptian religious sentiment involved privileges being extended to the Egyptian priesthood and the clergy in Memphis became pro-Ptolemaic to a large extent once it became clear that

³¹ A graphic example of this is to be found in the comparison of two decrees written by Egyptian priests in honour of the Ptolemaic kings. The first was written in 238 in honour of Ptolemy III, and the second in honour of Ptolemy V, was written in 196 B.C.E. The second letter details the increasing efforts of the Ptolemies to placate a powerful native priesthood. M.M. Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest: A Selection of Ancient Sources in Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 366, 374.

³² Dorothy J. Crawford, "Ptolemy, Ptah and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis", in *Studies on Ptolemaic Memphis*, *Studia Hellenistica* 24, ed. Willy Peremans (Louvain, 1980), 19.

³³ According to Diodorus (XXI.15a) Dionysus incited the masses to revolt and we can assume he was bilingual, as his name suggests.

³⁴ Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 274-275: "The Egyptians even claimed that all mankind had learned law and human culture from Egyptian colonies sent all over the world.... Athens was said to have been founded by the Egyptians from Sais.... [O]ne thing various Egyptians did agree upon was that all human culture came from Egyptian gods and Egyptian kings, and that these excellent institutions had been changed for the worse by the Makedonian [sic], the conquerors and destroyers of civilization."

the regime was committed to supporting the hereditary transition of religious power in Memphis, and once this power was seen to grow as the centuries passed. The high priest in Memphis became a sort of ethnarch, or shadow-king, a political reality not likely to have been lost upon the Ptolemies.³⁵ From 164 B.C.E. these priesthoods began to include Greeks.³⁶ At first glance one would assume that these “Greeks” were allowed only to become *stolists* (a sort of temple custodian-class of priest), or understudies of some sort, and not immediately allowed into the specialist class of scholars and intellectuals. However, “Greek” is a misnomer, as we are dealing largely with Graeco-Egyptians, that is, those born and raised in a bilingual household and neighbourhoods and not pure Greeks who had later learned the language. There is no reason to assume that such persons were not granted access to the innermost sanctuaries of the House of Life as true aspirants; indeed, the highest priestly office in the land in this period was occupied by Petubastis (120-75 B.C.E.), son of the high-priest Psenptaïs, and the Greek princess Berenice, daughter of Euergetes II, and so was himself an exemplar of this phenomenon.³⁷ Both he and his father, as High Priests in Memphis, consolidated the prestige and legitimacy of the Ptolemies in a time of political weakness for the dynasty.³⁸ Petubastis was brought into the temple in 105-104 at the age of 16 and probably became high-priest at age 34 when his father Psenptaïs died in 87 or 86 B.C.E.³⁹ Petubastis issued “decrees and ordinances on behalf of the king”; as well, he “emerges from the political chaos created by the activities of the various factions in Alexandria as the real master of Egypt”.⁴⁰ As a veritable second king in Memphis, this son-in-law to the Greek king must have reported to Euergetes on the progress of the state-funded work going on at Kom Ombo and Edfu in the king’s name. He undoubtedly engaged in the work of restoring the ancient Egyptian texts as had his nine predecessors under the Ptolemies. It is scarcely conceivable that he could have attained such high office were he not extremely capable with hieratic and hieroglyphic, as well as demotic. Equally, one imagines a keen interest on the part of this spiritual potentate in furthering the word of Egyptian religious thought, into Greek, if not at least for the Greek priests under his direct care, then to all those with serious purpose and interest. The demotic stela for Petubastis is unfortunately fragmentary, however a stela dedicated to his son

³⁵ Dorothy J. Crawford, “Ptolemy, Ptah, and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis,” 31: “Memphis now stands apart from other Egyptian temples with a special relationship between king and high priest”. See also E.A.E. Reymond and J.W.B. Barns, “Alexandria and Memphis: some Historical Observations,” *Or.* 46 (1977): 1-33, as well as E.A.E. Reymond, *From the Records of a Priestly Family from Memphis*, vol.1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981).

³⁶ Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 319

³⁷ There is some controversy connected with the ordinals to be given to Psenptaïs, father of Petubastis, Petubastis himself, and his son, also named Psenptaïs. As my discussion is not concerned with the larger genealogy of the entire priesthood in Memphis I have opted to leave these off.

³⁸ Reymond and Barns, “Alexandria and Memphis,” 16-19

³⁹ Charles Maystre, *Les grands prêtres de Ptah de Memphis* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1992), 192-93.

⁴⁰ Reymond and Barns, “Alexandria and Memphis,” 21.

Psenptaïs pointedly underlines the lengths the Greek kings went to involve themselves in Egyptian religious practice and, equally, the rapport that the high priests of Memphis had with the Greek king in Alexandria:

I went to the residence of the Greek kings on the shore of the sea west of Aqa whose name is Rakotis [Alexandria]. The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, the god Philopater Philadelphus Neos-Dionysus, coming forth from his palace alive and well, arrived at the temple of Isis, mistress of the Iat-Oudjat. He made many and great offerings to her. Leaving the temple of Isis upon his chariot, the king himself stopped his chariot. He put on my head a beautiful crown of gold with all sorts of genuine and precious stones with (?) a heart of the king in the midst of it. I was named his prophet. He issued a royal edict to the towns and nomes saying: "I have made the great Chief of workers Psenptaïs, true of voice, my prophet"(BM 886 [1026]).⁴¹

It is here that an important precondition for the rise of Gnostic thought was created, for the group in the vanguard of Petubastis was fluent in Greek, literally "the language of power" of the time, as well as Egyptian. The evolution of *spoken* Coptic, with its liberal use of Greek loan-words, is the natural result one would expect. The development of this verbal phenomenon into a written medium employing the Greek alphabet was a natural consequence, one that shall be examined more closely in Chapter 6. Complete bilingualism provided the basis for a subsequent fusion of Greek and Egyptian philosophical and religious thought among a group that was already predisposed to take up these matters.⁴²

We know very little about Egyptian religious life in Alexandria in this period,⁴³ but we may surmise that it was active as the Egyptians also had their own law courts.⁴⁴ For the Greeks, apart from the above-mentioned cult of Sarapis, there was a dynastic cult centred upon the body of Alexander.⁴⁵ A syncretism of Dionysus-Underworld-Osiris was made, and Bast was associated with Artemis by the Greeks. There is evidence that the Persian religion of Ahura-Mazda gained some footing in

⁴¹ Charles Maystre, *Les grands prêtres de Ptah de Memphis*, 412.

⁴² See François Dunand, "Les Synchrétismes dans la Religion de l'Égypte Romaine", in *Les synchrétismes dans les religions de l'antiquité*, ed. François Dunand and P. Lévêque (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 152-85, where the earlier Ptolemaic dynamics are also discussed.

⁴³ Fraser, predictably, concludes that there was therefore "a lack of religious activity," (*Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 189), this because the site was not associated with a particular god. There is, however, some evidence that a fort was established on the site by Ramses III around 1500 B.C.E., and there may have been a shrine to Isis upon Rakotis hill before the arrival of Alexander; in any event, there is no evidence to suggest that the site was viewed by Egyptians as being on foreign soil, much as they detested Alexandria at times. Quite apart from this, it is unlikely in the extreme that with all the evidence we have of Egyptian cultural tenacity, that the Egyptian population existed in Alexandria as deculturalized drones as Fraser would suggest.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁵ The body of Alexander was "kidnapped" by Ptolemy on route from Babylonia to Macedonia, and brought to "his" city. This was a shrewd move intended to legitimate the city in Egyptian eyes as the pharaonic centre of power in Egypt. In the event, this was only minimally successful.

third century B.C.E. Alexandria,⁴⁶ and a possible Zervanite influence upon the festival of Kore-Aion held in Alexandria can be detected.⁴⁷ The village of Eleusis east of the city was named after the site of the famous Eleusinian mysteries in Greece, and a rather exuberant yearly festival was held there.⁴⁸ Isis is perhaps the best attested deity in Ptolemaic Alexandria, and there may have been an earlier cult of Isis with its own temple on the hill of Rakotis before the foundation of Alexandria. Judaism of course was strongly present in the eastern part of the city, but evidence for non-Egyptian/Greek deities is sparse, limited at present to Cybele, the Phrygian goddess of fertility, referred to in Alexandria as “The Mother of the Gods and the Saviour who hears our prayers” and “The Mother of the Gods, the Accessible One”.⁴⁹ Finally, it seems certain that Buddhist emissaries from the Indian king Ashoka arrived in Alexandria around 200 B.C.E., a period of mounting religious excitement in Egypt.⁵⁰

An important factor has to be the existence of mystery-cults in Alexandria, and the cult of Isis must rank as the most important. The Hellenisation of this Egyptian goddess resulted in her acceptance in the remotest corners of the Greek and Roman worlds. In her most potent form here she manifests fate. Her declaration, “I conquer Heimarmene. Heimarmene obeys me” powerfully anticipates the first person address of the female speaker in the Gnostic *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*: “I am the one who is called ‘the Truth,’ and ‘Iniquity.’” (20.7-8⁵¹) Both female figures in effect refute the widespread belief in astrological determinism. The self-professed oxymoronic qualities of the female speaker in the Gnostic text suggests the shift into a

⁴⁶ According to Dioscorides: Fraser, 279. Also, “the statement that Hermippus, the pupil of Callimachus, wrote a commentary on the writings of Zoroaster, if true, suggests that translations of Persian texts were also available for study at the library.” Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 330.

⁴⁷ Zervanism was an offshoot of Zoroastrianism which focused upon a higher unity of Time within which the dark and light principles (Ahura Mazda and Ahriman) were contained, hence the perceived connection with the Greek Kore, and the Egyptian Aion.

⁴⁸ According to Satyrus. Strabo condemns the “immoralities” practiced there by men and women., and Walter Burkert, while admitting that the evidence is inconclusive, draws the following conclusion: “it seems that the Alexandrian festival took place in a temple, without previous initiation; it was not a mystery celebration but rather belonged to an Egyptian setting.” See Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 38. The question of course that is not answered here is whether or not there was participation by Egyptians.

⁴⁹ Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 277. There is a suggestion of influence here with the later Gnostic myth of one of the primordial female aeons, sometimes called Ekklesia, or Barbelo, referred to as “The Mother of the Aeons.”

⁵⁰ Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 278.

⁵¹ Coptic transcription from *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, vol. XI: *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 & VI*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), 250. A compelling presentation of the close affinity between various passages in this text and the sayings of Isis is presented by Rose Horman Arthur in her book *The Wisdom Goddess: Feminine Motifs in Eight Nag Hammadi Documents* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984).

dualistic conception of the goddess consistent with the Sophia myth.⁵² And so while the higher Sophia does rise above the Heimarmene (Fate), her lower aspect continues to be held in thrall. This may well represent the evolution of the Isis tradition within an epoch which began to subscribe to the conception of a demonised cosmos.⁵³ In any event, Isis must be considered as an important influence upon the evolution of the Gnostic Sophia/Barbelo figure as we shall more closely examine in Chapter 11.⁵⁴ Within Egypt, the Isis cult was most strongly developed in Alexandria and Memphis.

Rather than dealing with other specific sects at length it is more important to note the common features of mystery cults as opposed to religions. In the first instance the voluntarism involved in joining such a group was of critical import:⁵⁵ the cults operated in seclusion and were not at all interested in propagating a faith.⁵⁶ There is a primary concern with “knowing” among an inner elite group of adepts, pertaining directly to the transmission of the deeper significance of some core myth.⁵⁷ Another important characteristic is the complete absence of any concept of heresy, or excommunication.⁵⁸ All of the above factors represent key characteristics of the Gnostic sects and are therefore to be counted among the precursors of Gnostic thought in Alexandria. One very important difference does exist, however, and this is manifest in the vague soteriologies presented by the mystery cults in general; unlike the Gnostics, who made this the very heart of their myths, the mystery cults had only a very faint concern for the salvation of the soul.⁵⁹

Amidst this mosaic of believers, there were philosophical traditions which originated in Greece and which were present in Alexandria. The *topos* here must

⁵² Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 170-71: “Isis is, in fact, the female principle of Nature, and is receptive of every form of generation, in accord with which she is called by Plato the gentle nurse and the all-receptive, and by most people has been called by countless names, since, because of the force of Reason, she turns herself to this thing or that.... [S]he has an innate love for the first and most dominant of all things, which is identical with the good, and this she yearns for and pursues; but the portion which comes from evil she tries to avoid and to reject, for she serves them both as place and means of growth.” Isis, like the later Sophia, embodies the power of *eros* and *thanatos*.

⁵³ This, in turn, may have resulted in a schism within this goddess tradition as is suggested in the female speaker’s address to the Greeks and in her identification with Egypt in the *Thunder: Perfect Mind*.

⁵⁴ According to Hippolytus (*Her.* 5,14,6-7), a Gnostic group called the Peratae worshipped Isis as the right-hand power of god and as the twelve hours of the day. See also Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (1958; reprint, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions Int., Ltd., 1986), 273-74.

⁵⁵ “Mystery initiations were an optional activity within polytheistic religion, comparable to, say, a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela within the Christian system,” Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

focus upon the library of Alexandria,⁶⁰ and upon its associated Mouseion which was, by etymology, a cult-centre for the worship of the Muses. While the sources don't permit us directly to view what work was done here, we can say with some confidence that this must have involved cataloguing and copying as a basis for more advanced work in philology and science, certainly involving teaching and the giving of lectures. An important point for our purposes is that ancient Egyptian texts were likely translated there.⁶¹ In the first instance, the Ptolemies appear to have had a high regard for ancient Egyptian customs and traditions, and the high-priest in Memphis apparently operated as a Viceroy of the Ptolemies.⁶² In this connection we note that the above-mentioned High Priest Psenptaïs was likely given the hand of the Greek princess in return for the assistance he had rendered Euergetes II.

A fundamental split existed among the philosophical groups of the Hellenistic world. In the fourth century B.C.E. the epicentre of Greek philosophical thought was still Athens, and this continued on until it was sacked by Mithradates in 88 B.C.E., following which the Academy shifted to Alexandria (*ca.* 76 B.C.E.). Various philosophical traditions were well-represented in Alexandria in the form of contending sects, and the fundamental split we are dealing with is that which existed between the Stoics and Skeptics. It is Skepticism we shall be focusing upon as the primary philosophical progenitor of Gnostic thought in Alexandria. Skepticism was deeply hostile to the Stoic notion of conventional knowledge as the essential foundation of excellence (*areté*⁶³), and strongly emanated from the Academy in Greece in the third century B.C.E., the prestige of which had recently been re-established by the Skeptic Arcesilaus.⁶⁴ An epistemological theory of uncertainty which allowed room for probability, but not for absolute certainty, was espoused by Antiochus of Ascalon and his intellectual heirs of the late Ptolemaic period, Potamon and Arius Didymus, both of Alexandria. Potamon was the founder of the Eclectic School,⁶⁵ and Arius was the "spiritual advisor" of Augustus during his triumphant entry into Alexandria.⁶⁶ The old Skeptical school of Pyrrho was revived in Alexandria by Anesidemus of Cnossus in 50-40 B.C.E.: his first book, *Pyrrhoneian*

⁶⁰ Tzetzes and Epiphanius agree that there were two libraries. According to Tzetzes the "Palace library" contained 400,000 *symmigeis* scrolls containing more than one title, and 90,000 *amigeis* with only one work, while the "external library" contained 42,800 works. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 329. See Luciano Canfora, *The Vanished Library*, 183-89.

⁶¹ Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 330.

⁶² Reymond and Barns, "Alexandria and Memphis", 15

⁶³ For etymological reasons we shall insist that *areté* be translated as "excellence" rather than the modern inflation of "virtue" as it is often rendered.

⁶⁴ A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 94.

⁶⁵ A movement "which selected from the doctrines of each school," Fraser, 490. Fraser notes that the influence of the eclecticism of Antiochus extended into the Roman period, in particular the influence it had on Cicero through whose teachings it has come down to us as the familiar creed of western humanism.

⁶⁶ One of whose accomplishments was the pardoning by Augustus of Cleopatra's court Sophist Philostratus. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 490.

Arguments, was an attack upon Stoic philosophical and physical doctrines.⁶⁷ Neo-Scepticism remained essentially an Alexandrian philosophy long after the fall of the Ptolemies.

It is important to postulate here that the Stoic-Skeptic split must have extended down to ground level, as it were; that it was not just a series of abstruse arguments limited to a small group of thinkers working in association with the library, but also represented a “gut-level” response to the layperson’s role in the cosmos, as witnessed by the widespread Hellenistic development of anti-determinism. The rise of the great religious movements in the Roman period affords us a clear picture of this split in worldviews, rather facetly summed up in modern scholarly discourse as “monist” and “dualist” world-views.

On the one hand there was the Stoic notion of Divine Reason operative in the exemplar of *kosmos* – “all is as it should be” expresses the sentiment, and there is no radical divine-lower world split: for the Stoic “it was a one-storey system”.⁶⁸ The Skeptic deconstructs this attitude, and it must be remembered that the formal Sceptics of this period always operated in the shadow of their Sophistic forerunners, with their own emphasis upon subjectivity, the individual, and rhetoric. It is a short leap from a disparagement of Stoic idealism to demonise the cosmos and make the problem of radical evil a primary concern. The orthodox-Gnostic split, manifesting a later development of this schism, became an acute monist/dualist confrontation in the phenomenal rise of Manichaeism for which the Stoic ideal of Divine Reason in the *kosmos* was brought down to its most debased antithesis, that of a pernicious tyrannical power-system. The spontaneous appeal of Manichaeism indicates the widespread support this worldview possessed at the grassroots level and, as shall be demonstrated in Chapter 9, Egypt too was fertile ground for the growth of a radical dualism in its most extreme form of Manichaeism. On a philosophical level, this division manifests itself as one between deterministic and voluntaristic conceptions of the individual, actualised within a symbolic world that is consequently pro or anti-cosmist. The philosophy of Epicurus, for example, was anti-cosmist in the sense that it rejected astrological determinism as did the cult of Isis. A passage from the *Tripartite Tractate* (an extended Gnostic work probably written in Alexandria, and certainly Egyptian) draws out this division very well:

They have introduced other types (of explanation), some saying that those who exist have their being in accordance with providence. These are the people who observe the orderly movement and foundation of creation. Others say that it is something alien. These are the people who observe the diversity and lawlessness and the powers of evil. (109.5-15)⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Fraser maintains that Pyrrhonism “died out” in the mid-third century arguing, again, from negative evidence. There is no direct proof for this and it seems far more likely that the philosophy was alive and well throughout the entire Ptolemaic period.

⁶⁸ E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965), 13.

⁶⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII: *Nag Hammadi Codex I (I:5): The Tripartite Tractate*, vol. 1, ed. Harold W. Attridge & Elaine H. Pagels (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 290.

Plutarch, writing around 118 C.E., objects to Stoic monism, and demonstrates the stance of a host of Platonist philosophers with rather Gnostic leanings:

We must neither place the origins of the universe in inanimate bodies, as Democritus and Epicurus do, nor yet postulate one reason and one providence, dominating and ruling everything, as the creator of characterless matter, as the Stoics do; for it is impossible, where God is responsible for everything, for anything evil to come into being, or for anything good to come where God is responsible for nothing. (*De Iside* 368B)⁷⁰

One feature that is prominent on the Skeptical side of the divide is an implicit focus upon the individual, male or female. Pyrrhonian Skepticism exhibited a close link with the Sophistic enlightenment, and with the thought of Protagoras in particular.⁷¹ To return for a moment to our earlier discussion about the emancipation of women in Hellenistic times, we can assume that the various modes of Skeptical thought in Alexandria would have supported women rather than excluding their participation, involved, as they were, in the repudiation of traditional values: the connection with the earlier Sophistic *Aufklärung* has already been noted, and it was the Sophists who first raised the issue of women's rights.⁷² The rejection by Epicurus of Stoic doctrines also included the admission of women into the sect as equals. So, too, the female philosopher Hipparchis lived according to Cynic principles. The Stoics, for their part, did not posit equality between the sexes and refused to accept women as rational beings. In opposition to the Skeptics who were undermining the values of the Classical period, the Stoics, following their founder Zeno (335-263 B.C.E.), were intent upon reinforcing those values, and in particular, in reasserting the traditional role of motherhood and marriage for women.⁷³ Stoicism, on the whole, was a philosophy of social conservatism.

The radical subjectivism of the Sophists proclaimed the relativity of truth,⁷⁴ and under the auspices of Pericles in Athens, created a distinct internationalism of outlook as purveyed by the travelling *sophistes*. This feature was to become the hallmark of the later Hellenistic age as it broke out across the Orient under Alexander; indeed, the young Skeptic Pyrrho travelled with Alexander on his campaigns in the east. The demurral by Protagoras concerning the existence of the gods finds its more

⁷⁰ Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 188-89.

⁷¹ Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 79.

⁷² G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 159: "It is not surprising that the new thinking of the Sophistic movement should lead to the posing of questions concerning the rights and position of women in Greek societies." We would also note in passing that the first implicit condemnation of slavery in Greek texts (found nowhere in Plato and Aristotle) appears to be that of Alcidamas, a disciple of the Sophist Gorgias.

⁷³ Regarding their concern about falling birth-rates in Greek cities, see Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 132.

⁷⁴ See Protagoras' famous dictum: "Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not" (trans. Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, 239).

extreme development in the appearance of agnosticism in Alexandria in the Cyreanean philosophy of Theodorus,⁷⁵ as well as in the atheism of Euhemerus (died 298 B.C.E.) which was to have far-reaching effects in its literary assault upon traditional religious beliefs.⁷⁶ A connection also existed here between the subsequent rise of Euhemerism and the Sophistic movement.⁷⁷ In conjunction with the above undermining of traditionalism, Diogenes, the founder of the Cynical movement, saw benefit to the individual in confounding societal law,⁷⁸ and the Epicureans rejected political systems, urging their followers not to have anything to do with political leaders.⁷⁹ In looking for evidence of this antinomianism later in a specifically Alexandrian Gnostic figure, we note Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes:

But the laws, he (Epiphanes) says, since they could not restrain men's incapacity to learn, taught them to transgress. For the private property of the laws cut up and nibbled away the fellowship of the divine law.... He says that 'mine' and 'thine' were introduced through the laws, and that (people) would no longer enjoy in community the fruits either of the earth or of possessions, or even of marriage.

Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* III, 2.7.2⁸⁰

Above all, the corrosiveness of Sophist relativism knocked down the traditional world-view espoused by world-affirming theologies and philosophies and established a relativist outlook that was more markedly secular humanist in focus.⁸¹

⁷⁵ "As for the gods, I have no way of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist; nor, if they exist, of what form they are. For the obstacles to that sort of knowledge are many, including the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life" (trans. Wheelwright *The Presocratics*, 240). This statement by Protagoras, much misunderstood, clearly avows a moderate agnostic position as opposed to the atheistic.

⁷⁶ "It is difficult to believe that Euhemerus did not realize that his theology would be used as overt propaganda against traditional beliefs," Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 294.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁷⁸ When asked where he is from, his famous reply, "I am a citizen of the universe" vividly expresses the sort of internationalist outlook associated with these "liberal" groups of the time (Diogenes Laertius, 6, 63; Loeb vol. 2, 65).

⁷⁹ Grant, *From Alexander to Cleopatra*, 243-44. It should be noted here that the Epicureans, while on the "liberal" side of the equation socially and politically, were in fact on the Stoic side of the philosophical divide in a number of critical regards, most particularly in their world-affirming empiricism.

⁸⁰ Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 39.

⁸¹ In particular, the focus upon rhetoric was instrumental in undermining truth-claims by sidestepping, as it effectively did, the very notion of a purportedly *pure* philosophy at work, dealing instead with the question of psychological motives and the dynamics of discourse. George Kennedy, in *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton University Press, 1963), makes the analogous point: "Rhetoric was at times a greater liberalizing force in ancient intellectual life than was philosophy. It demonstrated that there were two sides to many if not all questions," 23.

This was accomplished at ground level, by an assault upon the very preconditions for phenomenological certainty. This tradition, clearly manifest and maintained in Alexandria, found its way into the very pith of Hellenistic Gnosis which was as contemptuous of the Stoic world-view as were the earlier Skeptics in Alexandria.⁸² Again, for proof of this we turn to a patristic account of Carpocrates of Alexandria:

They (Carpocrates and his followers) say that conduct is good and evil only in the opinion of men... through faith and love are (men) saved. All other things are indifferent, being accounted now good, now evil, according to the opinion of men.

Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I,25.4-5⁸³

A little further, Irenaeus affirms the philosophical link we are positing:

They call themselves gnostics. They have also images, some painted, some too made of other material, and say they are the form of Christ made by Pilate in that time when Jesus was with men. These they crown, and they set them forth with the images of the philosophers of the world, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the rest.

Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I,25.6⁸⁴

It was not my intent to burden the text with an extended discussion of this affinity, however the relativism of Carpocrates is highly reminiscent of the Sophists Gorgias and Protagoras as Jonas has remarked.⁸⁵ The implicit relativity of both developments on this trajectory is acute, with the difference being that the Gnostic philosopher has developed a metaphysic to explain this relativity. Whether this philosophical aspect of Gnostic thought owes its inception entirely to the earlier advent of the Greek

⁸² Both movements were to suffer persecution for their stand. The persecution of the Gnostics is well-known; by the fourth century their works were being burned in Egypt, mere possession made a criminal offense under Roman law. There is a strong similarity here in the earlier Greek resistance to the Sophistic movement. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, 164-65: "This tradition [Sophistic atheism] was coupled with another according to which a whole series of prosecutions for impiety (*asebeia*) were brought against the exponents of such views – Protagoras, Socrates, Phidias, Anaxagoras, Euripides and Theodorus are all mentioned, and in a number of cases prosecution was said to have resulted in exile or even death. In the case of Protagoras tradition declared that the book in which he wrote concerning the gods was ordered to be burnt in public. It is probable that there is some exaggeration and even some degree of fiction in all this. But the evidence can hardly be dismissed as a whole."

⁸³ Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol.1, 37-38.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (1958; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 272, on the above passage from Carpocrates: "While this reminds one of nothing more than the reasoning of certain classical Sophists, a deeper Gnostic reflection upon the *source* of such "human opinions" transforms the argument from a skeptical to a metaphysical one, and turns indifference into opposition: the ultimate source is found to be not human but demiurgical, and thus common with that of the order of nature."

Sophistic enlightenment, or whether it is simply a case of “sympathetic resonance” is impossible to say with certainty given the evidence available. At the very least the conditions for likely historical connectedness are there.

Alongside these philosophical developments is the dualism endemic to so-called Middle-Platonic thought, whose origins we have examined in the previous chapter. The shared sympathetic resonance of a number of Platonic philosophers with the rise of dualism in Egypt is extremely important and will be developed in Chapter 7.

Cleopatra’s attempt to fuse Greek and Egyptian culture on the State level failed in the face of Roman expansionism. This is not to say that the fusion she sought was not in fact present, perhaps even widespread amongst the literate classes. The changes for Egyptian peasants following the Roman conquest in 30 B.C.E. were nevertheless disastrous; in fact, the laws enacted by Augustus and maintained for two hundred years were designed to impede social mobility.⁸⁶ The population of Egypt was singled out for particularly harsh treatment and Alexandria bore the brunt of this on numerous occasions. “The notoriously outspoken and irreverent populace of Alexandria” were noted for their perceived fickleness, volatility, destructiveness, and lack of respect for Roman authority.⁸⁷ This hostility to Rome continued until well into the second century, perhaps until Septimius Severus’ granting of a Council to the city in 199-200.⁸⁸ A vivid expression of this sentiment is found in *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*⁸⁹, which purports to be a verbatim record of hearings between an individual or small group and the Emperor in which insolent defiance is expressed. We may conclude that this likely represents the tip of an extensive underground literary movement of the time (whose works have been lost), undoubtedly centred in Alexandria, one which expresses civic pride and anti-Roman sentiment; as such it would also have been an expression of larger Egyptian nationalism. Many public demonstrations occurred in the streets of Alexandria during this time and support was invariably given to pretenders to the throne in Rome which inevitably caused reprisals, the bloodiest wreaked by Caracalla in 215 C.E.⁹⁰ The important feature in these developments is the shared alliance of Graeco-Egyptian and Egypto-Greek against Roman rule.

Outside of Alexandria itself Egyptian resistance increased, the most serious revolt occurring in the Boukolia marshes in 172 C.E. led, significantly, by an Egyptian priest. This insurrection actually defeated Roman units and almost captured

⁸⁶ To “keep the several population strata as discrete and immutable as possible: *divide et impera*,” Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule*, 32.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁸⁸ The partial treatment extended by Augustus to the Alexandrian Jews embittered relations between the Jews and Alexandrians. Philo wrote about the great pogrom in 38 C.E., others are known to us only from the patriotic and propagandist Alexandrian literature, fragments of which have survived on papyri, known by scholars as *Acta Alexandrinorum*. A great deal of the unrest in the city was caused by this friction although it should be stressed that this wasn’t anti-Semitism *per se*; rather, it reflected the citizenry expressing their disapprobation of Roman rule through the Jews as perceived Roman protégés.

⁸⁹ Herbert A Musurillo, ed. *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

⁹⁰ Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule*, 201.

Alexandria before the Syrian garrison intervened. This incident illustrates an important phenomenon in Egypt. The Egyptians had a priestly class, unlike the Greeks. As the upper classes had been dissolved under Ptolemaic rule and were not allowed to reappear under the Roman, it was this class of priests who naturally became the repository of Egyptian cultural and national aspirations, although the power of the priests was curtailed in a number of ways by the Romans. A substantial segment of this class centred in the Greek cities owing to their partial assimilation by the Ptolemies, and the bilingualism which resulted undoubtedly played a major role in the uprisings in Alexandria. In 115 C.E. a Jewish revolt had broken out in Cyrene and subsequently spread to Alexandria where whole sections of the city were devastated. It is to be stressed that a number of major Gnostic teachers appeared in Alexandria in the midst of this period of unrest (Valentinus c. 140 for example).

It is at this point, having set the stage for the appearance of the Gnostics, that things become the most difficult and tenuous, owing to a lack of textual evidence. But let us attempt to devise a model for this critical time period from 30 B.C.E. to the end of the second century, one which is in accord with all of the evidence we have thus far marshalled.

In the first instance the bilingual Egyptian priestly class in Alexandria, since its earliest inception, was undoubtedly in contact with other diverse intellectual movements, some of which we have discussed. The *distance*, psychological and physical, of Alexandria from the Nile valley itself would have facilitated the “mutation” of this group in various directions fed, as it were, by the richness of cultural diversity in the city. This would have reflected the changes which were being wrought in the predominantly Egyptian populace of the capital, although it must be stressed again that at this point the terms “Greek” and “Egyptian” had become increasingly blurred. The dualisms of Persian and Essene thought may have supplied a critical influence,⁹¹ and the deconstruction of the Stoic worldview among a substantial social group would have required its replacement with a more vital theologising, a new religious consciousness based upon the old, but more directly concerned with the problem of evil.

This last issue is one that is most important, and while the attainments of the leading thinkers of the time were undoubtedly critical in their ability to act as a catalyst, this is only possible given the ground swell of public opinion: this reciprocity is what creates movements. We therefore note that the grassroots dualistic sentiment which one century later so obviously supplied the foundations for the rise of Manichaeism, was present in Egypt during this time as is manifest in the magical papyri and the one Gnostic tractate in our possession, *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC

⁹¹In particular the anti-Roman theology of the Essenes. The dualistic tenor of Essene thought is well established and need not be detailed here although it must be said that the integrity of this group, as derived from the Dead Sea Scrolls, as with many Hellenistic trajectories, is now being called into question. It is to be speculated that the interaction of Jew and Persian during the former's exile in Babylon created a conduit for Zoroastrian dualisms to enter into Jewish thought. Above all, there are Jewish glosses in many Gnostic texts, and the role of the Jewish community in Alexandria needs to be examined, as do the Therapeutae living along the shores of Lake Mareotis south of the city. The presence of Persians in Alexandria has already been noted, along with the likely translation of their religious texts in the library.

III,3 & V,1), which can be dated to the first century B.C.E.⁹² The most interesting changes, from our perspective, would have occurred among the bilingualised descendants of the priestly class who were made up in part of educated Greeks who had crossed the cultural divide. We note in particular Hecataeus (c. 300 B.C.E.), a pupil of the Skeptic Pyrrhon who, at a very early stage in Ptolemaic rule, provided a powerful rhetorical impetus in aiding this transculturalisation although he could hardly be called bilingualised. According to Diodorus, his work *On the Egyptians* was divided into four sections: native cosmology and theology; geography of Egypt; native rulers; and customs. In all this his main interest was in demonstrating the antiquity and superiority of Egyptian culture and social institutions although the accuracy of the details he passes along leave much to be desired. Even so, together with Manetho, Hecataeus was instrumental in early Ptolemaic times in disseminating Egyptian thought to the Greek world, and in abetting the worldly and comparativist spirit of the Alexandrian age.⁹³ This group, existing in close proximity to the library in Alexandria,⁹⁴ would then have facilitated the development of the “internationalist” perspective imbuing the Gnostic temperament. The later anti-Roman sentiments of the city would have enhanced their own anti-worldliness, and their anarchic temperament, fundamentally Egyptian at this point with respect to foreign laws,⁹⁵ would have been in perfect accord with the most anarchic ancient city of learning known in antiquity. Gnostic libertinism, as well as asceticism, both arose from the bed of anarchist temperament.⁹⁶ We shall have occasion to examine the growing link between Alexandria and Memphis, in particular the hereditary high-priests there whose lineage continued unbroken throughout the entire Ptolemaic era, and whose power was ever-increasing. Egyptian in their cultural heritage and ways of thinking, this group would have been profoundly radicalised by their exposure to the diverse intellectual developments in Alexandria, in particular Greek philosophical thought. The parallel Gnostic interaction of Graeco-Egyptian elements resulted in a synergism, a fusion, far more than a mere accumulation of disparate ideas. On the strength of a dualist textuality manifest in the magical papyri, a widespread shift to dualistic world-views

⁹²This point is detailed in Chapter 7.

⁹³“Manetho testifies to the growth of an international spirit in the Alexandrine age.” *Manetho*, vii.

⁹⁴Not necessarily *in* the city although one assumes that this would have naturally formed the focus here. There is textual evidence to show that antiquarians in other Greek cities on the Nile built up their libraries through buying, borrowing, and copying as one would expect. There is one text which illustrates a bookseller’s list of books needed from Alexandria. Requests here included the complete works of various philosophers, and one interesting treatise, regrettably lost, entitled *On the Uses of Parents* Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule*, 61.

⁹⁵This anarchism was not confined simply to the large cities, but extended into the rural areas where peasants were driven to flee their homes by Roman taxes and liturgies. The large scale refusal to work was also a common feature of the times. *Ibid.*, 203-204.

⁹⁶Kurt Rudolf, *Gnosis*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson (Reprint;1977, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 255: “Evidently libertine and ascetic deductions were drawn from the beginning, and more or less simultaneously, from the common “anarchistic” deposit, and were practised with different degrees of intensity.”

in the ancient world supplied the “heat” for this transformation. The numerous Gnostic overlaps with this genre, and with the Hermetica as well, shall be examined in the next chapter.

Within the Roman colonial net two great cultures struggled to survive, and both found their common cause in Alexandria. The rise of orthodox Christianity, and its deliberate fusion with the Roman state, was to result in the complete destruction of the autochthonous religious sentiments of Egypt; the Greek world was to resist Romanisation and in fact outlast it. However, this earlier Graeco-Egyptian synthesis allowed for the passing on of ideas from both cultures into the Roman; as well, it allowed for the rise of philosophies which were a product of a fusion of Greek and Egyptian thought, notably the Hermeticists, Neoplatonists, and the Gnostics (Manichaeism might be included here), all of whom were to have a great influence in the Roman world.⁹⁷

Many of the major Gnostic teachers that we know of, certainly the key figures with whom the patristic writers were grievously affronted, were Egyptian. The Roman heresiologist Hippolytus of Rome wrote the *Refutatio* (The Refutation of All Heresies) in the late second or early third century. Having described the system of Basileides of Alexandria at length, Hippolytus saves his most telling indictment for the last sentence: “These are the myths that Basileides tells from his schooling in Egyptian wisdom, and having learnt such wisdom from them he bears this sort of fruit”.⁹⁸ To this we can add Plotinus’ indictment of the Gnostics (also written in Rome) some fifty years before Hippolytus. Clearly the battle lines between Rome and Alexandria were being extended on theological and philosophical grounds by these times.⁹⁹

Prior to this period, and extending well into it, the magical papyri embody an Egypto-Greek fusion of thought preoccupied with underworld powers and the inimical nature of the Heimarmene (Fate). As Alexandria represents the strivings of an intellectual elite to assimilate diverse religious and philosophical elements into a new system, one emboldened by the new-found internal focus upon the individual, so the magical papyri manifest the ancient methodologies of the Egyptian priesthood, an

⁹⁷The dissemination of Hermetic and Neoplatonic thought in the Roman world is well-attested. Manichaeism extended itself across North Africa into Spain and Italy, and across the Orient to the south of China. Valentinianism, to choose one dominant Gnostic sect, had churches in southern Gaul and on the Euphrates at the time Irenaeus wrote his monumental work, *Against All Heresies* (c. 180-192 C.E.).

⁹⁸VI, 27. Trans. Catherine Osborne, *Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy: Hippolytus of Rome and the Presocratics* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 309.

⁹⁹There is only the tradition of Mark to suggest any sort of “orthodox” Christian trajectory in Egypt in the first century, a tradition which can be discounted given the complete lack of mention in Clement and Origen. Bell 81, argues for “a not inconsiderable Christian element” in Middle Egypt from the middle of the second century onwards which is possible, although one must affirm the dominance of Gnostic thought in Egypt at this time, and in fact its influence is to be found in the writings of Clement and Origen quite apart from the mainstream Gnostic authors of the time – these “Christians” were likely Gnostic-Christians. Hippolytus’s statement reveals a Roman-Alexandrian polarisation resulting from the orthodox condemnation of the Alexandrian *haireisis*. The Gnostics were free to ‘choose’ until the persecutions began in the fourth century and onwards.

external focus upon text, religious practice, and proper procedure. It is to the magical papyri that we now turn.

Chapter Five: The Magical Papyri

In setting out to analyse the magical papyri we must first of all emphasise the socio-historical context within which these documents appeared, for there is a connection to be made with the so-called Nag Hammadi find as well as the Hermetica, associations that scholars by far and large have neglected to date.¹ The Egyptian magical papyri, written in Greek, but also containing a substantial number of Demotic texts and containing numerous Coptic glosses, were preserved in Thebes, some 113 km upriver from the Gnostic collection buried in the Jebel al Tarif (some 60 km if one heads directly overland across the large bow of the river), and both caches were hidden towards the end of the fourth century C.E.. In *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead* (NHC VI,6), a hermetic text buried in the Jebel al Tarif, Hermes directs Tat (=Thoth): “O my son, it is proper to write this book on steles of turquoise, in hieroglyphic characters...” (NHC VI,6.61.18)². PGM XII.121 refers to a certain Zminis of Tentyra (Dendera) and this close geographical proximity of textual references reinforces the compelling thematic overlaps that we shall examine in this chapter. It is important to stress the geographical and historical proximity of the magical papyri to the Nag Hammadi find, for this likely explains in part the kindred heterogeneity of their composition. The compilers of both collections obviously had an abiding interest in philosophy, theurgy, and traditional Egyptian mythological modes of thought. A concomitant of this is the bilinguality of both groups. This last aspect is important for the task at hand, for we do not wish to simply demonstrate Gnostic affinities, but to show that many of these conceptions can also be traced back further to ancient Egyptian thought.³

In this section I propose to establish a number of thematic elements in the magical papyri as a conduit or backdrop for Gnostic thought. The *terminus ad quem* for both libraries – for such they appear to be – allows for a much earlier date of original composition.⁴ The links between the magical papyri and Hermetic thought

¹Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 170, is a notable exception. “The neglect that has been lavished on the Thebes cache is all the more surprising when one considers the dominant position that it occupies in the study of late antique magic and early alchemy, and its similarities with the Nag Hammadi library, now exposed to the opposite form of abuse.”

²Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, ed. Douglas M. Parrott, 366-67. Also Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 170, who believes that the whole Nag Hammadi collection belonged to a person or group from this area based upon this reference and linguistic considerations.

³Wilfried Gutekunst, “Wie ‘magische’ ist die ‘Magie’ im alten Ägypten? Einige theoretische Bemerkungen zur Magie – Problematik,” in *La Magia in Egitto al Tepi dei Faraoni*, eds. Alessandro Roccati and Alberto Siliotti (Rassegna Internazionale di Cinematografia Archeologica Arte e Natura Libri, 1987), 77-98, follows W. Westendorf, H. te Velde, and E. Drioton, in demonstrating that “magic” in Egyptian thought was but a refracted colour in the larger Egyptian religious spectrum, one that pertained to practical theology.

⁴The Gnostic text *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III,3) for one, has been dated with some certainty to the first century B.C.E. (“Eugnostos and ‘All the Philosophers’” from *Religion*

are strong, and Fowden makes the important point that both the Thebes cache and the Nag Hammadi corpus, “illustrate that interlocking of the technical and philosophical approaches” that he traces in the Hermetica.⁵

The magical papyri demonstrate the rise of a new religious worldview in Egypt, one in which the underworld has gained in direful importance. One makes a fundamental mistake in assuming that these documents only illustrate a debased lowbrow *mélange* of ill-fitting pieces. Magical texts are no longer viewed as being a sort of religious underworld in and of themselves; recent work in anthropology and sociology views the phenomenon of magic as a modality of religious thought, one which is to be situated on the continuous spectrum of religious experience.⁶ While there is not yet a consensus on how magic is to be defined, A. Segal’s article “Hellenistic Magic” ably details the hermeneutic pitfalls in the modern hierarchic approach to the religious phenomenon of “magic”.⁷ The magical papyri at once offer us a direct glimpse into the transformational process that a segment of traditional Egyptian theology was undergoing, in particular an enhancement of its own theurgic propensities in a marked dualist worldview. The result of this, as I shall argue, is the foundation of a religious impetus coterminous with Gnostic thought in Egypt. Hans Dieter Betz, in the introduction to his translation of the Greek magical texts describes their contents as follows:

Since the material comes from Graeco-Roman Egypt, it reflects an amazingly broad religious and cultural pluralism. Not surprising is the strong influence of Egyptian religion throughout the Greek magical papyri, although here the texts show a great variety. Expressed in Greek, Demotic, or Coptic, some texts represent simply Egyptian religion. In others the Egyptian element has been transformed by Hellenistic religious concepts. Most of the texts are mixtures of several religions – Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, to name the most important.... We should make it clear, however, that this syncretism is more than a hodgepodge of heterogeneous items. In effect, it is a new religion altogether, displaying unified religious attitudes and beliefs. As an example, we may mention the enormously important role of the gods and goddesses of the underworld. The role of these underworld deities was not new to Egyptian religion or, to some extent, to ancient Greek religion; but it is characteristic of the Hellenistic syncretism of the Greek magical papyri that the netherworld and its deities had become one of its most important concerns... The people whose religion is reflected in the papyri agree that humanity is inescapably at the whim of the forces of the universe.⁸

im Erbe Ägyptens), while the magical texts presented by Betz “are mainly from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D.” *The Greek Magical Papyri*, xli.

⁵Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 172.

⁶See Christopher.A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, *Magika Hiera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), vi.

⁷Alan Segal, “Hellenistic Magic,” in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 349-411.

⁸Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, xlv, xlvi, xlvii.

Janet Johnson, in her accompanying introduction to the Demotic magical papyri, notes the overwhelmingly Egyptian content and methodology of the demotic texts, while also stressing the similar Egyptian attributes of the Greek papyri.⁹ Above all, the bilingualism of the scribes involved in the production of the texts is apparent, and Johnson's conclusion that, "one must, at any rate, be leery of overstating the Greek case and attributing too much to Greek influence" might equally be applied to the Nag Hammadi corpus. This Egyptian sensibility is one that is engaged in syncretistic activities. Alongside such Egyptian figures as Amun, Khepri, the Heh-gods, Nephthys, Isis, Thoth and Re, to name a few, are various gods from the Greek pantheon and, most importantly, a pervasive superficial Jewish influence which resulted from the high esteem accorded to Jewish magicians at this time.¹⁰ PGM XII, 201-69 ends by calling upon the Egyptians, the Jews, the Greeks, the high-priests, and Parthians.¹¹ While this might be seen to be mere rhetorical flourish, the actual thematic contents of the collection argue otherwise.

While more "syncretistic" in their makeup, it is important to note that there is no great gulf between the religious aspirations of the Graeco-Egyptian magician and the continuing traditional modes of thought. *The First Tale of Khamuas* which dates to the middle of the first century C.E. is, according to F. Ll.Griffith, "one of the finest works of imagination that Egypt has bequeathed to us"¹² The story depicts Setne Khamuas diligently seeking after a sacred text said to be written by the hand of Thoth. Various tales concerning Khamuas detail the powers of this book, and it is just possible that in not at all depicting Khamuas (Setne) in a heroic light, that this traditional story was used as a cautionary against the new appropriation of sacred texts which were being put to magical uses beyond the temple precinct. In any event, the text shows some Greek influences.

In analysing the magical papyri thematically we shall concern ourselves mostly with those autochthonic Egyptian elements that have at least some bearing upon Gnostic thought as the overall Egyptian presence is ubiquitous and need not be exhaustively detailed.¹³

Nun

The figure of Nun is found throughout the collection, as in PGM III wherein Re is addressed and his appearance from the primordial abyss is clearly maintained:

⁹ Ibid., lv.

¹⁰ William M. Brashear, *Magica Varia* (Bruxelles: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1991), 22.

¹¹ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 163.

¹² F. Ll Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis* (1900; reprint, Osnabrück: Otto Zeller Verlag, 1985), 14.

¹³ For an in depth look at the Egyptian theological presence in one papyri in particular, see Jan Bergman, "Ancient Egyptian Theogony in a Greek Magical magical Papyrus (PGM VII, ll. 516-521)", in *Studies in Egyptian Religion*, M. Heerma van Voss *et.al.* ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 28-37.

O god of gods, lord of the world, who have divided by your own divine spirit the universe; first from the firstborn you appeared, created carefully from water that's turbulent¹⁴

“The great god in the abyss” is a typical epithet and we find this further on in PGM III.633-690, a passage which focuses upon Re and other figures on the sun-barque. This text is written in Coptic and is to be tentatively dated to the first century C.E..¹⁵ In PGM IV, 1596-1715, the 12 passengers of Re's sun-barque are identified as the 12-hours of the nights passage, each in turn depicted as a specific animal and Egyptian god. R. Merkelbach and M. Totti see this as likely coming from an astrological-mystical book dating to the 2nd or 1st century B.C.E.¹⁶ The motif of the attack by Apophis upon the sun-barque also shows up in Coptic magical texts.¹⁷

The figure of Maskelli is to be identified as Nun,¹⁸ and this divine figure appears in the Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* where he is also identified as Zarazaz (Book IV, 365.2)¹⁹. Various divine figures come forth from Nun and in fact Egyptian “I am he who came forth from Nun” is written as a sacred incantation: PHIRIMNOUN [A]NOX.²⁰ The function of Nun as the abyss which generates divinity is found in Gnostic thought, as in this passage from *On The Origin of the World*:

Now the Aeon of Truth possesses no shadow within (and) it did not weaken, for the immeasurable Light is everywhere within it. But its exterior is shadow which is called Darkness, from which there appeared a Power presiding over the Darkness. The Powers which thereafter came to be called the shadow “the Chaos which has no beginning”. From it, each [genus] of the gods blossomed upwards [.....] together with the entire world [so that] the shadow follows upon the first Work. It was manifest [as] the Deep (Coptic NOYN) from within the Pistis, about which we have spoken. (NHC II,5 98.25-99.2)²¹

¹⁴ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 32-33.

¹⁵ Christine Harrauer, *Meliouchos: Studien zur Entwicklung religiöser Vortellungen in griechischen synkretistischen Zaubertexten* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1987), 71.

¹⁶ Reinhold Merkelbach and Maria Totti, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri Religiösen und Magischen Inhalts*, Band 1, *Gebete* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag GmbH, 1990), 105.

¹⁷ William H. Worrell, “A Coptic Wizard's Hoard,” *AJSL* 46 (1930): 261.

¹⁸ Harrauer, *Meliouchos*, 22 n.18.

¹⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.IX: *Pistis Sophia*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 730.

²⁰ PGM XXI.25; Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 259.

²¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XXI: *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 30. Alexander Böhlig, “Urzeit und Endzeit in der Titellosen Schrift des Codex II von Nag Hammadi” in *Mysterion und Wahrheit* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 135-48, who otherwise notes the connections with Egypt in this text, but does not draw any connection with Nun.

We note that the idea of the theogony as being bounded by Nun is expressed as the exterior shadow. The association of Pistis with Nun is also expressed in PGM XII.229: “I am the faith [Pistis] found in men, and am he who declares the holy names, who [is] always alike, who came forth from the abyss”.²²

The appearance of Nun in the magical papyri and Gnostic thought will be further examined in Chapter 10 and it need only be mentioned here that the figure of the Valentinian Bythos figures largely in that discussion.²³

The Hermopolitan Ogdoad

PGM XXI. 1-29 affords an example wherein Nun is depicted with his female counterpart Naunet along with the other three couples of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad: Heh and Hehet, Kuk and Kauket, Amun and Amaunet, together referred to as “the eight guards”.²⁴ In Gnostic texts the Chaos gods, often numbered as eight or twelve, are found in various texts, to be examined in Chapter 11.

A divine figure of particular interest in this connection is that of BAINCHOOCH which is a rendering of the Egyptian *b' n kkw* (“soul of darkness”), the Hemopolitan god Kuk.²⁵ The figure of BAINCHOOCH appears in the Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* (Book IV 356.22 and 381.25-382.5), where it is described as a god which comes for the soul of the deceased, accompanying it down to Amentiy. PGM V.19 refers to BAINCHOOCH as “him who appeared before fire and snow... who introduced light and snow”²⁶ and a similar connection is maintained in the *Pistis Sophia* where the soul is taken to “the places of frost and snow” (Book IV 376.20 & 380.5)²⁷. The soul is later taken to “the outer darkness until the day when the great dragon-faced archon who circles the darkness will be judged” (IV.380.10-13)²⁸, a depiction of events highly reminiscent of the Egyptian night journey of the dead through the realm of Nun and Apophis.

²² Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 162. Also noted in Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, 172.

²³ The connection of Nun with the Valentinian Bythos in PGM XII.229 is noted in Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, 172.

²⁴ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 259. The ogdoad is also detailed in similar fashion in PGM XIII.791.

²⁵ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 18; Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, 96; Harrauer, *Meliouchos*, 79, Terrence DuQuesne, *A Coptic Initiatory Invocation*, Oxfordshire Communications in Egyptology II. Thame Oxon: Darengo, 1991), 19.

²⁶ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 101.

²⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.IX, 752, 760. Harrauer, *Meliouchos*, 80, identifies the functions of Bainchooch with Seth, god of inclement weather, an association derived from the primordial Chaos god Kuk (Darkness).

²⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.IX, 760.

A similar figure appears in PGM XIII.809: BAINPHNOUN, *b' n p3 Nwn* (soul of Nun”), which is to be identified as Re, based upon *The Book of the Celestial Cow* (verse 281): “the ba of Nun is Re”.²⁹

It is worth mentioning that the Hermopolitan Ogdoad was still of considerable theological importance well into Roman times. The temple of Opet in Karnak, for example, indicates precisely the sort of storehouse of theological information one would anticipate as a backdrop for both the magical papyri and Gnostic texts. As one enters the temple today, the largest wall of reliefs before the inner temple depicts the Hermopolitan ogdoad. The eight gods are laid out on a number of 4-foot high panels dominating the entire wall of reliefs, and they take their prominent position down either side of the main entrance to the inner temple. The Opet temple was apparently very popular in Roman times for pregnant women and it is not hard to imagine the connection made by the Egyptians between the “watery abyss from which every divinity comes forth” and pregnancy and birth. Again, the Gnostic *On the Origin of the World* also depicts this association:

Then the bile that had come to be from shadow was cast into a part of Chaos. Since that day the watery condition is manifest, and what sank within it flowed forth manifest in Chaos, just as with she who gives birth to a child (when) her entire afterbirth flows forth; just so, matter came to be out of Shadow and was cast aside. (NHC II,5 99.11-20)³⁰

The temple was restored and rebuilt under Ptolemy XII (80-51 B.C.E.) and some rebuilding was also effected under Augustus. Apart from this, the ancient city of Chmunu (*hmnw*), literally “The City of the Eight Gods” at modern-day Tel el-Ashmunein in Middle Egypt, must have been known by all Graeco-Egyptians with any interest in religious matters as the “ogdoad-city” and the Ptolemies built a temple to Ptah within the precincts of the old city.³¹

Emanationist Variations

PGM XIII is of especial interest in laying out various “Mosaic” versions of an emanationist system clearly derived from the Egyptian.³² The compiler of this text composed “The Key of Moses” and makes reference to “A Sacred Book called ‘Unique’ or Eighth Book of Moses”, the “secret moon prayer” of Moses, “the Tenth Hidden (Book?) of Moses”, “The Hidden Book of Moses concerning the Great

²⁹ H.J. Thissen, “Ägyptische Beiträge zu den griechischen magischen Papyri,” in *Religion und Philosophie im Alten Ägypten*, eds. Ursula Verhoeven and Erhart Graefe (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters), 293-302.

³⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXI, 32.

³¹ Günther Roeder, “Kosmogonische Vorstellungen in Ägypten – Die Kosmogonie von Hermopolis,” *Egyptian Religion* 1 (1933): 12.

³² See Morton Smith, “The Eighth Book of Moses and How it Grew (P. Leid. J 395),” in *Atti del XVII Congresso internazionale di papirologia* (Napoli: centro Internazionale per lo studio di papiri ercolanesi, 1984), 683-93.

Name”and “The Archangelic (Book?) of Moses”.³³ The last text is referred to in the Gnostic tractate *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5 & XIII,2) which is likewise concerned with the nature of chaos and lists the seven forces of chaos. The seven emanations in PGM XIII appear diachronically as a result of utterances by an unidentified creator god:

1. Phos-Auge (Light-Radiance: Reherakhty)
 2. Watery Abyss (Nun)
 3. Nous-Phrenes (Mind-Wits: Thoth)
 4. Genna-Spora (Generative Power-Procreation: Amun)
 5. Hermes-Moira (Justice-Fate: Ma'at)
 6. Kairos (Time: *nhh/dt*)³⁴
 7. Psyche (Soul: *b3/k3*)
- IAO (Demiurge)

The Egyptian correspondences are listed and the assimilation of the Heliopolitan system to the Memphite is suggested. It will be recalled that the memphite Ptah created through utterance and that all the functionaries of the progenerative Heliopolitan system were left intact below this new creation dynamic manifest in the sovereignty of Ptah.

The demiurge appears separately from the rest and is put in charge of the earth. The above appear as male-female pairs, as in other Mosaic texts, although here there are omissions. The appearance of a sequence of seven utterances which produce various gods is to be found at the temple of Esna not far from where the present text surfaced.³⁵ Again, the Gnostic *On the Origin of the World* reflects the closest link, quite apart from citing the same “Mosaic” source. The seven heavens and their female counterparts are listed and their creation is effected through “the principle of verbal expression” (100.15)³⁶. One is not surprised to find the typical Gnostic development of demiurgic hubris in this text as Yaldabaoth (IAO) boasts that “It is I who am God, and there is no other one that exists apart from me” (103.11)³⁷. It is of considerable import to note that this shows up in PGM XIII where IAO, terrified at the prospect of a god above him, says “I am stronger than this fellow”.³⁸

In PGM III.145 The magician identifies himself as “Adam the forefather” and goes on to address the god as follows:

Come to me, hearken [to me], most just one of all, steward of truth, establisher of justice; I am he whom you met and granted knowledge and holy utterance of

³³ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 172 n.2.

³⁴ The female syzygy “the Queen” (the moon) has been omitted here. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 178 n.51.

³⁵ See Serge Sauneron, *Esna V: Les Fêtes religieuses d'Esna* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1962), 268-69.

³⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXI, 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁸ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 178.

your greatest name, by which you control the whole inhabited world; perform for me the NN deed.³⁹

This is a most interesting passage on two counts. Firstly, it appears to be drawing on the Isis myth in which she poisons the sun god in order to learn his most secret name. This myth will be examined more closely in Chapter 12 as it forms a key feature of the Valentinian myth. Secondly, the inferiority of the demiurge to Adam is a feature common to the so-called Sethian group of Gnostic tractates, as in *The Apocalypse of Adam* where Adam tells his son Seth that, “we resembled the great eternal angels, for we were exalted above than the god who created us and the powers with him” (NHC V,5 64.14)⁴⁰. Christine Harrauer in her work *Meliouchos*, remarks that this passage “appears here to underlie a completely certain direction of the Gnostic anthropos myth, in which primal man stands higher than the begetter-god”.⁴¹

PGM IV.1635-1715 is a hymn to Nun/Re “the shining Helios... the great Serpent, leader of all the gods, who control the beginning of Egypt and the end of the whole inhabited world, who mate in the ocean, PSOI PHNOUTH NINTHER”⁴². The text presents the 12 hours of the Sun-god Re as passengers upon the sun-barque, associated with various divinities (via their animals):

1st hour	cat / Re	glory and grace
2nd hour	dog / Anubis	strength and honour
3rd hour	serpent / Thoth ⁴³	honour
4th hour	scarab / Khepri	strength
5th hour	donkey / Seth-Typhon	strength and courage
6th hour	lion / Sun-god at noon	success, glorious victory
7th hour	goat / soul of Osiris	sexual charm
8th hour	bull / soul of Osiris ⁴⁴	everything (to be accomplished)
9th hour	falcon / Horus	success and luck
10th hour	baboon / Thoth	
11th hour	ibis / Hermes-Thoth	
12th hour	crocodile / Sobek	

³⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰ Coptic text from *NHS*, vol.XI: *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 & VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 I & 4*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), 154.

⁴¹ Harrauer, *Meliouchos*, 45. I am indebted to Dr. Harrauer for this connection.

⁴² Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 68. The epithet is the equivalent of “the Agathodaimon, the god (of) the gods”, a variation occurring in PGM III.144-45: PSOEI O PSOEI O PNOUTE NENTERTEROU, the equivalent of *p3 šy ‘3 p3 šy ‘3 p3 ntr n3 ntr.w tr.w*, “Good Daimon, Good Daimon, O god of all the gods!”, Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 22. Nun, as “the father of all the gods” is clearly identifiable in these passages.

⁴³ This identification is rather more circuitous. See Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, 118.

⁴⁴ “The goat from Mendes, as with the Memphite Apis-bull, is an incarnation of the soul of Osiris.” Merkelbach, *Abrasax*, 119.

I list out the *skills* or *qualities* associated with these emanations, for it seems to me that they mirror the type of aeons that appear in Valentinian thought (see Appendix B). The primal ogdoad in Valentinian thought dispenses with mythological figures in its interest in developing hypostatic qualities of the godhead:

Bythius (The Deep)
Sige (Silence)

Nous (Mind)
Aletheia (Truth)

Logos (Word)
Zoe (Life)

}
{The Primal Ogdoad (group of 8)
}

Anthropos (Primal Man)
Ekklesia (Church)

Of interest here is the aeon “Sige” which appears to be a tripartite goddess whose other components are Ennoea (Idea) and Charis (Grace).⁴⁵ Charis appears as a quality of the first hour in PGM IV and while the coincidence is likely just that, it nonetheless points up the genesis of Gnostic thought as it moves from the purely mythological to a deeper concern with those natures of the godhead that are revealed diachronically in the aeons. This movement from Egyptian god to an attribute expressed in the Greek language is manifest in both systems.

Sacred Sounds

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the magical papyri is the constant recourse to sacred sounds, usually vowels that often form palindroms, cryptic divine names and the like. A late Hellenistic or early Roman treatise *De elocutione*, written by a certain ‘Demetrius’ who probably lived in the first century B.C.E. or C.E. , states the following: “in Egypt the priests, when singing hymns in praise of the gods, employ the seven vowels, which they utter in due succession; and the sound of these letters is so euphonious that men listen to it in place of flute and lyre”.⁴⁶ Plato had earlier identified the origination of reciprocity between sacred sound and structural attributes of the cosmos to Thoth:

...some god or god-inspired man discovered that vocal sound is unlimited, as tradition in Egypt claims for a certain deity called Theuth. He was the first to discover that the vowels in that unlimited variety are not one but several, and

⁴⁵These are referred to as if they are separate aeons throughout *The Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5).

⁴⁶Demetrius, *De elocutione*, in W.R. Roberts, *Demetrius on Style* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1902), 105.

again that there are others that are not voiced, but make some kind of noise, and that they, too, have a number. (*Philebus* 18 b,c.)⁴⁷

Likewise Plotinus, in describing the “real-ness” of thoughts and images as apperceived by the intellects of the ages, states:

The wise men of Egypt, I think, also understood this, either by scientific or innate knowledge, and when they wished to signify something wisely, did not use the forms of letters which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements, but by drawing images and inscribing in their temples one particular thing, they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is, that every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one, and not discourse or deliveration. (*Ennead* V.8, 6-9).⁴⁸

Apuleius, in chapter XVIII of *The Transformations of Lucius Apuleius of Madaura*, described the initiation of Lucius into the cult of Isis in Rome. An elder priest proscribes the rites from hieroglyphic scrolls, during which the initiate is led to the feet of the goddess and is given specific secret instructions that surpass the spoken word.⁴⁹ The creative power of the word in all such reliable and fabulist manifestations is to be traced back to the Memphite theology in its most potent expression and, alongside the depiction of various underworld enneads and ogdoads, the theurgic attempt to manipulate divine powers through sound forms a central feature of the religious experience expressed in the magical papyri. No spell contained herein is complete without recourse to sacred sounds and divine names.

In turning briefly to the extant Gnostic texts we note the *Pistis Sophia*, *Books of Jeu*, and *The Untitled Text* along with seven of the Nag Hammadi tractates employ sacred sounds.⁵⁰ While *The Thunder Perfect Mind* doesn't directly employ a succession of vowel sounds, the focus upon language in a theogonic context perfectly mirrors the Memphite Ptah describing his act of creation through the word:

I am the sound of the manifold voice, and the word of many aspects....
I am the hearing that is attainable to everything, I am the speech which cannot be grasped. I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name. I am the sign of the letter and the manifestation of the division. (14.12 & 20.28-35)⁵¹

Likewise, *The Gospel of Truth* describes the quintessential Egyptian concern here

⁴⁷ Trans. Dorothea Frede, Plato, *Philebus* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 11.

⁴⁸ *Plotinus V: Enneads V. 1-9*, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Loeb Classical Library, 1984), 257.

⁴⁹ Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (1950; Reprint. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), 231-42.

⁵⁰ *On the Origin of the World* (II,5), *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (III,2), *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (VI,6), *The Paraphrase of Shem* (VII,1), *Zostrianos* (VIII,1), *Marsanes*(X,1), *Trimorphic Protennoia* (XIII,1).

⁵¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XI, 236, 250, 252.

This is the knowledge of the living book which he revealed to the aeons, at the end, as [his letters], revealing how they are not vowels nor are they consonants, so that one might read them and think of vain things, rather they are the letters of the truth which they alone speak who know them. Each letter is a complete <thought> like a complete book, since they are letters written by the Unity. (NHC I,3 22.38-23.15)⁵²

which can be contrasted with a New Kingdom Egyptian religious piece which describes the functions of the sacred books in the temple:

One makes the book “End of the Work” on this day. It is a secret book, which wrecks charms, which binds the conspiracies, which halts the conspiracies, which intimidate the whole universe. It contains life, it contains death.... The books which are inside, they are the “emanations of Re” in order that this god may live thanks to those and in order to overcome his enemies.⁵³

Marsanes presents an extended discourse upon the nature and functioning of sacred sounds and a brief excerpt will serve to illustrate this:

The sounds of [the semivowels] are superior to the voiceless (consonants). And those that are double are superior to the semivowels which do not change. But the aspirates are better than the inaspirates (of) the voiceless (consonants). And those that are intermediate will [accept] their combination in which they are; they are ignorant [of] the things that are good... [Form] by [form] they, <they constitute> the nomenclature of the [gods] and the angels, [not] because they are mixed with each other according to every form, but only (because) they have a good function (NHC X 26.28-27.18)⁵⁴

A similar connection can be made between the Demotic magical papyri and the Gnostic *Books of Jeu*. A ceaseless reference to sacred formulae in both cases makes use of words and the names of personages that are quite similar at times, often involving a string of divine functionaries whose names begin with the same consonant. For example, in the Leiden Demotic magical papyrus we find the following names evoked: Bakhukhsikhukh, Babel, Baoth, Bumai, Bouel, Bolboel, Boel, Bibiou, Basaethori, Blakmo, Brak, Bampre, Brias, Balbok, etc.; in the Gnostic *Books of Jeu* we have a similar run of names: Beoio, Beozaz, Borathoz, Baochazaio,

⁵² Coptic transcription from *Evangelium Veritatis*, eds., Michel Malinine, Henri-Charles Puech, and Gilles Quispel. (Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1956), 14, 16.

⁵³ Philippe Derchain, *Le Papyrus Salt 825: rituel pour la conservation de la vie en Égypte* (Bruxelles: Palais des Académies, 1965), 57-62; 75-78; 83-85. The text dates to the New Kingdom, c. 1300. B.C.E.

⁵⁴ Coptic transcription from *Nag Hammadi Studies*, vol. XV, 296, 298.

Borezazai, Basazaz, Baothoioza, Baozaeeze, Bezazou, Berzaesa, Bozazapoz, Baozazzaz, Barcha, etc.⁵⁵

The use of magical diagrams can also be linked between the Gnostic *Books of Jeu* and the Magical papyri as the following examples illustrate:

Figure 1⁵⁶

The Gnostic *Books of Jeu* contain a total of 63 magical diagrams alongside the text, as well as innumerable magical symbols used in the text itself. It is to be noted that *figurae magicae* can be traced back to the illustrated rolls of the Egyptian temples.⁵⁸

The use of cryptic divine names, sometimes a string of Egyptian words as we have seen, or the very conception of “Ogdoad” which becomes a divinity (reference), and palindroms, form a standardised mode of theurgic address to higher powers. PGM IV.714 conveys a typical entreaty:

Hail, O Lord, O Master of the water! Hail, O Founder of the earth! Hail, O Ruler of the wind! O Bright Lightener, PROPROPHEGGE EMETHIRI ARTENTEPI THETH MIMEO YENARO PHYRCHECHO PSERI DARIO PHRE PHRELBA! Five revelation, O lord, concerning the NN matter.⁵⁹

To this can be contrasted the Gnostic Jesus as spiritual teacher standing beside the ocean with his disciples in the *Pistis Sophia*:

⁵⁵ F.Ll. Griffith and Herbert Thompson, ed., *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*, (904; reprint, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1974), *passim*; Violet McDermot, ed., *NHS vol. XIII: The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), *passim*.

⁵⁶ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 149.

⁵⁷ *NHS vol. XIII*, 50.

⁵⁸ Samson Eitrem, in *Münchener Beitr.* 19 (1934):248-49; Nicholas Horsfall, “The Origins of the Illustrated Book of the Dead,” *Aegyptus* 63 (1983): 202.

⁵⁹ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 52.

Hear me, my Father, thou father of all fatherhoods, thou infinite Light: aeiouo, iao, aoi, oia, psinother, thernops, nopsiter, zagoure, pagoure, nethmomaoth, nepsiomaoth, marachachtha, thobarrabau, tharnachachan, chopochothora, ieou, sabaath (Book IV 353.8-12)⁶⁰

The appeal, the formula, magical word plays, and figure of Sabaoth link the *Pistis Sophia* to the same religious milieu. We are given insight into the workings of the magical-oriented mind in its appropriation of Egyptian and Greek concepts and gods as with, for example, the cryptic divinity “Psinother” called upon after IAO by the Gnostic Jesus. Psinother also appears in PGM IV.828 at the very end of the spell cited above, along with Nopsither and Thernopsi, also mentioned in the *Pistis Sophia*. PGM IV, as noted above, details the correspondence of various Egyptian divinities with the twelve hours expressed in the form of animals; so, too, the *Pistis Sophia* lists the twelve dungeons each with a ruler whose face changes every hour from one animal to another (IV.317.16-319.10).⁶¹ Equally interesting is the appropriation of the Greek *psi*, “greatest”, hence Psinother as “greatest god” which is also Egyptian for “the sons of god”.⁶² As well, the psi-sound to the Egyptian ear registered as “nine” (Coptic ΠCI), a number expressing the quintessence of plurality to Egyptian sensibilities.⁶³ As with the appropriation of the Greek *horus* (boundary) to the Egyptian Horus, the bilingual mentality behind this cultural fusion attempted to create an entirely new middle ground: the aeon Horus in Valentinian thought was not an opaque dynamic of god, neither was he the full-blown figure of Egyptian myth. So too, this bilingual religiosity naturally fused the Greek *psi* as greatness with the Coptic ΠCI bespeaking “nine-ness”, attaining a synthesis of Ψ and the Egyptian *p3š3*. The hidden linguistic attributes of such names as BAINCHOOCH, Psinother, or Teilouteilou⁶⁴, confirm this referring-back to Egyptian religious sensibilities in magical thought.

Gnosis

The means of receiving special knowledge of the divine in the Magical texts has a number of important connections with Gnostic thought. The ascent to the pleroma and return of the spiritual master to teach is found in PGM IV.482, the so-called “Mithras Liturgy”. The author writes of the mysteries

⁶⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.IX, 706.

⁶¹ See also DuQuesne, *A Coptic Initiatory Invocation*, 21

⁶² Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 54.

⁶³ See Harrauer, *Meliouchos*, 81 n.88. The *Pistis Sophia* (I.126.6-10) lists out a number of sacred sounds that are to be taken as “interpretations of the names of these mysteries”. The third one listed is Ψ.

⁶⁴ See Jan Quaegebeur, “A propos de Teilouteilou, nom magique, et de Têroutêrou, nom de femme,” *Ench 4* (1974): 19-29.

which the great god Helios Mithras ordered to be revealed to me by his archangel, so that I alone may ascend into heaven as an inquirer and behold the universe.⁶⁵

In the Gnostic *Zostrianos*, an angel of “eternal light” addresses Zostrianos

Come and pass through, within each (the great eternal aeons above). You will return to them another [time] in order to preach to a living [race..] and to preserve those who are worthy, and to give strength to the elect, for the struggle of the aeon is great but time in this world is short” (NHC VIII,1.4.13-20)⁶⁶

Likewise, the Gnostic *Paraphrase of Shem* depicts the ascent of a solitary adept, aided by a divine figure in attaining *gnosis*. The tractate begins with the following description:

That which Derdekea revealed to me, Shem, according to the will of the Majesty. My thought which was in my body took me away from my race It lead me on high to the foundation of the world close to the Light which shone upon the entire earthly realm in that place. I saw no earthly resemblance, but there was light. And my thought separated from the body of darkness as though in sleep. (NHC VII.1.3-16)⁶⁷

An emphasis upon a pure life and abstinence for the Gnostic adept in these two examples is also to be seen in PGM IV.732 which directs the aspirant to remain pure for seven days “and abstain from meat and the bath”. The Gnostic treatise *The Testimony of Truth* is an interesting text on a number of counts. The provenance of the text has been strongly located in Alexandria in the 2nd century⁶⁸, and the text is anti-orthodox, indeed antinomian in general, while at the same time also indicting a number of other Gnostic sects. One passage in particular very clearly lays out an ascetic course for the aspirant of *gnosis*:

And he pondered the Power which flowed upon the entire place, and which possessed him. And he is a disciple of his *Nous* which is male. He began to keep silent within himself until the day when he should become worthy to be received above. He rejects for himself superfluity of words and wordsome quarrels and abides the entire place. And he bears up under them, and endures all of the evil things. And he is patient with everyone making himself equal to

⁶⁵ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 48.

⁶⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXXI: *Nag Hammadi Codices VIII*, ed. John H. Sieber (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 36, 38.

⁶⁷ Coptic transcription from *FENHC*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 7. This feature also appears in *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1, III,1, IV,1 & BG 8502,2), *Asclepius* (NHC VI,8), *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI,6), *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3), and the *Pistis Sophia* (Askew Codex).

⁶⁸ Pearson, *NHS*, vol. XV, 120.

all, also separating himself from them. And that which anyone desires he brings to him so that he might become complete and holy. (NHC IX,3 43.29-44.19)⁶⁹

The testimony of Chaeremon, a first-century Egyptian priest, is an important one to consider alongside Gnostic and magical aspirations. The strong presence of Egyptian mythological elements in the magical papyri, in particular the identification of gods and sacred animals, the setting of standards for initiates, and interpretations of dreams or visions, are all activities which can hardly be considered far-removed from Chaeremon's priestly milieu.⁷⁰ A case for a fair degree of overlap can certainly be made and, even acknowledging Chaeremon's undoubted desire to idealise the Egyptian priesthood, we cannot but doubt that main gist of his testimony concerning priestly ascetic practices reflect the actual "pure" life of the priesthood of the time.⁷¹ At the end of a long and very detailed description of the ascetic observances of Egyptian priests as described by Chaeremon, Porphyry makes the following interesting comment: "But the rest – the crowd of priests, shrine (?) bearers, temple wardens, and assistants – practice the same rites of purification for the gods, yet not with such great accuracy and self-control".⁷² This is precisely the sub-class of the Egyptian priestly hierarchy where we would expect a number of bilingual Egyptians with some sort of Greek background to stand as "revisionists"; indeed, it is clear that Chaeremon wants it understood that this class is less pure than the inner priestly circle.⁷³

PGM III.583-610⁷⁴ contains a rather eloquent entreaty to god for *gnosis* and is to be found in the Hermetic *Asclepius* in its entirety, also surfacing in the Nag Hammadi corpus as "The Prayer of Thanksgiving" (NHC VI,7) alongside the other two Hermetic tractates *Asclepius* (NHC VI,8) and *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI,6).⁷⁵

The rather odd notion of eating *gnosis* is to be found in both PGM XIII.910 where the seven vowels are licked off a gold lamella, and in Gnostic practice where,

⁶⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV., 152, 154.

⁷⁰ A fine example of Egyptian priestly piety is to be found upon the walls of the tomb of Petosiris, a sage of Hermopolis who lived around 350-330 B.C.E. The inscriptions testify that, "Every night the spirit of god was in my soul, and at dawn I did as he willed. I practiced justice [Ma'at], I detested evil." Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (London: Evergreen, 1960), 13. Porphyrius (233-304 C.E.), writing on the Egyptian priests in *On Abstinence*, described how "they practice simplicity in living and in dress, temperance, austerity, justice, and non-attachment..." (IV, 6-8).

⁷¹ "Nothing impunes the essential authenticity of what survives." Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 54.

⁷² *Chaeremon*, Fragment 10, 17.

⁷³ With respect to the authors of the magical papyri, A.A. Barb makes exactly this point about revisionary priestly activities in a bilingual context: "The demotic texts can hardly have been written by anybody but an Egyptian priest or scribe, the Coptic ones were probably a lucrative sideline of unscrupulous monks." "Mystery, Myth, and Magic," 160.

⁷⁴ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 33-34.

⁷⁵ See Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 83.

according to Hippolytus where some Gnostics “drank” their gnosis.⁷⁶ There are numerous Egyptian antecedents, as in the rubric from this Coffin Text:

This spell should be spoken over the seven sacred eyes in writing: to be washed in beer and natron and to be drunk by the man.(CT II Spell 341)⁷⁷

An example, concurrent with the appearance of the magical papyri and Gnosis in Egypt is to be found in *The First Tale of Khamuas*. In this Graeco-Roman demotic literary epic, the Egyptian prince Neneferkaptah obtains a magical book of great power. His younger brother at one point describes the actions of Neneferkaptah:

He caused to be brought unto him a piece of new papyrus; he wrote (thereon) every word that was before him on the roll, all. Having caused it to be soaked with beer, he dissolved it in water, he made certain that it was dissolved, he drank it, he knew according to that which in which it was.⁷⁸

Divine Personages

The figure of IAO, Sabaoth, Adonai, and Abrasax in the magical papyri form an obvious link with Gnostic cosmologies. PGM III.146 offers a typical sampling of invoked demiurgic deities:

I conjure you by the god IAO, by the god Abaoth,⁷⁹ by the god Michael, by the god Souriel, by the god Gabriel, by the god Raphael, by the god Abrasax Ablathanalba Akrammachari, by the lord god Iaoil, by the lord god Chabra(ch)⁸⁰

The first three of these gods are Gnostic planet aeons, the following four are Jewish archangels.⁸¹ It is clear from other lists in the magical papyri (PGM X.45 for example) that the group of seven is probably being emphasised here in the usual planetary/vowel sound arrangement, with Abrasax standing apart. It is clear that the prestige that Jewish magical practises had translated into an array of Jewish divine personages, as in the above, or in the Jewishising of specific deities through the

⁷⁶ Elenchos V 23,3 (p.125, 24 W). The testimony of Epiphanius about certain libertine Gnostic sexual practices might also qualify for inclusion here.

⁷⁷ Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 276.

⁷⁸ Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, 25-26.

⁷⁹ Harrauer translates the lacuna here as [Saba]oth, *Meliouchos*, 45.

⁸⁰ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 22.

⁸¹ Harrauer, *Meliouchos*, 46.

alteration of name-endings.⁸² The Jewish element, as such, derives from Hellenistic syncretistic Judaism – specifically Alexandrian in all likelihood⁸³ – and not from Jewish religion at the time of the Old Testament.⁸⁴ The phenomenon of an anti-Jahweh cosmology filled with Jewish-sounding divine personages, but not exclusively so, is shared in part by both the Magical papyri and Gnostic thought, in particular so-called Sethian Gnosticism.

The figure of Abrasax, ubiquitous in the magical papyri, and the cosmic egg (PGM III.145 for example) are both to be found in the thought of the Gnostic Basileides of Alexandria (see Appendix B). The reports of Irenaeus (*adv. haer.* I 19,1 & 4), Hippolytus (*Refut.* 7 26,6), Epiphanius (*Panar.* 24.76), and Pseudo-Tertullian (*adv. omn. haer.* I.4), while not at all agreeing on the nature of Basileides' thought, agree that Abrasax was not a creation of Basileides, but was picked up for numerological reasons among others.

The Greek section of Papyrus Carlsberg 52 mentions the three “chastising archons of the Abyss, Chla, Achla, and Achlamou”.⁸⁵ which recalls the punishing archons of Chaos in the *Pistis Sophia*: “Now it happened that when the emanations of the Authades realised that the Pistis Sophia was not raised up from the Chaos, they immediately turned again and tormented her greatly” (I.47 85.14-17)⁸⁶. The Coptic part of Papyrus Carlsberg depicts a lion-faced divinity, Petbe, god of retribution and revenge living in Nun (Pshai, the Late-Period god of Fate, is also presented as living in Nun in a demotic magical papyrus⁸⁷). The name of the chaos-god Authades in the *Pistis Sophia* (“self-willed”) describes a principle of arrogant wilfulness. This power is described as lion-faced, “whose one half was fire and whose other half was darkness, namely Yaldabaoth” (I.32 46.14-17)⁸⁸. Arioth, a god of the depths in Papyrus Carlsberg 52⁸⁹, also shows up in *The Pistis Sophia* (IV.140.362) as the female archon Ariuth. Finally, it might be mentioned that the *Pistis Sophia* describes *The Outer Darkness* as a great dragon encircling the earth with its tail in its mouth, and the common motif of the Uroboros is found pictorially presented in PGM VII.590.

⁸² Brashear, *Magica Varia*, 22 n.5: “Greek and Coptic magicians gave their texts a semitic flair by strewing them with almost any root, word or name and adding the endings *-el*, *-ath* or *-oth*.”

⁸³ Harrauer identifies the passage in PGM III.43ff as “definitely... from Alexandria”. The syncretistic elements allow for this conclusion, especially the Babylonian underworld goddess that Harrauer identifies. *Meliouchos*, 54.

⁸⁴ Betz, “Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Magika Hiera*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 249.

⁸⁵ Brashear, *Magica Varia*, 40.

⁸⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX: *Pistis Sophia*, ed. Carl Schmidt (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 170.

⁸⁷ PDM xiv.30; Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 197. See also H.J. Thissen, “Ägyptische Beiträge zu den griechischen magischen Papyri”, 300.

⁸⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 92

⁸⁹ Brashear, *Magica Varia*, 40.

Incubation

The phenomenon of direct access to the numinous through dreams shows up throughout the magical papyri (e.g. PGM I.1 & 37; IV.3205; VII.232, 407 & 727-39; XII.121-43) and is counted upon as one of the potent skills of the magician. This function is also a critical feature of Egyptian priestly life as it is well-attested in the Late Period. The Gnostics Carpocrates, and Simon, were attacked by Irenaeus and Hippolytus for their perceived practice of the magical arts, including gnosis through dreams.⁹⁰ Carpocrates, an Egyptian Gnostic active in Alexandria with his son Epiphanes around 130 C.E., is denounced because he would “practice magic, and use images and incantations; philters, also, and love potions; and [having] recourse to familiar spirits, dream-sending demons... declaring that [he possesses] power to rule over, even now, the princes and formers of this world”, as is Basileides along the same lines.⁹¹ In short, two of the most influential Gnostic teachers that we know of in Alexandria, are accused of practising all of the normal practices of the Egyptian dualist magician. Given the textual affinities that we have thus-far examined, in conjunction with the sympathetic mood shared by Gnostic and magician, the main thrust of the testimony of Irenaeus must be given credence

This survey does not pretend to be exhaustive but is sufficient to the task at hand in establishing a firm Gnostic resonance in the magical papyri and vice versa. In particular, we have noted those junctures where magic is subsumed by *gnosis*. This *gnosis* “includes almost everything of interest to the magician, from foreknowledge of the divine plans for the future to the range of things we would regard as scientific”.⁹² One particular magical spell (also cited by Betz in this regard) stands out here:

I am Thought, discoverer and founder of drugs and letters. Come to me, you under the earth; arouse [yourself] for me, great daimon, he of Noun [Nun], the subterranean... I will not let god or goddess give oracles until I, NN, know through and through what is in the minds of all men, Egyptians, Syrians, Greeks, Ethiopians, of every race and people, those who question me and come into my sight, whether they speak or are silent, so that I can tell them whatever has happened and is happening and is going to happen to them, and I know their skills and their lives and their practices and their works and their names and those of their dead, and of everybody, and I can read a sealed letter and tell them everything (in it) truly.⁹³

The reference to knowledge of past, present, and future, in a *gnosis*-context is highly reminiscent of the famous Valentinian formula:

⁹⁰ Irenaeus I.XXIII & I.XXV; Hippolytus Haer.6.26

⁹¹ *Ad.Haer.* I.XXIV.5 and I.XXV.3, trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1913), 350; also Clement, *Strom.* III.2=§5.2-9.3 & §10.1

⁹² Hans Dieter Betz, “The Formulation of Authoritative Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World*, vol. 3, *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. Ben F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 164-65.

⁹³ PGM V. 247-303; Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 106.

What liberates is the knowledge of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereinto we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.⁹⁴

While the overlaps with Gnostic thought are numerous,⁹⁵ it is fair to conclude that they are not so numerous as to suggest Gnostic antecedence.⁹⁶ This cannot be proven on textual grounds, and so we must advance a sociological hypothesis for the interpenetration of Gnostic and magical thought.

I would begin by echoing Fowden's observation that we are dealing with an intellectual elite in Gnostic, Hermetic, and magical thought.⁹⁷ Greek magical thought perhaps began to influence its Egyptian counterpart – a venerable aspect of traditional priestly functions – as early as the 6th century B.C.E.⁹⁸ Later on, there was also the increasing influence of Greek philosophy⁹⁹; as well, we must mention the development of alchemy, which also saw close collaboration between Egyptian and Greek thought.¹⁰⁰ Above all, it seems to me, it is the phenomenon of bilingualism that supererogates the modern scholarly fixation with the syncretistic. Syncretism, per se, need not be seen as a capricious endeavour undertaken by a particular social group generally assumed to be culturally confused; it is more often a natural result of a deeply established bilingual social life. A person who grows up with two active day to day languages often does not have the *option* to participate in either of the respective cultures involved at the complete expense of the other – he or she is compelled to synthesise the two. On the basic level of the *simpliciores* this involves finding a norm for customs and religious observances; on the level of the elite we are dealing with here, it necessitates exploring each vast mythological/theological architectonic for juncture-points that can form the foundations for a new worldview. The strengths and weakness of this synthesis can only be partially appreciated from this remove. One of the main problems in basing one's understanding upon such and such a particular

⁹⁴ *Exc.Theod.* 78.2, translation Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 45.

⁹⁵ *Pace* Brashear who claims that, "On the whole, Gnostic elements in the magical papyri are relatively few and far between," (*Magica Varia*, 23) which of course begs the question as to what "Gnostic" means in his statement. On a very general level the magical papyri are strongly Gnostic in their depiction of underworld powers, and their quest for a knowledge that will guide them past these inimical obstacles – this quite apart from specifics: how Gnostic is Gnostic in this sense?

⁹⁶ A point made by Brashear in conjunction with the above overstatement of his case. The two trajectories of Gnostic and magical thought are not mutually exclusive, and Brashear pushes the distinction too far. *Magica Varia*, 23.

⁹⁷ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 191.

⁹⁸ Betz, "Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri", 249.

⁹⁹ Betz, "The Formulation of Authoritative Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri", 163.

¹⁰⁰ François Daumas, "L'alchimie a-t-elle une origine égyptienne?," in *Das Römisch-Byzantinische Ägypten* (Mainz am Rhein: Phillip von Zabern, 1983), 116: "the milieu in which alchemy was born was Graeco-Egyptian and... the literature and national sciences were easily accessible to writers who were part of it."

group in the Hellenistic era, is that the definitions are always somewhat synthetic, as well they might given the volatile shifting of social and mythological boundaries during these times. The texts, or embedded texts as they often appear, are always “contaminated” by influences that obfuscate the modern penchant for clear-cut trajectories *a posteriori*. “Syncretism” more often signals modern scholarly frustration with this phenomenon than it effectively elucidates.

The most critical subset of bilingualism as the true dynamic underlying so-called syncretism, is *redaction*. The intellectual elite wrestling with multicultural religious/philosophical issues in this period – themselves a smaller group within an already small percentage of people who were at all literate in Egypt – were opening new mythological frontiers which incorporated traditional thought patterns as a matter of course. The new-found focus upon the Hellenistic individual vouchsafed his or her right to mythopoeic synthesis. By the same token, an earlier text by such a “syncretist” could be taken up by a later redactor and reworked with no pangs of conscience, witness the transformation of *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III,3), a “pagan” Gnostic text, into *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4) through sheer addition to the core text: the fact that both texts were preserved alongside one another in the Jebel al Tarif surely indicates that the redaction process itself was being appreciated by the ancient antiquarians who buried the texts to protect them.

It is therefore of the essence to place a significant segment of the Gnostics in Egypt in close association with the phenomenon of Graeco-Egyptian intermarriage and bilingualism as we have seen in Chapter 4. The writers of the magical papyri in part came from the same milieu. And so it is that the appearance of Coptic in the magical texts is a signal development on the linguistic side of this fusion and the whole question of the development of Coptic in association with this intellectual elite must now be raised.

Chapter Six: *The Development of Coptic*

One of the main textbooks currently being used to introduce students to Coptic, and certainly the most recent publication of its type, is T.O. Lambdin's *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic*¹ which, while otherwise an excellent piece of work, presents a rather equivocal view of the actual social origins of the language that it sets out to teach. Earlier on in his career Lambdin, following the work of W.F. Edgerton,² focused upon problems in the vocalisation of Egyptian and applied the term "Proto-Coptic" to designate the period of development between Edgerton's "Paleo-Coptic" phase and the actual rise of Coptic as a written script. Lambdin avoided the problem of dealing with actual historical time-periods in the development of this synthetic linguistic model.³ However, in his *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic*, written twenty-five years later, Lambdin states that the Coptic script was employed by the early Christian proselytisers in Alexandria in the second century C.E. as a way of presenting the Bible to the Egyptian masses. Exactly what is meant by "employed" here is ambiguous: does it indicate that the use of the Greek alphabet for the Egyptian language was initiated by Christian proselytisers? or did they capitalise upon the fact that Coptic was already an established script?⁴

¹Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

²William F. Edgerton, "Stress, Vowel Quality, and Syllable Division in Egyptian," *JNES* 6 (1947): 1-17.

³Thomas O. Lambdin, "The Bivalence of Coptic *ETA* and Related Problems in the Vocalization of Egyptian," *JNES* 17 (1958): 181, n.23I: "I use the word 'subsequent' in a relative sense only, since I object to Edgerton's assigning Paleo-Coptic forms to any specific period of the history of the Egyptian language. As I have stated, the Paleo-Coptic forms represent a synthetic relationship between the Coptic and Egyptian writings of a word, and we are not in a position to determine their reality as speech forms in a given period, much less to demonstrate the simultaneity of changes required if this were true."

⁴"The hieroglyphic script... together with its cursive derivatives, hieratic and demotic, remained the sole medium for writing the Egyptian language until the end of the second century A.D. At that time, the missionaries of the Church, then centred in Alexandria, undertook the translation of the Bible from Greek into Egyptian in order to facilitate their task of Christianizing the country. They abandoned the three-thousand-year-old hieroglyphic writing system, probably as much because of its complexity and imperfections as for its "heathen" associations, and chose instead to employ a modified form of the Greek alphabet." Lambdin, *Introduction to Sahidic Coptic*, vii; emphasis added. Lambdin is evidently contending that Coptic arose entirely as a Christian phenomenon, assigning this development to a time-period which provides no textual proof for a widespread Christian presence in Egypt. Lambdin is perhaps to be forgiven for putting forward the traditional story (and for studiously avoiding the inclusion of even one "heretical" text in the Coptic passages in his exercises) as his overall aims are linguistic; not so, Alan K. Bowman in *Egypt After the Pharaohs* (Warwickshire, England: University of California Press, 1986), 157-58, who advances this same view.

The available evidence examined in Chapter 5 surely affirms the latter. In the first instance, we have Coptic magical texts which date back to at least the first century of our era.⁵ As well, we have a sizeable selection of Greek and Demotic magical texts from the first three centuries C.E. which makes frequent use of Coptic words and glosses.⁶ While it is likely that there were some Greek-speaking Christian communities in Egypt in the later first, and second centuries, we do not have evidence for any considerable Christian presence until the middle of the third century C.E., the great conversion of the Egyptian masses not occurring until well into the fourth.⁷ Following the conclusions of such scholars as A. Harnack, C. Schmidt, J. Maspero, H.I. Bell, and G. Bardy, P.E. Kahle concludes that “there is practically no evidence at all for Christianity in Egypt before the time of Demetrius (patriarch A.D. 188/9-231), and Clement of Alexandria (died A.D. 217)”.⁸ Given this, we may therefore draw the obvious conclusion that Coptic, not just the stage of the language but the employment of the script, existed before its wide-spread use by Christian proselytisers in Egypt.⁹ I wish, then, to develop a practical hypothesis for the existence of Coptic as a “pagan” phenomenon before its further development in Christianised Egypt, to assign to it a provisional time period and location, and to draw out some implications for the study of Egyptian Gnostic texts in particular; as heirs to a long tradition of independent Egyptian religious thought, they might be expected to have been composed by literate

⁵ See Paul E. Kahle, *Bala'izah: Coptic Texts from Deir el-Bala'izah in Upper Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 252, which dates these texts “towards the end of the first century A.D.”; also Werner Vycichl, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Copte* (Leuven: Édition Peeters, 1983) which dates some texts between 95-130 C.E., others around 100 C.E.; Tito Orlandi in “Coptic Literature,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 52, dates these texts from the first to the fourth or fifth century C.E.; Helmut Satzinger, “On the Origin of the Sahidic Dialect,” in *Acts of the 2nd International Congress of Coptic Studies*, eds. Tito Orlandi and Frederick Wisse (Rome: C.I.M., 1985), 311: “It is generally accepted that S [Sahidic] did not owe its role of an enchoric koine in Upper Egypt to Christianity, but rather had assumed that function at a considerably earlier time”; C.W. Goodwin, “On an Egyptian text in Greek characters,” *ZÄS* 6 (1868): 18-24, details an Egyptian horoscope written in the Greek alphabet with the addition of six letters taken from the Demotic. Based upon planetary positions given the text can be dated with some certainty to 154 C.E.

⁶ See Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*. A number of these texts are identified as having originated from Old Coptic versions. Also F. Ll. Griffith “The Old Coptic Horoscope of the Stobart Collection,” *ZÄS*, v.38, 1900, 71-93, and “The Date of the Old Coptic Texts and their Relation to Christian Coptic,” *ZÄS* 39, 1901, 78-82.

⁷ Kahle, *Bala'izah*, 257; see in particular H.I. Bell, “Evidence for Christianity in Egypt during the Roman period,” *HTR* XXXVII (1944): 185ff., and Gustave Bardy *Les premiers temps du christianisme de langue copte en Égypte* in *Mémorial Lagrange* (Paris, 1940), 210: “If it can be determined that at the beginning of the fourth century the Coptic element was represented in the churches of Egypt, it seems likely that it remained as a feeble minority, and, that, in the main, Christianity in Egypt existed closely attached to Hellenism.”

⁸ Kahle, *Bala'izah*, 257-58.

⁹ It should be remembered that until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., Greek was used for official purposes and was in fact the principle language of the Church of Egypt. See Kahle, *Bala'izah*, 264.

Egyptians in the language of Egypt and not exclusively in Greek. The linguistic relationship between Coptic and Demotic, the native Egyptian script which was in declining use during the first three centuries of our era, is an extremely difficult area and will not be explored here in any great depth; rather a number of fundamental linguistic conclusions advanced by Demotists and Coptologists will be used to support a viable socio-historical model within which these scripts might be contextualised.¹⁰

In terms of accessible textual evidence, our initial consideration must be the aforementioned Coptic magical papyri. Kahle concludes that, “the so-called Old Coptic texts being written with Greek letters evidently met an urgent desire, particularly in the case of spells, to lay down exactly the pronunciation of words or to clarify obscure passages in Demotic”.¹¹ The system of transcription itself in this regard is, according to Kahle, sufficiently developed to rule out isolated attempts made upon a purely individual basis.¹² I would note, however, that this need to exactly vocalise words only makes sense in a Graeco-Egyptian milieu, for vowelless scripts obviously cause no confusion amongst native speakers. We are faced with the socio-historical model of Greek sensibilities requiring a window into the language, and of Egyptian sensibilities desirous of providing it.

There is evidence which demonstrates rudimentary attempts at transcribing Egyptian into the Greek alphabet in the form of graffiti found at Adydos, which dates to the second century B.C.E.

Figure 3¹³

¹⁰ I am, in the main, following the original conclusions of Kurt Sethe, “Das Verhältnis zwischen Demotisch und Koptisch und seine Lehren für die Geschichte der ägyptische Sprache,” *ZDMG* 79 (1925): 290-316. See also Satzinger “On the Origin of the Sahidic Dialect”.

¹¹ Kahle, *Bala'izah*, 252-53. This dynamic can be seen in action in the Demotic magical papyri. Janet H. Johnson in her introduction to *The Greek Magical Papyri* makes the analogous point in noting that the occurrences of the older Egyptian hieratic script are far more common than Greek passages in these texts, “and glosses into Old Coptic most frequently for the writing of magical names and presumably to indicate proper pronunciation (which would have been very difficult to do given the abbreviated nature and great age of the traditional Egyptian scripts),” In Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, lvi.

¹² Kahle, *Bala'izah*, 253. Kahle notes that this estimate is based upon unpublished material.

¹³ Paul Perdrizet and Gustave Lefebvre, *Les Graffites Grecs du Memnonion d'Abydos*, *Inscriptiones Graecae Aegypti*, vol. III no.74 (1919; reprint, Chicago: Arles Publishers Inc., 1978), 13.

Λ Ε ΠΟΡΩ ΥΡΓΟΝΑΦΟΡ
ΜΗΙ ΕΣΙ ΝΟΜ ΟΥΣΙΡΕ ΜΗΙ ΕΜΟΥΝΑΑ ΣΟΝΤΗΡ ΠΝΟΤΩ

This example, dated by Perdrizet/Lefebvre *ca.* 200-100 B.C.E., commences with a false start: line one misses the G and therefore starts a fresh line in a firmer hand. A Greek date Λε “in year 5” is added and we have “year 5 of pharaoh” with the name “Urgonaphor” appearing at the end of that line. Based upon I would date the text to the year 202 B.C.E., the fifth year of pharaoh Harmakhis, also known as Haronnophris and Hurgonaphor,¹⁴ who led a successful revolt in the Thebaid. Pierre Lacau, the first Egyptologist to see this graffito, rendered lines 3 and 4 in Coptic, “I saw Isis with Osiris, I saw Amun-Re, King of the Gods, the Great God”, and with this we must basically agree. “NOM” is an inverted MN, the “L” in Amon-Ra is a common feature from the New Kingdom onwards, SONTHER a Greek rendering of “King of the Gods” from *nisw ntrw*, and the ω at the end is a suffix meaning “great”. However, the verbal-form is still troubling. It is obviously a qualitative and would seem to be from the verb Μεε, “to love”. This does not work rhetorically in an Egyptian context as it was not the normal expression used to describe a connection between the king and the gods: “beloved of” is the obvious choice which would entail another verb. Lacau has obviously opted to take the M as an N for just this reason, and thus we have the qualitative of the verb NAY, to see.

This confirmation of Greek-Egyptian linguistic interaction suggests that a true Greek-Egyptian cultural/economic interaction *in Egypt* generated the need for the Egyptian language to be transcribed into the Greek alphabet for a variety of reasons, possibly even as early as 750-656 B.C.E. during the reign of Psammetichus I.¹⁵

I propose then to develop a social model based upon Greek-Egyptian interaction from 650 B.C.E. to 384 C.E., that is, the era of the early Greek settlements in Egypt, extending through Ptolemaic and Roman times until Demotic was eventually replaced by Coptic as *the* written Egyptian script.¹⁶ This phase I shall call

¹⁴ Bowman, *Egypt After the Pharaohs*, 30.

¹⁵ The Egyptian king Psammetichus I employed Greek mercenaries in his army and allowed for the settlement of the first Greek communities in Egypt by rewarding these soldiers with two pieces of land for their services. According to Diodorus, Psammetichus encouraged trade with Greece, and “was so great an admirer of the Hellenes that he gave his sons a Greek education,” *Diodorus Siculus I*, I.67.9. Herodotus records that the Greeks were well-treated and respected by the king, who also founded a school of interpreters. See Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas*, Chapter 4. It is, I believe, reasonable to assume that apart from translating Greek into Egyptian, this school might have attempted at least the transliteration of spoken Egyptian into the Greek alphabet. The earliest written evidence for actual linguistic influence may exist in the form of a Kushite inscription found at Abydos. See Jill Kamil’s work, *Coptic Egypt: History and Guide* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1987), 22, in which she reports that “the earliest attempt to write the Egyptian language alphabetically in Greek, feeble but important, has survived in an inscription dating to the Kushite dynasty... at Abydos.” No note or further description is given for this inscription and I am yet unable to track it down.

¹⁶ The date 650 B.C.E. puts us well into the reign of the aforementioned Psammetichus I (664-10) who restored free rule to Egypt from the Assyrians, and it is in this period that we first hear of numbers of Greeks in Egypt. This, in conjunction with the possibly useful Kushite inscription, marks the beginning of the *social* possibilities for early Coptic. Boardman, *The*

“Early Coptic”, and as a working hypothesis we should look to Ptolemaic times, especially the later period of Ptolemaic rule when a significant number of Greeks were becoming Egyptianised to a quite remarkable degree, for the sort of deep Graeco-Egyptian cultural fusion which would have generated the impetus to create a systematic script for spoken Egyptian employing the Greek alphabet.

The Early Coptic period, as I am defining it, is contemporaneous with the rise and fall of Demotic which for 1000 years was the written language of Egypt (*ca.* 650 B.C.E. - 450 C.E.).¹⁷ During the main development of Coptic, Demotic was the script in use among Egyptians. This cursive script, descended from Hieratic, continued on in use until the final phases of Early Coptic (100 B.C.E. - 384 C.E.) and so we have the interesting phenomenon of two radically different scripts for the same language existing side by side during late Ptolemaic and Roman times.¹⁸

A study of Demotic material from the Ptolemaic Period, much of it as yet unpublished, shows that the Egyptian language attained vigorous expression in this written form, both in the quantity of the texts which have come down to us, and in the broad array of its textual applications.¹⁹ What interests us is the overlap of Greek and Demotic in a bilingualised Ptolemaic social stratum, and I would cite but one example from many.²⁰

Greeks Overseas, 129f. The date of 384 C.E. marks the closing down of the temples of Egypt by the decree of Theodosius, which signalled the end of Egyptian “paganism.”

¹⁷ See Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule*, 82: “Demotic... began to fade in the second century, though vestiges are at hand for some two hundred years after that.” See also W.E.H. Cockle’s article, “State Archives in Graeco-Roman Egypt from 30 BC to the Reign of Septimius Severus,” *JEA* 70 (1984): 106-122, in which archival records in Greek and Demotic are examined. Also, Janet H. Johnson, *The Demotic Verbal System* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1, dates the rise of Demotic to the reign of Psammetichus I (*ca.* 664-610). Since the last extant cohesive Demotic text is dated to the third century I am using this as well to define the end of the Early Coptic period, in conjunction with Theodosius’ decree, for it is at this point that Coptic begins overtake Demotic as the written language of the vulgate.

¹⁸ There were, of course, even more variants in limited use during this period, specifically Ptolemaic, a vibrant renaissance in temple hieroglyphic, and some forms of hieratic as noted by Clement: “Those instructed among the Egyptians learn first of all the genre of Egyptian letters which is called ‘epistolographic’; secondly, the ‘hieratic’ genre which is used by the sacred scribes; finally and in the last place, the ‘hieroglyphic’ genre, which partly expresses things literally by means of primary letters and which is partly symbolical. In the symbolical method, one kind speaks ‘literally’ by imitation, a second kind writes as it were metaphorically, and a third one is outright allegorical by means of certain enigmas.” *Stromata* V 4, 20.3; fragment 20D, from Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Chaeremon: Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984), 35. Diodorus Siculus writing in the first century B.C.E., mentions the fact that Egyptian priests were, at this time, still teaching their sons the hieroglyphic or hieratic script (referred to as “sacred”, along with Demotic); *Diodorus Siculus* I, 81.1-6.

¹⁹ Besides a large array of prosaic (largely legal and economic) texts, we have the genre of Egyptian wisdom literature in its final phase, written in Demotic. See Miriam Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature in the International Context* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1983).

²⁰ I am drawing primarily from Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt*, 124-39.

Dionysios, son of Kephalas, lived in the last decades of the second century B.C.E. The Egyptian element in his family had been prominent from much earlier and he had been given the benefit of a bilingual upbringing. As a result he wrote Greek and Demotic as well as any scribe of the time, and his family took great pride in keeping their Greek names, although they used their Egyptian names and spoke the Egyptian language *inter familia*. Dionysios served in the military of the Ptolemaic state (as did his father, hence his possessing that privilege), yet also held a priestly office in the cult of the local ibis-god. This example illustrates a quite remarkable degree of Graeco-Egyptian cultural interpenetration, one endemic to the latter half of the Ptolemaic era. From this point on, with some certainty, we can look to bilingualised strata made up of literate Graeco-Egyptians and bilingual Egyptians, primarily in Alexandria and Memphis, for the wherewithal and essentially religious motives to develop a systematic Coptic script.²¹

The fact that Dionysios held an Egyptian priestly office is significant. Unlike the Egyptians, at least in Ptolemaic times, the Greeks had never developed a priestly class. We recall Kahle's hypothesis that the formulation of Coptic arose out of an "urgent need" to clarify passages in Coptic, especially to effect an accurate transliteration of sacred sounds – a quintessentially Egyptian religious concern now manifested in a bilingual environment. Dionysios' case, and other similar ones that we possess, is significant not just in demonstrating the complete level of bilingualisation attained by Egyptians of Greek descent in this time period: most significantly, it vividly confirms what we know from other sources – that a significant number of Greek descendants were 'Egyptianised' through their Egyptian wives and through a genuine and active participation in Egyptian religion.

Following Kahle I would postulate that Coptic arose to some extent out of the esoteric needs of a relatively small Graeco-Egyptian social class which was more concerned with religious than mundane matters, a class perhaps more scholarly and esoteric in their interests than that represented by Dionysios, and one which is to be associated with Lower Egypt, particularly in Alexandria and Memphis.²² Alongside this development there is the more widespread need in the civil service of the times to translate Egyptian into Greek characters for administrative purposes. It is clear that at its inception Coptic would have been developed by bilingual Egyptians who wrote in both Greek and Demotic scripts and whose minds were open to Greek culture.²³ We

²¹ Pace Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*. Fraser concludes that among the Egyptians in Alexandria there was "a lack of religious activity" (189) in this period because the site was not associated with a particular god. There is, however, some evidence that a fort was established on the site by Ramses III around 1500 B.C.E., and there may have been a shrine to Isis upon Rakotis hill before the arrival of Alexander; in any event, there is no evidence to suggest that the site was viewed by Egyptians as being on foreign soil, much as they detested Alexandria at times. Quite apart from this, it is unlikely in the extreme that, with all the evidence we have of Egyptian cultural/religious tenacity, the Egyptian population of Alexandria existed as deculturalised drones as Fraser seems to suggest.

²² See Kákosy, "Gnosis und Ägyptische Religion," in which the association of Gnosis with Alexandria is seen to extend back into the earliest period of Gnostic studies. "In this time Alexandria is not only the stronghold of Greek culture and knowledge, it is especially an international centre, in which oriental religions also played an important role," 238.

²³ Philippe Derchain, "Miettes: Homère à Edfou," *RdÉ* 26 (1974): §3, 15-19, who notes the allusions to the *Illiad* made in a myth of Horus by a *hierogrammate* in late Ptolemaic times,

must constantly bear in mind, however, that the term “Egyptian” in the Alexandria of the first century B.C.E. Egypt, has many nuances. The bilingualised strata we refer to were largely comprised of Greek and Egyptian descendants whose family lines went back across one side of the divide or the other, though some had likely come to embody a hybrid Graeco-Egyptian social class.²⁴

We have noted the privileges that were extended to the Egyptian priesthood in the second century B.C.E. following the battle of Rafia. From around 164 B.C.E. a significant portion of this clergy became pro-Ptolemaic, although we might assume this to have been more the case in Lower Egypt. From this time membership in these priesthoods began to include Greeks, and this must surely have marked the inception of a decisive phase for the development of Coptic.²⁵ This group, as can be seen in the case of Dionysios, was fluent in Greek, literally the language of power of the time, as well as Egyptian. The evolution of a spoken Egyptian which made liberal use of Greek loan-words was the natural result, and this spoken phenomenon must have immediately preceded the appearance of a more or less systematic Coptic script. More than this, a complete bilinguality on the part of an educated class provided the basis for a subsequent fusion of Greek and Egyptian philosophical and religious thought within a group that was already predisposed to take up these matters as we have seen. The important work of J. Yoyotte, for example, attests to “a collaboration between Greek ‘men of culture’ and the *hierogrammates* of Edfu”.²⁶ A tangible result of this

remarks that, “The fact is capital for me, if we admit the well-foundness of what precedes, it is that we suddenly find, in this Egyptian sacerdotal world which seems to us so enclosed, an opening towards the Greek world, an interest for a culture with which, we have rather been accustomed to believe, it was living in conflict.”

²⁴ Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 313, points out that intermarriage was initially banned in the Greek cities (Alexandria, Naukratis, and Ptolemais), but that the trend developed from the middle of the third century onward. See also Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilisation and the Jews* (New York: Atheneum, 1970) in which he makes the point that although Greek settlement in early Ptolemaic times was significant, it didn’t really have a chance against the seven million indigenous Egyptians. The process of Egyptianisation, mainly through intermarriage, proceeded unchecked, “for the soldiers married women of the local population, and with the women Egyptian names, language, religion and customs entered into their family life. The children of such mixed families normally followed the mother,” 20. For a detailed discussion of the problems involved in attempting to define ethnic boundaries, see Koen Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Amsterdam: J.C.Gieben, 1988).

²⁵ In following Kahle and Satzinger in their positing of a ruling-class Sahidic dialect in Lower Egypt, we should note also that this literary axis established between king and shadow-king or ethnarch created the requisite *rhetorical* environment we would expect for the development of Coptic. For this axis was not created between strict ethnic polarities, rather it bespeaks a cultural fusion occurring among the educated classes, perfectly symbolised by the inclusion of Greeks among the Egyptian priesthood. For example, in the reign of Ptolemy VI (180-145), Herodes, native of Pergamon, held the priestly station of Prophet of Khnum. For the special nature of Memphis in Ptolemaic times see Crawford et al., *Studies on Ptolemaic Memphis*; Reymond and Barns, “Alexandria and Memphis: some Historical Observations”, and Reymond, *From the Records of a Priestly Family from Memphis: vol. I.*

²⁶ Jean Yoyotte, “Bakhthis. Religion égyptienne et culture grecque à Edfou,” in *Religions en Égypte hellénistique et romaine* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969), 127-41. “The dossier of Nakhthis makes known the existence, in the Edfu of the last two centuries

development, albeit one refracted down onto lower social levels as it were, is to be found in the magical texts which first appear in Coptic, Demotic, and Greek shortly after this period in the first century C.E.²⁷

The early partial yet systematic transcription of a spoken Egyptian dialect into Greek characters, which is clearly demonstrated by the graffiti at Abydos from the second and first centuries B.C.E., would have gained great impetus from these social conditions, for the motivation and wherewithal is now present for the transcription of Egyptian thought into a more universal form, precisely the *modus operandi* then in effect in the Ptolemaic libraries in Alexandria.

I would therefore target a specific Ptolemaic period which was especially conducive, *politically*, for the systematic development of Coptic from 164 B.C.E. onwards, the approximate time when Greeks were first joining the Egyptian priesthood in significant numbers. The level of Egyptianisation among the Greeks reached new heights in the first century B.C.E., and we are drawn to the reign of Egypt's last Greek ruler, Cleopatra VII, for the requisite decisiveness of character to be found amongst the litany of weak rulers who immediately preceded her. She alone, of all the Lagids, attempted to manifest a Graeco-Egyptian fusion beyond mere political expediency, and she alone of all the Ptolemaic rulers learned the Egyptian language (an incredible achievement!) and in this she perfectly symbolises the seduction of the Greek mind by Egyptian religiosity. Indeed, Cleopatra presented herself as "the new Isis".²⁸ We can speculate that her own study of Egyptian was effected through the employment of Greek characters. If this be the case she would have likely been zealous to have all upper echelons in the state learn Egyptian and the Coptic script would have greatly facilitated this task. The link between Alexandria and Memphis was at its strongest at this time, and we recall that the son of the bilingual high-priest Petubastis was in office during Cleopatra's reign. This hypothesis however cannot be proved. It is enough to note that the required development time for the degree of systematisation apparent in the Coptic magical texts of the first century C.E. encompasses her 21-year reign (51-30 B.C.E.).

before our era, of an active intercommunication between a Greek cultural milieu and the exclusive group which practised the sciences and magic sacred to the native Egyptians," (139-40). This cross-fertilisation occurred, we can assume, as a result of the tolerant relations that existed at the top between Ptolemaic king and Egyptian ethnarch. See Crawford, "Ptolemy, Ptah and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis", 40: "The relationship between Alexandria and Memphis, between monarch and high priest appears to be one of equal respect." The discussion here centres upon the first century B.C.E..

²⁷ We must constantly bear in mind, as I will note at various points in this discussion, the acute problem of negative evidence: not one original text has been bequeathed to us from the greater Gnostic teachers of Alexandria in the early first and second centuries, *ergo* we cannot say with certainty in what proportion they wrote in Coptic, Greek, and Demotic. Likewise, the wholesale destruction of "pagan" texts in the Christian era also does not allow us to place too great an emphasis upon the magical texts as being sole manifestations of the evolution of Coptic in the first century.

²⁸ Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 147. This is not to idealise Cleopatra's motives, for certainly the political expediency of *appearing* decisively Egyptian looms large in the Ptolemaic claim to chthonic legitimacy at this time. However, her ability to learn the language is quite striking and I see no reason to doubt a sincere commitment on her part towards Egyptian religion and cultural identity.

I turn now to examine very briefly the linguistic arguments put forward by P.E. Kahle that Sahidic Coptic existed as a pre-Christian dialect of Alexandria. Kahle's concludes that Sahidic is a neutral dialect that does not fit into the scheme of other sub-dialects (i.e. Achmimic, Middle Egyptian, Fayyumic, and Bohairic).²⁹ The frequent use of Greek words and particles, and in particular Greek verbs, in Sahidic, must be taken to indicate that Sahidic had been in contact with Greek more closely than any other dialect. Sahidic is therefore to be associated with Alexandria as, "the principle, if not the sole, written and spoken dialect of the more educated pagan Egyptian".

It is important to keep in mind the social turmoil of this period, described in the preceding chapter, when attempting to account for the development of Coptic in the first and second century C.E.. The people responsible for the transcription of various "religious" texts into Greek, Coptic, and Demotic, prominently included in their number individuals who represented a fairly widespread shift in Egypt to dualistic cosmologies. The magical texts served to sustain Egyptian religious and philosophical thought, albeit in rather Hellenised form in many examples, and the need for proper pronunciation in part prompted a turning to the efficacy of the Greek alphabet by a bilingual class. The magical texts depict a melding of worldviews whose development can be traced from an incipiently dualistic Egyptian religious tradition on to the demonised cosmos of the Gnostics. The interpenetration of Greek, Jewish, Egyptian, and Persian religious concepts and figures found within this movement, all points toward the multilingual, essentially *literate*, environment of Alexandria and other nominally Greek cities of the Delta in late-Ptolemaic and early-Roman times although this was not exclusively the case as is attested by the Graeco-Egyptian interaction at Edfu under Ptolemaic rule.³⁰ As well, we note that Plutarch, writing *De Iside et Osiride* in Delphi ca. 118 C.E., exhibits a strong interest in the Egyptian language, affording some thirty linguistic references to Egyptian in this work alone.³¹

This is not to suggest, however, that the development of Coptic, or proto-Coptic as the case may be, need only have occurred within an essentially Gnostic (i.e. dualistic) milieu. The Stoic Egyptian priest Chaeremon, to my mind, represents precisely the sort of rearguard reaction against the dualist radicalisation of traditional Egyptian religious thought that we would expect from part of the Egyptian priesthood.³² Often described as a "Stoic philosopher", Chaeremon, anti-Semite and

²⁹ Kahle, *Bala'izah*, 255. The distillation of the main points of Kahle's argument have been taken from 233-257. See also Satzinger "On the Origin of the Sahidic Dialect," in which this Lower Egyptian spoken dialect is traced to an earlier Memphite phase of the language in Persian times, as a language of the ruling class. One wonders if this dialect can be traced further back to the known "Delta dialect" of Late Egyptian in Rammeside times.

³⁰ Yoyotte, "Bakhthis. Religion égyptienne et culture grecque à Edfou."

³¹ Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 103.

³² I am equating Chaeremon's Stoic sensibilities with the longstanding tradition of *ma'at* – an acute appreciation of right order *in the physical universe*. Dualist cosmologies are intent upon removing *ma'at*, or the Pleroma, the principle of perfection, completion itself, from the demonstrably imperfect material realm. Philosophically, Alexandria can be viewed in terms of a Stoic-Skeptic split, the latter attitude underpinning, in the form of various Eclectic and Skeptic philosophical schools, the liberal and antinomian tenor of the times in late

idealiser of the Egyptian priestly way of life wrote, among a number of lost works, the *Hieroglyphica* which was quite influential in late antiquity.³³ Chaeremon is important in that he consciously facilitated the Graeco-Egyptian fusion we are concerned with, this from within a more conservative scholarly class of priests. Against such literary initiatives must be set the aforementioned *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, the development of Gnostic thought, and various other rhetorical vehicles which gave outlet to Egyptian nationalism and anti-Roman sentiment.

The hypothesis I advance is that this genuine cultural interaction inevitably generated the appearance of the *spoken* Egyptian dialect of the time in Greek characters, in Alexandria and Memphis in particular³⁴, especially one already richly embedded with Greek loan-words. The Greek mind, even “Egyptianised” to the extent of ostensibly casting off the Greek mythos and embracing the Egyptian, would have insisted upon this at some point for reasons of expediency, and the more liberal Graeco-Egyptian magician and priest would have appreciated the facility with which actual vowel sounds could be recorded, as a result readily moving away from the archaic pronouncements, figuratively and literally, of Demotic.

In analysing the relationship between Demotic and Coptic, Kurt Sethe concluded that, as with every phase of the Egyptian language, Demotic was eventually left behind by the actual spoken language of the people, and perpetuated within itself archaic forms. The seeds for the germination of Coptic have to do, in part, with this lag between an older written script, and the newer spoken language.³⁵ Through extensive linguistic analyses Sethe, even in his day, was able to conclude that Demotic is not to be considered a “divider” between Late Egyptian and Coptic; likewise, Coptic cannot be depicted simply as a continuation of Demotic. There was a complex inter-relationship between the three and Coptic should be viewed as a parallel development to Demotic rather than as a clear successor.³⁶ A pivotal point is made by Sethe at the beginning of his article:

Ptolemaic-early Roman Alexandria. The Stoic temperament naturally melded with civil authority. The *Tripartite Tractate*, a later Gnostic text, clearly delimits this split: “They have introduced other types (of explanation), some saying that those who exist have their being in accordance with providence These are the people who observe the orderly movement and foundation of creation. Others say that it is something alien. These are the people who observe the diversity and lawlessness and the powers of evil.” Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 290.

³³ van der Horst, *Chaeremon*, from the introduction.

³⁴ An indirect affirmation of the prominence of Memphis in the Greek mind is perhaps to be found in the etymology of the Greek *αεγυπτος*, which came from an Egyptian name for Memphis *Hwt-k3-Pth*, “Soul-Mansion of Ptah.” See Ricardo A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 38, n.1,3.

³⁵ See Sethe, “Das Verhältnis zwischen Demotisch und Koptisch und seine Lehren für die Geschichte der ägyptische Sprache,” 300. Sethe’s main point is that this dynamic is far more intense in a society which is mostly illiterate, wherein the perpetuation of the script is effected by a relatively small group, predisposed for religious and political reasons to entrench archaic forms.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 301: “[Coptic] at its inception did not succeed Demotic but was a language which independently arose from the same root [Late Egyptian], and was used simultaneously with the Demotic language, being its sister not its daughter.”

In Coptic we have the spoken language (vulgar or colloquial speech) noticeable at the same time people used Demotic as a written form (literature and an official document script)... The speech, which we come up against as “Coptic” in the literature of Christian Egypt, must have been known as the spoken language of the people *at least* from the first century AD, ‘the Age of the Roman Emperors,’ for we know this to be the last period of activity for a national ancient Egyptian culture.³⁷

The working sociological hypothesis I advance is that the co-existence of the Demotic and Coptic script in large measure connotes the simultaneous existence of an “Old” and “New” Egypt, a way of speaking and thinking that bespeaks two cultural generations, that of older and younger linguistic sisters to adopt Sethe’s conceit. In the core 500-year period with which we are dealing (*ca.* 200 B.C.E. - 300 C.E.)³⁸ this distinction became more and more acute.³⁹ In contrasting Demotic with Coptic it has been argued that there was a sharp break between the two.⁴⁰ Janet H. Johnson, at the conclusion of *The Demotic Verbal System* argues, following Sethe, that these were simply oral innovations which gradually developed:

³⁷ Ibid., 301; emphasis added.

³⁸ The Demotic magical papyri of London and Leiden (originally one manuscript), according to Janet Johnson, “was written in the third century of our era and constitutes the latest long, connected Demotic text which has been preserved.” Johnson, *The Demotic Verbal System*, 2. This text shows considerable Coptic influence in a large number of words employing Coptic transcriptions, and so this text can be used to demonstrate the decline of Demotic as the script in current use. The last Demotic example we have is a grafitto from the middle of the fifth century. The period from the third to fifth centuries marks the expansion period of Coptic under the growing hegemonic influence of orthodox Christianity in Egypt. See Griffith and Thompson, *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*. This text, initially called the “Leiden Gnostic” (a term rejected by the editors of this edition), actually displays numerous thematic overlaps with the Gnostic *Books of Jeu* as mentioned above.

³⁹ In attempting to keep in mind the *rhetorical* dynamics here, it should be remembered that there was a profound split within the Egyptian priesthood following the overthrow of the rebel king Ankhmakhis in 185 B.C.E. As always, the geographical location of Upper Egypt ensured a less liberal, more conservative, reactionary stance when faced with a foreign presence, and we can assume that the clergy which remained loyal to Alexandria following the rebellion – and who were subsequently rewarded – came primarily from the cities of the north, Memphis in particular, where cultural fusion was proceeding apace. This socio-political split likely forms the basis for the subsequent linguistic split between Demotic and Coptic in Greek and Roman times. It should also be remembered that in the Ptolemaic era there was a turning inward by the various temples in the development of various scripts, unlike the earlier Dynasties when temple inscriptions appeared throughout Egypt in more or less standardised forms. The combination of this “turning inward” with a pro-Ptolemaic stance by the priesthood in Memphis provides fertile possibilities for the development of Coptic there.

⁴⁰ Kurt Sethe, “Das Verhältnis zwischen Demotisch und Koptisch,” and B.H. Stricker, “Die Indeeilung der Egyptische Taalgeschiedenis,” *OMRO* 25 (1945): 12-51.

There was certainly a lag between their development in the spoken language and their appearance in the written language, in Demotic as throughout Egyptian history. Thus by the Roman period much Demotic was probably archaic. But some of the innovations did make their way into the written language. With the adoption of a radical new script for Coptic, there was no need to preserve archaic forms, and there certainly was a break.⁴¹

Coptic in its inception was never a transliteration of Demotic which remained the script of arch-conservatism and bureaucracy in Egypt. Above all we sense a fundamentally pragmatic concern with writing Egyptian *as it currently sounded* which was always a problem, a corollary that was no longer practicable within the consonantal ambiguities of Demotic.⁴² Following Sethe and Johnson, I conclude that there was a difference in the phonetic basis for both scripts. The sociological factors which created the need for Coptic ensured that it would develop as its own dialectical entity to a large extent; as the communities involved (Graeco-Egyptian and the more purely Egyptian) thought differently about things, their written language ineluctably reflected these differences.

Throughout the critical period of the Early Coptic phase, *ca.* 200 B.C.E. onwards, the development of Coptic would have been prompted for reasons of expediency. For one, the employment of Egyptian with the Greek alphabet allowed the native language to be effectively taught to Greek-speaking peoples. Complete familiarity with an alphabet creates an immediate window into a language, and if the modern mind finds Demotic difficult it is for reasons similar to those faced by the Ptolemaic Greeks: the Demotic script is entirely foreign. This motive would have been shared by both Greeks and Egyptians who were desirous of having specific modes of Egyptian religious thought disseminated.

Philological and linguistic work is to be associated with Alexandria, in particular her libraries, there as in no other city in Egypt.⁴³ If this “old” and “new” split is to have any validity, the rise of Coptic must be associated with Lower Egypt where Greek literary influence was at its strongest, specifically the heterodox

⁴¹ Johnson, *The Demotic Verbal System*, 301.

⁴² Johnson, *The Demotic Verbal System*, 15. In analysing the Leiden Demotic magical Papyrus, Johnson notes the marked changes in transformational rules – the appearance of a new rule, the deletion of an old one, changes in order, “generalisation” of old rules, etc. – achieved by “relaxing the environmental restrictions for its application.” This “relaxation”, I would suggest, amounted to a cultural openness to the extent of allowing Greek to provide for a more utilitarian linguistic vehicle – i.e., its alphabet – while ensuring that its incorporation would not radically alter the tenor of spoken Egyptian beyond the writing of it.

⁴³ In fact the library was in close proximity to the great temple in Alexandria, thus creating the ideal conditions for religious, philosophical, and scientific cross-fertilisation. “Next door to the Alexandrian Sarapeum was the great University: the cult of Sarapis and the establishment of the Library and the Museum were alike due to Ptolemy I. The Library was to overflow into the Temple and the links were to remain inseparable until the final onslaught by the Christians.” Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman*, 190.

environment of Alexandria, and her spiritual sister-city, Memphis. As noted, the linguistic studies of Kahle and Satzinger suggest this.⁴⁴

Demotic on the other hand, I surmise to have become a literary bastion of the conservative south. Upper Egypt did not initially need Greek to deal with the outer world as did Lower Egypt; rather, the above-mentioned Greek-Egyptian fusion was far more restricted and the native script was retained by priests and scribes. This must have been perceived to be the “natural”, even culturally sacrosanct, method of recording information, arcane and prosaic, and the continued employment of Demotic likely resulted in part from a strong desire to resist the encroachment of the Greek, and later Coptic, scripts. This was one aspect of Egyptian “intransigence” in the face of a supposed Greek political hegemony.⁴⁵

I am not attempting to paint a too simplistic north-south polarity, however it seems to me that this is supported by the ancient geographical-sociological differences which existed between an insulated Upper Egypt and a Lower Egypt that was obliged to take on foreign influences. Even so, as time went on from the development of Coptic in the late Ptolemaic-early Roman era, we would expect to see Coptic and Demotic used according to different rhetorical agenda throughout all of Egypt, especially during Roman times when the Gnostics were active in the first, second, and third centuries. For if Coptic embodies cultural synthesis it follows that it would have had, in part, an array of specific applications associated with more heterodox communities. Conversely, if Demotic were a script that habitualises itself in business documentation, along with archaisms and ritual in religious texts, we would expect an array of applications that were more strictly free from heterodox influences. Extant texts in Coptic and Demotic appear to bear out this distinction.⁴⁶ This is not to say that there was not a large area of overlap between the two scripts during Roman times, undoubtedly created by a commonality of applications: what it does suggest, though, is that the essential reasons for the appearance of either script at

⁴⁴ I would also note that this dynamic parallels an earlier situation according to Satzinger. “At a given time at the beginning of the Persian domination or later, the need was felt in the Thebaid to acquire knowledge of the idiom that was spoken by the ruling class of the north. The idiom of the capital - Memphis - was taken over by everyone who sought to succeed in the realms of administration and politics. What was first perhaps thought to be a need may later have become a fashion.” From “On the Origin of the Sahidic Dialect,” 310. Satzinger’s conclusion, that “we should take into consideration the historical aspects of the pre-Coptic development, more than has been the case” (311), ably targets the underlying problems addressed here: above-all the need to define the *rhetorical environment* in socio-historical terms, and the *psychological motivations* that brought various strata of Greek and Egyptian literati together in genuine synthesis.

⁴⁵ The temple of Philae, for example, during the reigns of Philopator and Epiphanes (216-184), engraved a decree only in Hieroglyphic and Demotic script, although the text declares itself to be trilingual. See Willy Pereman, “Sur le bilinguisme dans l’Égypte des Lagides,” in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 13: Studia Paulo Naster Oblata 11* (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), 147. We can easily appreciate why Greek was omitted, for a widespread revolt against Ptolemaic rule occurred during this period: Ankhmakhis became King of Egypt in the Thebaid around 200 B.C.E. and this independent reign was not crushed until 185 B.C.E. .

⁴⁶ Many of the Coptic texts available from the Gnostic era in Egypt are later redacted versions from primarily the third and fourth centuries for which it is impossible to ascribe their original form. The *Pistis Sophia*, however, was likely composed in Coptic as has been noted elsewhere.

a given time and place resulted from complex social factors which conform to the larger pattern of heterodoxy vs. archaicism. Given the lack of textual evidence this cannot be ascertained beyond the general observations herein advanced.

If it is accepted that Coptic was initially a Lower Egypt phenomenon resulting from the interaction of Greek and Egyptian thought, it is clear that the Greek impact upon the Egyptian language itself was surprisingly restricted: the loan words are mostly synonyms, some specific Greek philosophical terms without Egyptian counterparts, and limited employment of prepositions, particles, verbs and the like. The grammatical exactitudes of Greek had no dramatic impact upon the infrastructure of Coptic whatsoever and this is significant, for it supplies linguistic support for the larger cultural picture developed here: the Greeks, their insulated royalty and immediate coterie excepted perhaps, underwent a profound metamorphosis in Egypt following the break-up of Alexander's empire. In short, their mythos was largely overpowered by the Egyptian. While this process was in some ways subliminal during the first century of Ptolemaic rule, the so-called "golden period", the stunning performance of Egyptian arms at the battle of Raphia in 217 B.C.E. powerfully rekindled the Egyptian political will to power. While the revolts that followed were eventually suppressed, the impression of Egyptian cultural virility is sustained through the privileges being increasing accorded to the priesthood, and by the fact that this priesthood began to include Greeks after 164 as noted above. The linguistic fusion we are concerned with must be set against this picture. Moreover, the hybridisation of Hellenistic thought had a profound influence upon the Egyptian psyche, one result of which was the rise of dualistic religious views which are to be found in an array of Egyptian manifestations.⁴⁷ In terms of the actual language, even though the impact of Greek upon Egyptian was limited, it nonetheless ensured that Coptic, as a *spoken* language, would have sounded rather different than Demotic from the outset, perhaps, at the time of Basileides (*ca.* 130 C.E.), manifesting specific differences in application and pronunciation comparable to the modern phenomenon of Cambridge English in use alongside Old English in certain arcane scholarly circles.⁴⁸

That the development of Coptic was likely a localised and esoteric phenomenon would account for the limited evidence, both in quantity and textual applications, which supports this thesis. In assigning the development of the script to Alexandria or at least to the Delta this explanation gains credence from the fact that 1), documents do not survive as well in the moist soil of the Delta, as compared with the arid south, 2), "Pagan" documents faced wide-spread destruction in the Christian era, and 3), the urbanisation and population density of the modern city of Alexandria does not allow for extensive excavation. For these reasons an argument based upon negative evidence has creditable force and we must be very careful in attempting to develop a definitive picture based only upon extant textual evidence

The linguistic and socio-historical evidence herein examined suggests that the development of Coptic occurred in Ptolemaic Egypt and early Roman Egypt as a script produced through Graeco-Egyptian religious interaction. As to why the

⁴⁷ Specifically, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Middle Platonism, and Manichaeism.

⁴⁸ See B.H. Stricker, "De Indeeling der Egyptische Taalgeschiedenis," who concludes that Coptic was the real spoken language, while Demotic was an archaic literary form of Egyptian (47). However, Stricker, whose work pre-dates Kahle's and other subsequent studies of the magical texts, dates the rise of Coptic to the end of the third century C.E..

Christians eventually chose Coptic as their proselytising medium the answer is quite clear: the script had prestige and efficacy to the orthodox mind (which initially used Greek in Egypt), whereas Demotic was a difficult script to master and its use of determinatives was to be associated with, among other things, the “pagan” Egyptian gods. This choice, along with the Christianisation of the Roman State, ensured that Coptic prevailed over Demotic as the spoken and written language of Egypt, in itself symbolising the final eradication of the ancient Egyptian worldview by a non-autochthonous creed.

Coptic likely arose out of a true cultural fusion amongst a limited literati, a script which carried within itself the impetus to flower into a distinct language of its own, as a vehicle for heterodoxy in Lower Egypt centred at Alexandria, and perhaps to a lesser extent at Memphis and other communities. Certainly Greek was at the centre of the 300 years of marvellous research carried out in Alexandria under the Ptolemies. Bilinguality, and the subsequent development of Coptic, however, allowed this synthesis to move into the Egyptian psyche – it allowed entire Greek strata to meld themselves to, and to transform, Egyptian religious consciousness, and on a very large scale. The rise of the Gnostic movement was one major result of this. It is therefore significant that we have texts such as the *Hermetica* in Coptic, the very quintessence of a Greek-Egyptian fusion, fragments of Plato’s *Republic*, a huge Manichaean corpus which surfaced this century, a similarly extensive Gnostic library found in the Jebel al Tarif near Nag Hammadi, as well as other very large Gnostic sources, and Egyptian magical texts, all in Coptic. The critical feature here, and one which initially prompted me to investigate this problem, is that outside of the category of magical texts, not one word of this array of heterodox literature has yet to be found in Demotic: there are no Gnostic, Manichaean, Hermetic, or attempted transliterations of foreign texts in the autochthonic Egyptian script still in widespread use at the time – they exist only in Coptic, and to a far lesser extent in Greek.⁴⁹ The reasons for this, as I have suggested, are socio-historical, resulting from the divergence of a new Egypt from the old, the Hellenistic from the Archaic.

⁴⁹ The *Hermetica* excepted. Once again it should be stressed that the extant Gnostic Coptic texts appear to date from the third and fourth centuries but are certainly redacted versions of earlier texts which therefore puts their composition in a period during which the widespread use of the Demotic script was still current.

Chapter Seven: Hellenistic Egypt: Theurgy, Theology, Philosophy, and Gnosis

We may, however, remark that the immobility that our dynamic predilections are inclined to derogate as petrification could also be regarded as a mark of the perfection which a system of life has attained – this consideration may well apply in the case of Egypt.¹

Overall, Egyptian theological texts inscribed in Ptolemaic and Roman times demonstrate a religious expressiveness that is far from formulaic. The priesthoods of the various temples were given a *carte blanche* by the Ptolemies to effect a renaissance period in the development of hieroglyphics. With the dismal memory of centuries of Persian rule still very fresh in their minds, the priests now had a tendency to inscribe as much as they could upon the new walls, in effect to immortalise in stone their hieratic libraries of sacred texts concerning cosmogonies, ritual, and practice. It is remarkable that the Ptolemies required only the inscription of their names as kings of Upper and Lower Egypt, yet even this affirmation of their resident monarchy was effected in hieroglyphic: an absolutely minimal acquiescence to Greek culture, in terms of language or architecture, is to be found in the great Ptolemaic temples. And of course it must be re-emphasised that the expense to build these temples – in many cases renovate or add to – was enormous.

A fundamental question must be raised here, and it pertains to the outlook of the “Greek” literati in, say, the second century B.C.E. and onwards. One imagines them observing this perennial expenditure of resources on the temples of Egypt, witnessing the painstaking inscriptional work ceaselessly carried out, and above all their susceptibility to the still potent priesthoods who radiated their auras of religious prestige from within these ancient precincts: is it even plausible that there would not have been – for the “Greeks”, never mind the bilingual strata we are more directly concerned with – an overpowering urge to understand hieroglyphics?² The temples and pyramids dominated the Egyptian skyline, much as church spires focused the eye above the countryside in England in centuries past, and the perdurable architecture

¹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 14.

² One can hardly accept the conclusions of R.S. Bagnall, concerning “the Greek lack of esteem for the Egyptian present – the failure of the reality of Egypt to have any serious impact on the Greek world,” in “Egypt, the Ptolemies, and the Greek World,” *BES* 3 (1981):21. Even in the Greek world distant from Egypt, the Isis cults and general prestige of “Egyptian Wisdom” militate against this conclusion. But in Egypt itself, what “Greeks” are we speaking of here? *Pure* Greeks, free from the historical trends of intermarriage and bilingualism? The reality of the Graeco-Egyptian in Egypt does not accord with this rather standard Classicist derogation.

and mysterious texts of Egypt must have obsessed the inquiring Greek mind.³ The obvious sociological hypothesis here is that Cleopatra's mastery of Egyptian represents the tail-end of a religious participation which began among the lower classes, eventually extending even into the inner circle of the Lagid rulers.

It should also be remembered that in the Ptolemaic era there was a turning inward by the various temples in the development of various scripts, unlike the earlier Dynasties when temple inscriptions appeared throughout Egypt in more or less standardised forms. The combination of this "turning inward" with a pro-Ptolemaic stance by the priesthood in Memphis provides fertile possibilities for the development of Coptic there.

A number of thematic links with Gnostic thought shall be discussed in Part III; for now we shall make a number of general observations.

In the first instance, the theurgic applications of the magical papyri, also found in the *Chaldean Oracles* for example, manifests the archaic, hierarchic, text-bound and externally active aspects of Gnosis. Hans Lewy, in treating the *Chaldean Oracles*, essentially defines the theurgic essence of Archaic Gnosis:

The basic principle of the system... represents the entities that accomplish the theurgical operation as identical with those that rule the Universe; the selfsame power is drawn upon in the practice of magic and in the organisation of the Cosmos. Believing this, the Chaldeans could not but regard a full understanding of the forces of the Universe as a necessary preliminary to theurgy, which aims at dominating those forces. Accordingly, their exposition of the system of the Cosmos has a preeminently practical object, manifested in the choice of the various themes and in the way in which these are dealt with.⁴

The true "underworld of Platonism" exists in the *Chaldean Oracles*, as opposed to Gnostic thought in general, both for the later intense appropriation of the *Oracles* made by Platonic philosophers, and for their less sophisticated, more mechanistic view of the cosmos. The point to be made here is that there is no difference at all, either in overall thrust, or in the cosmological details (the names are different but they amount to the same worldview), between the Chaldean view and Archaic Gnostic which shall be detailed further in the next chapter. The theurgic represents the bottom-end, practical approach to divine knowledge, where the effort is not made for a detached love of the arcane, of secret knowledge itself, but for sensible results. Gnosis and Philosophy manifest themselves as the occupations of the elite.

Philosophy is curiously and uneasily wedded to Gnosis in Egyptian Gnostic thought, for the two endeavours often have entirely antithetical aims depending upon who is at the helm. On the other hand, there is a simpatico in mood and method that goes quite deep, and one is witness to an interpenetration of thought that bespeaks a large social interaction of Egyptian and Greek intelligentsias for which we have little direct evidence. In Chapter 3 we noted a differentiation made by Xenocrates between "knowledge" (epistême) and sense-perception (aisthêsis); in the *Trimorphic Protенnoia* we also have this distinction: "I am the perception (aisthêsis) and the

³ Many Greeks were themselves involved in building these Egyptian temples and, although there are references to Greek temples, none have thus far surfaced.

⁴ Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire* (1956; reprint, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), 157.

Knowledge” (NHC XIII,1.36.12)⁵ (Coptic COOYN: *gnosis*). The thought of the *Protennoia* exists as a sound in perception (*aisthêsis*) and as a tripartite word “hidden in the Silence of the Ineffable” (37.23 & 29)⁶. We shall examine *The Trimorphic Protennoia* at greater length, but we note the sophisticated philosophical vocabulary employed in this text. Culling those terms that are not prosaic or used as obvious synonyms for Egyptian words in both tractates, we are left with a very sophisticated philosophical vocabulary indeed. It is clear that this array of terms does not appear in the text as a sort of haphazard free-associativity on the part of the most recent scribe or redactor, rather it is to be supposed that their employment was an integral part of the original composition. And yet this philosophical tendentiousness does not disrupt the essentially mystic, revelatory tone of the text. One might say that as the Greek language had an extremely limited impact upon the formulation of Coptic, so Greek Philosophy supplied some of the precision tools and procedures, perhaps even the dry-dock in Alexandria, yet the shipwrights and ships being built were Egyptian/oriental. This carefully circumscribed employment of Greek loan-words, besides suggesting the elite bilingualised stratas we have come upon earlier, also suggests the very language and thought-processes of these Graeco-Egyptians, or Egypto-Greeks.

Gnosis was held to be on a much higher level than was Philosophy, for if it cast a cold light upon the demiurgic vicissitudes of carnal existence, it did so in order to highlight one’s true spiritual nature, and thus it espoused the typically Egyptian obsession with a good afterlife – all of these are expressed in the famous maxim by Valentinus, to the effect that “we know where we are from, where we are, and where we are going”. In Coptic-gnostic texts, the word is as likely to be drawn from the actual Greek loan-word (*gnosis*) as it is from Coptic equivalents (*CAYNE* or *MME*). In either case the word meant simply “to know”, in itself embodying the dual sense of the French *savoir* and *connaître*, or the German *wissen* and *kennen*; equally, it was as apt to be used with reference to the arcane as it was to the prosaic and this meaning extends back into the etymology of the Coptic word from the ancient Egyptian.⁷ One might say, in light of the above examination of *The Trimorphic Protennoia*, that Gnosis, while essentially different, perhaps even alien to Philosophy proper, cannot exist apart from it. As with the methodology of Kant, this knowledge seeks to posit the preconditions of intelligibility, to present an understanding of the aeons and the theogony for example, yet since the sensuous data of consciousness is received from a lower “demiurgic” level of being, *gnosis* must ultimately transcend this and go higher if it is to be of any salvific consequence.⁸ At this juncture we turn to examine dualist Greek philosophy prior to, and concurrent, with the rise of Gnosis in Egypt.

⁵ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 404.

⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 406.

⁷ See J. Cerný’s *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 168, where the Demotic and late Egyptian antecedents are given.

⁸ One notes in passing, the startling *faux pas* in Layton’s interpretation of Gnostic thought whereby *gnosis* is translated as “acquaintance,” *Gnostic Scripture* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). “Acquaintance” of course loads the term on the side of personal knowledge, especially passing acquaintance with another person. In the ancient world the sexual connotations of this side of the term were fully realized of course, and “to know” someone had this interpretative ambiguity built into it; yet the more superficial connotations of

It is an interesting feature of Middle Platonic thought that it has been viewed as an “eclectic” period of Greek philosophy, a period of formulation preparatory to a greater philosophical development commencing with Plotinus. This period, from the first century B.C.E. to the fourth C.E., is often viewed as a speculative void.⁹ As a consequence it has been a period of thought generally perceived as being of marginal interest in the history of philosophy and religion. In the study of Hellenistic emanationist thought, the area is of course critically important. John M. Dillon’s work, *The Middle Platonists*, is a determined, and in large measure successful, attempt to rectify the sketchiness that surrounds the output of these philosophers. It is somewhat ironic that the book, while beginning upon this reformist note and in proceeding to lay out a prodigious array of text and commentary, ends by derogating the entire field in the traditional manner. The peroration is of interest:

The claim, then, that I make for these men is a modest one. Like those humble sea-creatures whose concerted action slowly builds a coral reef, the philosophers of this period each contributed some detail to the formation of what was to become perhaps the greatest philosophical edifice of all time, that Platonism which, gathering to itself much of Aristotelianism and Stoicism, was to dominate the Late Antique world and the Middle Ages, and continue as a vital force through the Renaissance to the present day.¹⁰

This is low praise indeed, especially for such a diverse array of thinkers for whom the textual evidence is so sketchy, but whose prolific influence cannot be doubted.¹¹

It is a worthwhile exercise to note the times and places of appearance of these Middle Platonists, and to colour them in according to their general philosophical

“acquaintance” opted for by Layton are jarring to say the least. By insisting upon this incommensurate term in such a critical philological locus, Layton displays an alarming lack of sensitivity to the philosophical dimensions of Gnostic thought. *Gnosis* also pertained to specific knowledge of transmundane realms and powers, to the entire ontological equation of being and the individual’s responsibility therein. *Gnosis* on this level was not construed to be simply knowledge *about* God; more to the point, it was seen to involve direct experience of a larger theogonic process experienced in the individual.

⁹ Often referred to as “the underworld of Platonism” by Dillon. A.A. Long’s work *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986) is notable for completely ignoring the movement. The only figure who attains some mention, Plutarch, is drawn in purely for his critical views on Stoicism and Epicureanism. Likewise Long’s later collaboration with D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) maintains the same focus with the addition here of Numenius although the excerpts give no sense of his dualist proclivities. 92% of the book is on Epicureanism and Stoicism, and 8% or less on the Skeptic movement. Apart from this remarkable bias, it is interesting that a justification of this optic is not offered, indicating the prevailing attitude of many Classicists towards Middle Platonism and Skepticism in general.

¹⁰ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 415.

¹¹ Many of these philosophers were wide-ranging authors for which we possess not one extant work; instead we are severely handicapped by an array of embedded texts which are often presented for inimicable reasons. In any event, that such vibrant conceptualists as Xenocrates, Plutarch and Numenius in particular be likened to “humble sea creatures” slogging together a coral reef is really quite astounding.

stance Admittedly, we are dealing with a *mélange* here, and things are not neat and tidy so diffused were these inter-penetrating strands of thought. But Dillon's rather typical Classical Studies emphasis of "Aristotelianism and Stoicism" does not do justice to the larger picture he has presented. By a rough measure, I would note that over 3/4 of these philosophers can be situated upon the "dualist and skeptic" trajectory, while the rest display "monist/stoic" propensities. These philosophical colourations are fairly evenly distributed throughout the eastern Mediterranean. "Aristotelianism" is present in varying doses, as is Stoic method, often without world-affirmation in the usual Stoic manner. Skepticism and Dualism are obviously not held in high regard in Dillon's rather Hegelian vision of high-Philosophy taking root from this "lowly" Middle Platonic soil.¹² Apart from this, there are almost no connections made in this work between the philosophical divergencies under discussion and the socio-political backdrop that gave rise to them. The sacking of Athens in 88 B.C.E., the rise of Roman hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean and its effects upon philosophical/mythological speculation, the acute Graeco-Egyptian fusion underway in Alexandria, the widespread turning to dualist cosmologies in this time period, of which Middle Platonism is but one exemplar – to say these factors are marginalised in this book is to be guilty of understatement oneself.

In opposition to the implicitly orientalist tenor of this stance (the Orient is responsible for dualism and a general muddying of the water) with its accompanying pro-Stoic/Aristotelianism occidental bias (the best of what is modern and western came from this purer trajectory), I would note that the potent tradition of Skeptical thought was instrumental in "deconstructing" various religious and philosophical dogmas of the time, and in facilitating a more "pluralist" approach to "Truth" and "Knowledge" in the Greek cities of the eastern Mediterranean, especially Alexandria. Of course all of this would require a spirited defence of skeptical and sophistic developments – that their philosophical influence was indeed profound – and this cannot be undertaken here. The antipathy between what might be called objectivism vs. subjectivism or perspectivism, is imbued in Plato's reactionary obsession with the Sophists in his dialogues. Dualist thought in this philosophical mode goes straight back to Plato as well, in particular the *Timaeus*. It is distinctly present in Presocratic thought as well, in the speculations of Empedocles and Parmenides in particular as we have seen. This trajectory, loosely defined as such for its distinct dualist propensities, must be studied in association with all other dualist systems which existed at this time.

We shall be briefly examining the following philosophers:

Thrasyllus (c. 14-37 C.E.) from Egypt (Alexandria), he became
court philosopher of Tiberius in Rome.

Ammonius (c.40 C.E.) from Egypt

Plutarch (c. 85 C.E.) from Chaeroneia

Numenius (c. 150 C.E.) of Apamea (Syria)

Albinus (c. 153 C.E.) of Smyrna

Atticus (c. 176 C.E.) in Athens

Harpocration (c. 180 C.E.) of Argos

¹² And Dillon's omission of Skeptical thought here is the more inexplicable given the praise he accords their methods at a few junctures in his work; eg., "Scepticism... which had produced so much excellent philosophizing (by modern standards) under Arcesilaus and Carneades in the New Academy," *The Middle Platonists*, 105.

Ammonius Saccas (c. 210 C.E.) of Egypt (Alexandria).

All of these philosophers are contemporaneous with the rise of Gnostic thought, and all exhibit pronounced dualistic tendencies in their speculations with the exception of Ammonius Saccas whom we must conjecture to have been an important late figure. This issue will be raised in its turn.

Those few discussions which seriously raise the issue of the influence of Platonic thought upon Gnosticism, and which go beyond the positing of a general influence, centre upon the figure of Numenius in the 2nd. c. C.E.. It is necessary to situate the rise of Middle Platonism proper in this era, for at its very inception the Academy was forced to flee Athens after the city was sacked by Mithradates in 88 B.C.E. With the rise of Alexandria detailed in Chapter 4 it comes as no great surprise to see that there followed a general drift towards Alexandria from 76 B.C.E. onwards, although it is argued by some that the physical institution collapsed and was not revived until the fourth century C.E..¹³ This view is surely erroneous given the evidence we have for philosophical activity in Egypt in this period: the rise of philosophical Eclecticism occurred there, as did the revival of Pyrrhonist Skepticism in Alexandria by Aenesidemus (c. 50-40); Thrasyllus of Alexandria, a philosopher with dualist tendencies, became the court philosopher of Tiberius in Rome (c. 14-37 C.E.), and Theomnestus of Naucratis in Egypt became a head of the school of Antiochus around 44 B.C.E. in Athens. All this suggests a potent philosophical presence in Egypt. Antiochus, from Ascalon, Palestine, was earlier in his life a Skeptic philosopher who later became a Stoic in Rome; his pupils, Ariston and Dion, were also active in Alexandria.

At the close of this period, the Ptolemaic synthesis with Egyptian culture is at its highest, and the Greek state is about to fall to Roman rule. It is surely a critical factor that Stoicism was a far more acceptable philosophy to Roman sensibilities; as Dillon puts it

To be at all acceptable to the Roman aristocracy, after all, Stoicism had to find a place for loyalty to the nation state and for the duty of public service.¹⁴

It is for these general reasons that the Egyptian Stoic priest Chaeremon was invited to Rome to become the teacher of Nero in the following century.¹⁵ In contradistinction to this, “the notoriously outspoken and irreverent populace of Alexandria”¹⁶ were noted for their hostility to Rome which continued until well into the second century, well beyond Septimius Severus’ grant of a Council to the city in 199-200 if Caracalla’s ruthless massacre of Alexandrians in 215 is any indication. It is against the pronounced anarchic tenor of the times that the inter-action of Gnostic and Middle

¹³ See Dillon’s sources on this view, *The Middle Platonists*, 60. His own view is that, “the centre of Platonic philosophy seems now to move to Alexandria,” (61).

¹⁴ *The Middle Platonists*, 78.

¹⁵ For this he must have been viewed as a theocratic quisling by some of his fellow priests in Egypt, especially in the south.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule*, 197.

Platonic thought in Egypt must be set.¹⁷ It was a period of revolt, pogroms, and bloody reprisals, the most serious revolt occurring in the Boukolia marshes in 172 C.E., which was led by an Egyptian priest. Insofar as Gnostic and Middle Platonic thought in Egypt took place under these conditions, we can expect that the experience of a lack of *freedom* – economic, intellectual, and cultural – influenced their speculations, and this includes all Greek cities in the eastern Mediterranean where Gnostic thought and Middle Platonism were active.¹⁸ This undoubtedly provides one of the key socio-political underpinnings for the phenomenon of “Hellenistic religions”.¹⁹

The Egyptian philosopher Ammonius (*floruit.* 40 C.E.), teacher of Plutarch, is a figure of interest. In his thought we see an enhanced dualist perspective upon the cosmos that has similarities with Xenocrates. In this view, the sublunary realm is ruled over by an entity who is distinct from the Supreme Deity as a ruler of Hades, thus exhibiting similarities to the Persian Ahriman.²⁰ Ammonius is key in demonstrating the presence of a developed philosophical dualism in Egypt in the first century, and it is likely that he incorporated Egyptian thought in his work.²¹ Not much is otherwise known about Ammonius, but in examining the teachings of the major figure of Plutarch, we may presume that many elements of Plutarch’s Egyptian sympathies came from his teacher.

Plutarch, whose *floruit* was around 85 C.E., is an extremely important figure, both for his pronounced dualist thought and contemporaneous with the Gnostics, and also for the extensive writings of his that have come down to us. For Plutarch, the Monad, or One, is above the Indefinite Dyad, it “being the element underlying all

¹⁷ This anarchism was not confined simply to the large cities, but extended into the rural areas where peasants were driven to flee their homes by Roman taxes and liturgies. The large-scale refusal to work was also a common feature of the times. See Lewis, *ibid.*, 203-204.

¹⁸ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1986), 49, makes an analogous point: “In a striking scene, the Jew Philo (c.40 A.D.) tells how a theatre audience, probably in Roman Alexandria, had cheered boisterously at a line in a Greek play referring to ‘freedom.’ Alexandrians were perhaps exceptionally conscious of their loss of it, but the scene can be generalized. Greek cities were aware of a great, free past, and in relative terms, we must allow for their sense of a loss of civil and political liberty. It underlay the culture of this period, and we can justly diagnose it, even when contemporaries do not emphasize it.”

¹⁹ A perspective all the more remarkable for its omission in Luther H. Martin’s otherwise useful work, *Hellenistic Religions*. Certainly, Martin is correct in noting that, “by late antiquity, the centrifugal force of Hellenistic expansion extended the locus of deficiency to the outer bounds of the cosmos itself. The necessary conclusion to this cosmic revaluation was that the totality of the finite cosmos, together with its predominantly feminine attributes, was considered to be deficient,” (161). What is lacking in this assessment is an appreciation of the underlying mood of despair to be found in Egypt in particular.

²⁰ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 191.

²¹ With what we know about the complex class of Graeco-Egyptians in Egypt at this time, it is possible that Ammonius is the Greek version of Amon.

formlessness and disorder”.²² The One operates through this, limiting, shaping, and making it receptive to the higher will. It is highly significant that Plutarch describes this activity using Egyptian mythological figures. The One relates to the world through the *Logos* whose two aspects are seen as the soul and body of Osiris. While the soul is indestructible, the body is torn asunder by the ruler of the Underworld (Seth-Typhon) to be reassembled by the female divinity Isis. Contrast the sense of the following passage from *On Isis and Osiris*:

For what [truly] exists and is intelligible and is good prevails over destruction and change; but the images (*eikones*) which is perceptible and corporeal fashions from it, and the *logoi*, forms and likenesses which it assumes, are like *figures stamped on wax* in that they do not endure for ever. They are seized by the element of disorder and confusion which is driven here from the regions above and fights against Horus, whom Isis brings forth as a image of the intelligible, he being the perceptible world. (*De Iside* 373A)²³

with a passage from the Gnostic *Trimorphic Protennoia*:

The Archigenetor of Ignorance who ruled over Chaos and the Underworld produced a person in my (the *Protennoia*) Form. But he did not know that this one would become a sentence of dissolution for him, nor did he understand the Power which is in it. But now I have descended and have reached down into Chaos, and I was [near] those of mine who are in that place I am hidden among them, I give them Power, I give them Form... (40.23-34)²⁴

Isis and the female Protennoia share the same function, which might almost be described as one permitting Immanuel Kant’s *numenon* to surface through the *a priori* categories. As is usually the case in Gnostic thought, what might have been an absolute emphasis upon the masculine Word is contextualised by the feminine power operative within it. This feminine dynamic is seen to be an executor of a Primal Source which is itself beyond words, yet she herself employs the *dynamis* of *logoi* in the struggle against Chaos, Disorder, the Abyss, Ignorance, and Malign Powers. The Chaldean focus upon Hekate and the Iynges is also strongly suggested here.

In Plutarch’s dualism, based upon a late passage from Plato,²⁵ the unruly disorder is defined as an active force, a “Maleficent Soul” which is in a state of revolt against the manifest world.²⁶ Plutarch, besides drawing upon Egyptian thought, doubtlessly passed on from Ammonius, is also incorporating Persian elements into his thought, or is at least intent upon showing such parallels, considering Zoroastrian

²² Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 199.

²³ Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 204-205

²⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 412.

²⁵ Book Ten of the *Laws* (896Dff), in which an antagonist “of the opposite capacity” is set against the beneficent “World Soul.”

²⁶ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 202.

theology to be the “opinion of the majority of the wisest men”. In the same passage is found a depiction of a stark dualism that is indeed akin to the Persian:

Life and the cosmos, on the contrary.... are compounded of two opposite principles (*archai*) and of two antithetical powers (*dynameis*), one of which leads by a straight path and to the right, while the other reverses and bends back. For if nothing comes into being without a cause, and if good could not provide the cause of evil, then Nature must contain in itself the creation and origin of evil as well as good. (*De Is.* 369C)²⁷

Plutarch occupies a position midway between a radical and mitigated dualism. He does not posit the existence of a pre-existing Evil realm of equal force to the good, one which subsequently attacks the good realm as is the case with Manichaeism; rather he suggests that the Maleficent Soul created a proto-cosmos before the real one was made, a world of “wraith and phantasm”, which shares the above depiction in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* of the Archigenitor of Ignorance attempting to model a form of the higher *Protennoia*. The shared picture is further strengthened in the clear portrayal of this first proto-cosmos nonetheless being bound up with the higher feminine principle. For Plutarch it is the desire for order in Isis which brings this about, and in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* it is the “innocent sophia” over whom the lower powers attained a temporary victory, “the one who descended so that I (the *Protennoia*) would dissolve their ends” (40.15-17)²⁸.

Plutarch’s depiction of Isis draws upon the very heart of the Isis-worship of his time:

Thus Isis is the female principle in nature and that which receives all procreation, and so she is called by Plato the Nurse and the All-receiving.... Imbued in her she has a love of the first and most sovereign principle of all, which is the same as the Good, and this she longs for and pursues. The lot which lies with evil she shuns and rejects; she is, indeed, a sphere of activity and subject matter for both of them, but she inclines always of herself to what is better, offering herself to it for reproduction, and for the sowing in herself of effluxes and likenesses. In these she rejoices and she is glad when she is pregnant with them and teems with procreations. For procreation in Matter is an image of Being and an imitation of That which Is. (*De Iside* 372E)²⁹

²⁷ Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 190-191.

²⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 412.

²⁹ Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 202-4. See also Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987: “Isis is, in fact, the female principle of Nature, and is receptive of every form of generation, in accord with which she is called by Plato the gentle nurse and the all-receptive, and by most people has been called by countless names, since, because of the force of Reason, she turns herself to this thing or that.... [S]he has an innate love for the first and most dominant of all things, which is identical with the good, and this she yearns for and pursues; but the portion which comes from evil she tries to avoid and to reject, for she serves them both as place and means of growth,”(170-71).

The picture here is in accord with many Gnostic systems, in particular the *Trimorphic Protennoia* which abounds with feminine procreative imagery. We are in essence dealing with the Gnostic Sophia who, through her own fecundity, yearns towards the higher godhead. In the Gnostic model, the irrational World Soul is dragged down in bodily form into “sleep” and “forgetfulness”, a quintessentially Gnostic depiction. Dillon is quite correct in noting that this entity “is completely interwoven with the Rational Soul, maintaining a constant cosmic tension”.³⁰

Plutarch details another key feature of the Valentinian system which describes the extension of Sophia into the lower realms beyond *Horus* which, for Plutarch is the sensible cosmos. Plutarch attempted to correct previous conceptions here in recognising the pre-existence of the chaotic or irrational Soul, *before* the demiurgic creation.³¹ For the Valentinians this refers precisely to Sophia’s “formless abortion” which must be hypostasised by the demiurge, subsequent to the establishment of the Horus-boundary, into the equivalent of the Platonic Forms, and thence into the creation of the lower realm. This “abortion” cannot be supposed to have come about “ex nihilo”; rather the whole theogony is a “pleroma” of sexual energy and tension – Sophia’s desire to “know” the Father must be seen with this double entendre in mind as we shall see in Chapter 12. His compensating desire to know his “depths” can also be taken in this light, and the surfacing of these depths uses Sophia as an extension or facilitator of further theogonic developments, precisely the role of the Isis figure in Plutarch and the Protennoia of the *Trimorphic Protennoia*

Another key feature of Plutarch’s thought is the division of humanity into three classes, a concept at the heart of the Valentinian system, and found in various Gnostic texts.³²

Plutarch’s demonology reflects a similar world to that of the Chaldeans, a sublunary realm dominated by Hecate, and Dillon is close to the heart of things in noting that, “both God’s *pronoia* and his transcendence must be preserved, and the universe can tolerate no sharp divisions or sudden transitions”.³³ Gnostic thought embellishes things further by stipulating that even as an unperturbed Perfection the Primal Source, replete in its ineffable perfections, still “desired” to know its depths, to commence differentiation, aeonial extension, a stream of hypostases, a direct descent into the apogee of matter. This is implicit in Middle Platonism and the Chaldean system in any case and, as we shall see, it is explicit in Numenius. The pre-existent aspect of this pneumatic-hylic disorderly polarity is to be found in the ancient Egyptian concept of Nun, or rather Naunet, a watery “feminine” chaotic realm which girds the creation itself. And so it is we see Atum’s original onanistic act of creation mirrored exactly in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*,

³⁰ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 206.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

³² *Ibid.*, 214: “We seem to have here three classes of person, one without any higher element in their souls at all, another with a higher element to which they are obedient, and a third with a higher element with which they struggle, but by which they are finally subdued.” This third group should actually be situated between the two other poles as it is in Valentinian thought where they are called hylics, psychics, and pneumatics respectively.

³³ *Ibid.*, 217.

I am androgynous. I [am Mother], I am Father since I [cohabit] with myself alone, and I [copulate] with myself alone (45.2).³⁴

Atum does not create *ex nihilo*, but creates from out of the Nun. Plutarch's Isis embraces the abyss before the cosmos itself is created and this, too, is from the ancient Heliopolitan theology, as expressed here in a Pyramid Text:

I was born in the Abyss before the sky existed, before the earth existed, before that which was to be made firm existed, before turmoil existed (PT Utt. 486, §1040).³⁵

While the speaker is ostensibly the masculine Atum, the most important feature of this system is the emphasis upon the androgyny of the primal creative power, and a balancing of masculine and feminine energies in each subsequent creative act. The Memphite Theology recontextualised the above by establishing the creative *logos* of Ptah above the procreative Atum. Atum takes on distinctly demiurgic characteristics in the Memphite view.³⁶

Finally, Plutarch's soteriology depicts the soul's struggle with the demonic forces of the lower world and it is here that we receive the most plangent reverberation of the Gnostic *mood* in describing that moment when the soul attempts to ascend:

Whilst we are immersed in worldly affairs, and are changing bodies, as fit vehicles for our conveyance, he lets us alone to try our strength, patiently to stem the tide and get into the haven by ourselves; but if a soul hath gone through the trials of a thousand generations, and now, when her course is almost finished, strives bravely, and with a great deal of labour to ascend, the Deity permits her proper Genius to aid her, and even gives leave to any other that is willing to assist. The Daemon, thus permitted, presently sets about the work; and upon his approach, if the soul obeys and hearkens to his directions, she is saved; if not, the Daemon leaves her, and she lies in a miserable condition. (*De genio Socratis*, 24³⁷)

This vision of the sophia figure desperately attempting to return to the heights is at the heart of a myriad number of Gnostic representations, as it is in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*:

When the Epinoia of Light understood (this) she entreated the other Creation in humiliation. She said, ["Give unto me another existence] so that I will come to the given Power, lest I exist in an [evil] Order." [And the] entire [assembled]

³⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 422.

³⁵ Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 173.

³⁶ "This identification of Ptah with cosmic intelligence also puts Atum's demiurgic qualities and functions into relief." Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 12.

³⁷ Trans. William W. Goodwin, *Plutarch's Morals*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1874), 414.

House of Glory agreed with her word. They brought a blessing upon her and the exalted Order expelled it (the lower Order) from her. (39.32-40.4)³⁸

It is also powerfully present in the repetitious “laments” of Sophia in the *Pistis Sophia*, and all of Valentinian thought, including the *Tripartite Tractate*:

And through that one (the *Logos*), begets him(self) along with that which he is, and is himself renewed along with the one (*Sophia*) who came upon him, through his brother (the *Logos*) who sees him and entreats him about the matter, namely the one(*Sophia*) who desired to ascend to him. (NHC I,5 75.4-9)³⁹

To conclude, it must be emphasised that just prior to the appearance of the major Gnostic teachers of Alexandria, Plutarch’s system can be seen to be philosophically contiguous in breadth and detail, displaying all of the “syncretism” and “elitism” commonly associated with Gnostic thought. Plutarch’s indebtedness to his Egyptian mentor Ammonius cannot be doubted, and it is safe to say that many of the concepts examined here must have been rife in Alexandria in the first century C.E..

It is now an appropriate juncture at which to introduce Numenius whose floruit was c.150 C.E.. Numenius was an exact contemporary of numerous Gnostic teachers in Egypt as well as the purported authors of the *Chaldean Oracles*. Although we can’t conclusively demonstrate this given the incomplete corpus we have for Numenius, it is nonetheless a striking fact that the thought of Numenius takes the *rhetorical* form of a Hermetic dialogue more than the Platonic.⁴⁰ Numenius, also, demonstrates that he is a pluralist *par excellence*, drawing from Jewish, Brahman, Magian, and Egyptian thought. Numenius manifests the aforementioned Stoic-Skeptic split in launching a blistering attack on Antiochus for going over to the Stoic side, as well as heaping comic ridicule upon the Skeptic Lacydes who is seen to dogmatically will *epochê* (suspension of belief) in the face of clear evidence of household theft by his servants⁴¹ Numenius is notable, then, for he clearly delimits his independent philosophical trajectory from Stoicism and Skepticism.

The dualism of Numenius is as acute as Plutarch’s, citing Plato for the existence of two World Souls, the one beneficent, the other malevolent: “Everywhere does the nature of evil mingle with Providence, as some flaw”.⁴² A tripartite cosmology is present here, as with the other systems so far examined: the first is the “Father”, the second “Creator”, and the third “Creature”. The first “occupies himself

³⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 410, 412.

³⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 230.

⁴⁰ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 363.

⁴¹ See *The Neoplatonic Writings of Numenius*, trans. Kenneth Guthrie (1917; reprint, Lawrence, Kansas: Selene Books, 1987), § VII.3, “The Comic Experience of Lakydes.” This is an interesting precursor of a host of similar misconceived criticisms of Skeptical thought, all of which fail to understand the fact that a Skeptic would not deign to push *epochê* on the level of the *eulogon*, or common-sense.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

therewith (creation) only from a distance”.⁴³ Creation is depicted as birth, and “wetness” with the souls hovering over the divine waters in a depiction reminiscent of Atum and Nun. The third is a lower aspect of the second and is similar to Plutarch’s soul and body of Osiris, although the evil World Soul takes on a more independent status than a mere description of a “down-side” of Isis in Plutarch’s view. The demiurge is depicted in strictly neutral terms in that he is good only as a conduit for the higher Good.⁴⁴ The First God acts out of “desire” for the Second, and the Second for the Third; the Second only acts in demiurgic fashion in conjunction with the Third.

As with Plutarch, this theogonic extension, as it were, plunges into the watery Abyss of fluid Matter, which is seen to be a positive, evil force.⁴⁵ Numenius’s World Soul, however, is not seen to be in complete revolt against this process, but rather submits, “albeit with certain irreducible recalcitrance”, as Dillon elegantly puts it.⁴⁶ In any event, the descent of the soul represents a tragic inducement of a higher entity into the hylic accretion of bodily form. In descending into the cosmos, Numenius depicts the soul as struggling with demons of the west, “inasmuch as, according to the belief of the Egyptians, the West is the abode of harmful demons”.⁴⁷

This is not the place to attempt a study of the affinities between Numenius and the Chaldean Oracles, however, taken together, they suggest a common dualist backdrop to Gnostic thought that was far more widespread than is generally appreciated. One key overlap is in a shared negative view of the body. For the Chaldeans the body is “the root of all evil”⁴⁸; Numenius sees a perpetual struggle between opposed souls in humankind which allows for no reconciliation: the soul exists in the body as in a prison, also a battlefield between warring factions (rational Good vs. irrational Evil).

Albinus of Smyrna (c. 153), a contemporary of Numenius, is difficult to isolate amongst a welter of Middle Platonic sources, and it is perhaps best to assume that, as Dillon puts it, “we are in fact giving more an account of Middle Platonic doctrine in general”⁴⁹ to which I would add that he is clearly influenced by Stoic doctrine and hence does not indicate the same pronounced degree of dualist tendencies in common with the other philosophers here examined. I should say that what Chaeremon accomplishes in his idealisation of the Egyptian priesthood, Albinus attempts in his valorisation of the Philosophical Life. A work attributed to Albinus,

⁴³ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁴ A much misunderstood aspect of Gnostic thought where it is assumed that the Gnostic universe must depict the demiurge as being evil. In fact a mitigated dualist system must, by virtue of an inner theogonic consistency, posit the demiurge as being ignorant, a hapless tool, or else simply doing the best that he is able to do with limited resources. This is consistent in all Valentinian tractates.

⁴⁵ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 373.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 375.

⁴⁷ Guthrie, *Neoplatonic Writings*, 50.

⁴⁸ Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*, 277.

⁴⁹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 272.

the *Didaskalikos (Guide to the Doctrines of Plato)*, begins with the definition that Philosophy is “a striving after wisdom or a release and a redirecting of the soul from the body”⁵⁰, this based upon the intelligible world. Elsewhere, a distinction of a type of knowledge independent of sense-perception is developed.

Another Middle Platonic development held in common with Gnostic thought is a focus upon the *need* for theogony in the peerless and motionless One. One sees this contradictory depiction in the thought of Albinus:

Since Mind is better than Soul, and Mind in activity intelligising all things simultaneously and eternally, is better than mind in potentiality, and nobler than this is the cause of this and whatever might exist superior to these, this would be the Primal God, which is the cause of the eternal activity of the mind of the whole heaven (i.e. of the cosmos). The former, being motionless itself, directs its activity towards the latter, even as the sun towards vision, when someone looks at it, and as an object of desire sets desire in motion, while remaining itself motionless; even thus will this Mind move the mind of the whole heaven.⁵¹

This can be profitably compared with the Gnostic Basileides of Alexandria, a contemporary of Albinus who, according to Hippolytus, targets the same issue:

Since therefore there was nothing, no matter, no substance, nothing insubstantial, nothing simple, nothing composite, nothing non-composite, nothing imperceptible (non subjective), no man, no angel, no god, nothing at all that can be named or can be apprehended by sense perception, nothing of the mental things and thus (also nothing of all that which) can be simply described in even more subtle ways, the non-existent god... without intelligence, without perception, without will, without resolve, without impulse, without desire, wished to make a world. I say ‘he wished’, he says, for want of a word, wish, intelligence, and perception being excluded. By ‘world’ (I mean) not the flat, divisible world which later divided itself, but a world-seed.⁵²

As does Plotinus a few centuries later, evidenced in this description of his thought:

Nous proceeded from the One (and Soul from *Nous*) without in any way affecting its Source. There is no activity on the part of the One, still less any willing or planning or choice... There is simply a giving-out which leaves the Source unchanged and undiminished. But though this giving-out is necessary, in the sense that it cannot be conceived as not happening or as happening otherwise, it is also entirely spontaneous: there is no room for any sort of binding or constraint, internal or external, in Plotinus’ thought about the One.⁵³

⁵⁰ Jeremiah Reedy, trans., *The Platonic Doctrines of Albinus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1991), 21.

⁵¹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 282.

⁵² Hippolytus, *Refutatio* VII 21.1. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic texts*, vol 1, 64.

⁵³ A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus: A Volume of Selections* (London: Unwin & Allen, 1953), 33.

I have drawn upon these extensive quotations to make a number of important points. First off, Gnostic and Platonic interests coincide in all three passages. Secondly, and just as important, the expressions used are quite similar; there is in fact no great conceptual abyss between supposed philosophical and mythological discourses. This passage from Basileides is in fact remarkable for its vigour and clarity, and his concept of the “world-seed” is directly analogous to the realm of the Platonic Forms. The last point, and one which shall be returned to in our examination of Ammonius Saccas, is that there is no great difference between Plotinus, vehement anti-Gnostic, and Basileides on this issue.⁵⁴ Nor is this some minor abstruse point but is in fact at the very heart of all emanationist doctrines: *how* and *why* does a Perfect One, residing in tranquil motionlessness, commence an emanation process which eventually produces a lesser, distant, or inferior, realm?⁵⁵

The World-Soul of Albinus is an entity which requires awakening and ordering⁵⁶; this, too, is a critical act in the Basileidean theology: “Then the Gospel had to come to the Sphere of the Seven, so that the Ruler of the Hebdomad might also be taught and have the Gospel brought to him”.⁵⁷ A *meta-language* of *gnosis* is also the dynamic by which the Archgenitor of the *Trimorphic Protennoia* comes to realise his essential state of Ignorance:

For behold, he himself, the Archgenitor of our birth in whom we took pride, even he is ignorant about this Utterance” (44.27)⁵⁸

As with Plutarch, the World-Soul of Albinus pre-existed in a dormant fashion, “a sort of trancelike sleep”⁵⁹ which is made to look upon “the objects of intellection” of the

⁵⁴ However, it should be noted that, according to Hippolytus, Basileides was against emanationism *per se* (describing God in such a scheme as a spider at the centre of its web), preferring instead to detail a Memphite conception of immediate creation by the Word: “the seed of the world, says he, came from the non-existent, the word which was spoken. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 65.

⁵⁵ See Jan Zandee’s important work, *The Terminology of Plotinus and of Some Gnostic Writings, Mainly the Fourth Treatise of the Jung Codex* (Leiden: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in Het Nabije Oosten, 1961). Numerous textual parallels are drawn out between the thought of Plotinus and that expressed in the *Gnostic Tripartite Tractate*. Zandee’s conclusion that, “Plotinus only gradually departed from gnostic dualism and became a more monistic thinker,”(3) is contextualised as a reaction of the older Plotinus, and his larger conclusion that “Plotinus as well as the Gnostics draw from the common well of Middle Platonism,” (40) is clearly the case. With respect to the core concept of emanationism (*probole*), Zandee’s depiction of Plotinian and Gnostic necessity can also be applied to Middle Platonism as a whole, as well as the Chaldean system: “Creation has not been intended consciously. It is not based on a determined plan of the creator, nor on a constraint put upon him from the outside; but it is founded upon an inner necessity, just as fire must radiate warmth,”(31).

⁵⁶ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 284.

⁵⁷ From Hippolytus, *Refutatio* VII 26.4; Foerster, *A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 71.

⁵⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 420.

Father, thereby receiving the Forms and shapes. This striving towards the thoughts of God, the Platonic Ideas, is depicted as a process of recollection (*anamnêsis*) furthered by “small sparks” (*aithygmata*) which, in the nature of *déja vu*, prompt the soul to recall its previous existences and strive upwards.⁶⁰ Likewise, the soul comes to realise its state of forgetfulness in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and the catalyst of *gnosis* is much the same:

I went beneath their language and told the Mysteries to my own, a Hidden Mystery (through which) the fetters and sleep of Eternity were dissolved. (41.26)⁶¹

One cannot differentiate between Philosophy and Gnosis as there do not appear to be critical differences between the nature of the “small sparks” of philosophical insight described by Albinus, and the Gnosis which operates “beneath language” in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*. This is a pivotal test case to deal with, for in both systems the reception of this particular mode of knowledge is of the highest soteriological significance. What is missing in the system of Albinus is an enhanced female salvific figure seen to exist in intimate collusion with the *word*, or *iynges* in the Chaldean system.

Albinus depicts a counter-movement in the soul, a “wantonness” or “wilfulness” bound up in its irrational nature, a downward moving erring autonomy akin to the Gnostic depiction of hylic lust that is a pre-existent given, as expressed in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*:

For as for our tree from which we grew, a fruit of Ignorance is what it possesses, and death also exists in its leaves, and Darkness exists beneath the shade of its boughs, (from) which we plucked with guile and lust, this (tree) of the Chaos of Ignorance which became for us a dwelling-place (44.20)⁶²

Atticus was another influential philosopher in this time period (his floruit was about 176 C.E.), who was a leader of Platonism in Athens following Taurus (a Skeptic), possibly head of the Athenian Academy there, assuming it existed at all.⁶³

God, for Atticus, is transcendent, and the Logos is his instrument, not simply an aspect of the divine countenance. Again, unordered matter is pre-existent, along with “the Maleficent Soul” (*kakergetis psychê*). The syllogistic thrust of Atticus’ speculation is as follows: motion comes from the soul and this motion is disorderly, therefore there is a disorderly soul. This soul is adulterated by the higher Forms pressing down, and the result is a lower World Soul akin to Plutarch’s Isis.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 287.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 291.

⁶¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 414.

⁶² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 420.

⁶³ Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 247-48.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 254.

Harpocraton of Argos (c. 180 C.E.) is noted by Proclus as being a pupil of Atticus. The members of the Olympian pantheon are referred to as “Archons” and the demiurge is “head Archon”, akin to Basileides’ depiction of “the great Archon” (Hippolytus, *Refutatio*, X,14.6). The very nature of the body and matter is quintessentially evil for Harpocraton, and incarnation into such a state is seen to be an unmitigated disaster. One can hardly seek a more “gnostic” version of Platonic thought in the few telling essentials we have from Harpocraton. A socio-historical hermeneutic here must ask how influential these philosophers were – did they break ground on their own, or were they reflective of a larger ground-swell of public opinion? Again, the larger focus upon Hellenistic religions must affirm the latter.

The last philosophical figure to be taken up here is the mysterious personage of Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria (c. 210 C.E.). It is unfortunate indeed that we have no direct insights available into the teachings of the mentor of Origen and Plotinus. A strong case can be made, I believe, to link Saccas within the dualist philosophical trajectory we have thus far delimited.

In the first instance, Porphyry notes that Plotinus, after experiencing disappointment with various Alexandrian teachers, became quite enthused with Saccas after being directed to this teacher by a friend. Porphyry notes that,

The friend, understanding the desire of his (Plotinus’) heart, sent him to Ammonius, whom he had not so far tried. He went and heard him and said to his friend, “This is the man I was looking for.” From that day he stayed with Ammonius and acquired so complete a training in philosophy that he became eager to make acquaintance with the Persian philosophical discipline and that prevailing among the Indians (*Life* 3.11-17).⁶⁵

Dillon is surely correct in assuming from this that Saccas is highly reminiscent of Numenius in his incorporation of Persian and Indian elements into his philosophical outlook. Porphyry in fact mentions that the commentaries of Numenius and Atticus were read in the school of Plotinus. Of special import in this passage as it continues, is the hermeneutical emphasis given to Plotinus’ reading of these texts:

But he did not just speak straight out of these books but took a distinctive personal line in his consideration, and brought the mind (*nous*) of Ammonius to bear on the investigations in hand. He quickly absorbed what was read, and would give the sense of some profound subject of study in a few words and pass on (*Life* 14.13-18).⁶⁶

This is an intriguing reference, although it is oblique, for the sense is of a particularly *personal* insight applied to language, a teachable approach to language that aims for intuitive *insight*, and a method that Plotinus acquired from Ammonius Saccas, his teacher in Egypt. Plotinus elsewhere commends the Egyptians for their appreciation of sacred sounds as we have noted.

It seems clear that the ostensible anti-Gnostic stance of Plotinus is essentially reactionary; he had Gnostics in his school and he must have been exposed to Gnostic

⁶⁵ *Plotinus I: Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books; Enneads I. 1-9*, trans. A.H. Armstrong (1966; reprint, Loeb Classical, 1989), 9.

⁶⁶ *Plotinus I*, 41.

doctrines in Egypt. The fact that he left Egypt for Rome may indicate a desire to physically remove himself from the heartland of an explicitly dualist tendency in philosophy which aggravated the implicitly dualist in his own.⁶⁷ He was never able to reconcile this dualism in his speculations,⁶⁸ and the fact that he never cites Ammonius in support of his case, along with the positive picture of Ammonius given by Porphyry above, strengthens the impression that Plotinus continued to hold his mentor in high esteem throughout his life, although he fundamentally disagreed with the more enhanced “Persian” dualism in his teachings. We have noted the overlap of philosophical interest in Plotinus and Basileides on one major issue; in fact the whole tenor of Plotinian speculation is Gnostic in many ways, and Valentinus and Plotinus are intimate allies as contrasted with the cosmology of Mani whose teachers were debating with philosophers in Alexandria in the second year of Plotinus’ understudy with Ammonius Saccas (244 C.E.). And so the following famous passage from Book Four of *The Enneads* could have been written by any Egyptian Gnostic:

Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body, when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body. (*Ennead* IV.8, 1-11)⁶⁹

The final point to be made with respect to Ammonius Saccas is that this passage reinforces Porphyry’s depiction of a special form of philosophical insight which exists above “discursive reasoning”. This can be linked with the poetic discourse of Parmenides, the “true Sophia” of Xenocrates, the “small sparks” of Albinus, the eagerness of Numenius for Mysteries,⁷⁰ and the “*dynamis* of *logoi*” in Plutarch. Alongside this trajectory we have the pervasive *donné* of *gnosis* in the Gnostic movement. It is at this point of synthesis that I end my exposition of Greek dualist philosophical thought and set about detailing the differences – more to the point the underlying affinities – that exist between theurgy, philosophy, and *gnosis*.

This point is emphasised here to suggest that the logical end-point of Middle Platonism is not at all a refutation of Gnostic thought as is commonly believed; rather,

⁶⁷ In this we may have another clue as to the philosophy of Ammonius Saccas. It is a psychological dynamic of overcompensation that one tends to be most passionately opposed to that which one once believed in. The whole process of conversion dictates this behaviour, which we see in Saul of Tarsus for example, or in Augustine’s efforts to discredit Manichaeism after spending nine years as a fellow auditor.

⁶⁸ With regards to the two Plotinian concepts of the soul’s descent into an “inferior” world, and the rather Stoic praise given to the excellence of the cosmos, J.M. Rist makes the following observation: “The two positions may be incompatible, the result of conflicting pressures which Plotinus was never able to resolve,” *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, 112.

⁶⁹ *Plotinus IV: Enneads IV. 1-9*, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Loeb Classical Library, 1984), 397.

⁷⁰ Guthrie, *Neoplatonic Writings*, 42.

the dualism is pervasive throughout, and Plotinus is no exception. Moreover, we must go further here and posit definite intellectual collaboration between dualist Middle Platonist and Gnostic thought. As we have evidence of congress between Plotinus and his Gnostic students so, too, Alexander of Lycopolis reports that his fellow philosophers were being converted following debates with Manichaean missionaries in Egypt.⁷¹ The boundary between Valentinus, Carpocrates, and Basileides in Alexandria, and Plutarch, Numenius, Cronius, and Albinus can hardly have been a rancorous or contentious one.⁷² In fact the Persian propensities of Numenius, Plutarch, and Ammonius Saccas allow us to conclude that the converts Alexander speaks of when he wrote his treatise at the end of the third century C.E. were likely part of this school. As we have evidence on both sides of inclusivistic tendencies and an openness to dialectic, we can assume that Gnostics and Platonists were commonly involved in discussion and debate. The dualist school of Middle Platonism must certainly have viewed many Gnostic teachers as colleagues, as with modern Philosophy professors whose credentials are quite in order, yet who develop a somewhat tarnished reputation – or enhanced depending upon the milieu – for “mystical pursuits” on the side. I have attempted to show that the Egyptian priest stands behind the Gnostic of Graeco-Roman times, that the religious views of Egypt were thus conveyed and transformed through these literate social classes; however, Alexandria, in its development of a more philosophical Hellenistic Gnosis, was actively sought out by some of the finest philosophical minds of the times and their contribution generated a very different sort of *gnosis* from the Archaic. The so-called “Middle Platonic” philosophers, along with the ever theogony-obsessive Egyptian philosopher-priests, developed the first early Gnostic treatises in Egypt at an early date as *Eugnostos the Blessed* bears out.

In turning to examine *gnosis* within the context of Hellenistic Egypt, that is, predating the rise of the major Gnostic groups that we know of in Roman Egypt, there are three main Gnostic texts that stand out above the rest: *The Pistis Sophia*, *The Books of Jeu*, and *Eugnostos* (NHC III,3 & V,1). The first two works shall be examined in the following Chapter under the rubric of Archaic Gnosis; *Eugnostos* exists apart in evidencing an early example of Egyptian Gnostic thought and it is to be dated to the first century B.C.E.⁷³ *Eugnostos* begins with a refutation of three

⁷¹ See Pieter Willem van der Horst and J. Mansfeld, eds and trans., *An Alexandrian Platonist Against Dualism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1974), 58: “I, for one, do not wish to deny that these doctrines are capable of influencing the minds of those who uncritically accept this theory, especially since deceitful expositions of this kind were successful in making converts out of certain fellow-philosophers of mine.”

⁷² For example, Marcellina, a disciple of Carpocrates, came to Rome to disseminate her Gnostic faith. According to Irenaeus, this group used a painted image of Jesus, setting it forth, “with the images of the philosophers of the world,” (*Adv. Haer.* I, 25.6), trans. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 38.

⁷³ Parrott, “Eugnostos and ‘All the Philosophers’”, 154, dates it here on the basis of a reference to “all the philosophers” (III.70.15) which excludes mention of the Platonists; Parrott’s citation is worth repeating here: “During these centuries (ending with 31 B.C.E.) it is neither Platonism nor the peripatetic tradition established by Aristotle which occupies the central place in ancient philosophy, but Stoicism, Scepticism, and Epicureanism...” Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 1.

different philosophical positions, referring to those men who have inquired about God:

The wisest among them have speculated about the truth from the ordering of the world. And the speculation has not reached the truth. For the ordering is spoken of in three opinions by all the philosophers, hence they do not agree. For some of them say about the world that it was directed by itself. Others, that it is providence, others that it is fate. But it is none of these. (NHC III, 70.8-22)⁷⁴

Parrott identifies the three positions with the Epicureans, Stoics and Babylonian astrologers respectively and his general point about a lack of reference to Platonism is sound, although a jaundiced view towards Fate in the Hellenistic world was a keynote feature of the time, one derived from a number of directions and with many nuances.⁷⁵ With respect to the first point the text indicts the “self-made” as an “empty life” (NHC III 71.1)⁷⁶, and yet throughout the following text there are references to the “self-made Father” (e.g. NHC III 75.6)⁷⁷, and I understand this to mean that a self-made divinity within a theogonic process (that our author describes in great detail) is the true understanding, whereas self-made in a rigid and all-inclusive monistic sense is not: Parrott makes the point that this is in essence the ethic of hedonism in Epicureanism.⁷⁸ With this we must agree, and in fact we have a passage from Epicurus not cited by Parrott that is remarkably cognate with the above:

Destiny, which some introduce as sovereign over all things, he [the hedonist] laughs to scorn, affirming rather that some things happen of necessity, others by chance, others through our own agency. (Diogenes Laertius 10.133)⁷⁹

Eugnostos was apparently a very popular tractate among later Gnostics and one can detect a number of themes that show up in other tractates, specifically, an anti-philosophical stance, an apophatic description of the Primal Parent, and a strong development of an Egyptian emanationist theogony. We shall return to the first point at the end of this chapter. The epithets concerning the Parent are typical of a number of Gnostic texts: immortal, unnameable, imperishable, incomprehensible,

⁷⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII: *Nag Hammadi Codices III, 3-4 and V,1*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 44.

⁷⁵ Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 157-58: “Already by the end of the nineteenth century, in which the Hellenistic age was first defined, it had been proposed that the gnostic teachings of late antiquity were directed against a deterministic rule of fate, that is, the uncontested sovereignty of astrological *heimarmene*. But concern with the rule of fate in the Hellenistic world was not limited to the anticosmic protest of late antiquity, nor was the notion of fate limited to the view of an oppressive *heimarmene*. The Hellenistic structure of fate itself was in transformation along with the transitory world it articulated.”

⁷⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 46.

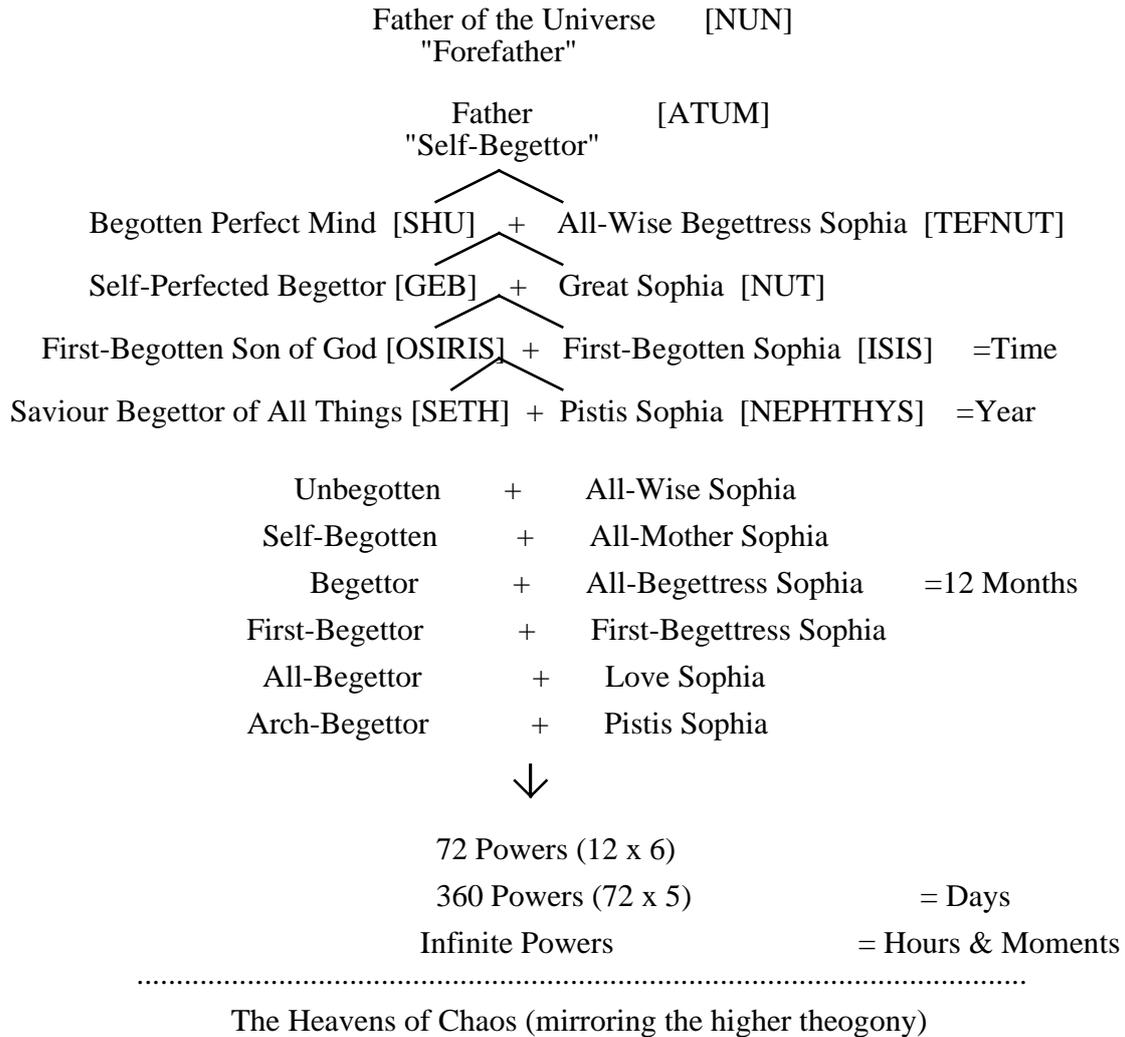
⁷⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 72.

⁷⁸ Parrott, “Eugnostos and Àll the Philosophers’,” 159.

⁷⁹ Loeb, vol.2, 659.

immeasurable, unknowable, etc., these are important features of *The Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3), *The Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5), *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1, III,1 IV, 1 & BG 8502,2), *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2 & IV,2), *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (NHC VII,2), *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3), *The Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1), *The Untitled Text* (Bruce MS 96), and *The Pistis Sophia* (Askew Codex), to name only the more prominent examples where the apophatic descriptions usually occur at the beginning of the work.

The text describes an emanationist system that is quintessentially Heliopolitan and it can be laid out as follows:



Parrot errs in identifying this with the Amun theology of Thebes for the simple reason that he does not recognise the emphasis upon the ennead . Parrott counts only five levels above the second group of 12 deities, and notes that the text claims that “they are the type of those who proceeded them”. (NHC III.82.10)⁸⁰, concluding that the sixth pair in the second group is missing in the first group. This is in fact not the case, for the classic Heliopolitan relationship between Nun and Atum is evident, wherein

⁸⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 116.

Atum is depicted as lying inert in Nun. It is a testament to the textual faithfulness to this close relationship in Egyptian thought, that Parrot misses it. The text describes this entity as follows:

He sees himself within himself, like a mirror, having appeared in his likeness as Self-Father, that is, Self-Begetter, and as Confrontor, since he is confronted Unbegotten First Existent. He is indeed of equal age with the one who is before him, but he is not equal to him in power. (NHC III 75.3-12)⁸¹

In the Heliopolitan view, Atum's role merges with the *Ur-Sitz* of Nun: *tm* means "everything" or "complete"⁸²; paradoxically, it can also mean "to become non-existent"⁸³ Atum's self-generation takes place within the context of Nun. The Coffin texts describe this relationship:

Atum came into being in chaos (CT II Spell 76, line 4)⁸⁴
Humankind who come forth from my eye, (they) whom I sent out while I was alone with Nut in inertness (CT II Spell 80, line 3)⁸⁵

Parrott identifies the highest deity here with Amun on the basis of his hiddenness, but this is one of a number of qualities and is not unduly emphasised in the text. Atum for that matter, displays the same qualities:

I am He (Atum) whose name is secret, more holy of throne than the Chaos-gods (BD Spell 7)⁸⁶

The text identifies the aeons as "the Sons of the Unbegotten Father" which suggests Nun's title of "father of the gods" as has been noted, and Atum's act of self-generation need hardly be emphasised at this point except to say that it is in complete accord with the second theogonic entity described as "Self-Begetter". This common feature of Gnostic thought can be traced back to the ancient Egyptian epithet for the creator god, *hpr ds.f*, literally "came into being by himself".

Below Atum we have the eight other members of the Heliopolitan ennead. Another indicator of this is the figure of Seth exactly where he should appear (the "Saviour – Begetter of All Things" is identified as Seth in the text) and this is another example of Egypto-Greek heuristic in fusing the Egyptian god with the Jewish Old Testament figure. The lowest entity in the hierarchy is the demiurge "Arch-Begetter"

⁸¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 72, 74.

⁸² Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (1962; reprint, Oxford: University Press, 1991), 298.

⁸³ Rudolph Anthes, "Egyptian Theology in the 3rd millenium B.C.," *JNES* 18 (1959): 177.

⁸⁴ Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 78.

⁸⁵ Author's translation; Hieroglyphic transcription from Adriaan de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938), 33.

⁸⁶ Faulkner, *Book of the Dead*, 36.

(correctly identified as Yaldabaoth in the Christian redaction) seen here as the consort of Pistis Sophia who is also located in typical Gnostic fashion just before the lower realms. Parrott neglects to take into consideration that the “heavens of chaos” are a reflection of the aeonic realities above, another Egyptian and Gnostic *donnée*. This realm is described as follows:

“here below error, which exists with truth, contests it” (NHC III 77.6-9)⁸⁷ and the upshot of the theogonic process is summed up as follows: “and in this way the defect of femaleness appeared” (NHC III 85.6-8)⁸⁸, both, again, quintessentially Gnostic descriptions. And so “the defect of femaleness” statement is not a later gnosticising addition, as Parrot would have it, but is contiguous with the entire thrust of the piece. Likewise “Immortal Androgynous Man” anticipates numerous Gnostic references to the androgynous Primal man. One concurs that the tractate is perhaps proto-gnostic in a number of regards, but it is not at all “un-gnostic as Parrott, with qualifications, maintains.”⁸⁹

As a very early Gnostic text, this work illustrates a number of key elements, not the least of which is the presence of the Egyptian theogonic paradigm. This model, however, has had its constitutive mythological figures transformed into hypostases whose functions, arranged hierarchically, are intended to give insight into the higher realm of which the lower is but a reflection. The function of the Heliopolitan ennead is here reflected downwards twofold in order to create *theogonic distance* between the source and Chaos. The Christianised *Sophia of Jesus Christ* explicates the Gnostic view that is implicit in our text; namely, that the third duplication of the ennead occurs in chaos and that the final male aeon, the “Arch-Begetter” is the arrogant demiurge Yaldabaoth.

The interesting perspective on time in the tractate also owes its conception to the Egyptian distinction between *nhh* and *dt*, here defined in terms of the perishable and imperishable:

Now a difference existed among the imperishable aeons. Let us, then, consider it this way. Everything that came from the perishable will perish, since it came from the perishable. Whatever came from imperishableness will not perish but will become imperishable, since it came from imperishableness. So, many men went astray because they had not known this difference; that is, they died. (NHC III 73.17-74.7)⁹⁰

Jan Assmann sees *nhh*-time as bound up with life *on this side* (*Diesseits*), pertaining to the king, the state, the forces of nature, “the perpetuity of discontinuity, the unities

⁸⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 86.

⁸⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 140.

⁸⁹ “*Eugnostos* is not gnostic, in any classic sense. With the exception of one brief passage, which appears to be an editorial addition [the female defect passage], the attitude toward the visible world is more positive than one finds in later gnostic writings”, Parrott, “*Eugnostos* and ‘All the Philosophers’,” 154-55.

⁹⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 64, 66.

of countable aspects of time”.⁹¹ Time and life in this view cannot be divided. *Dt* represents an underlying, or overarching, archetype *on the other side (Jenseits)*, one which eternally endures in a state of static unchangableness, complete and immutable, generating what Assmann describes as “the unlimited nature of the continuous aspects of time”.⁹² The critical line in the above quotation is the reference to a difference existing among the imperishable aeons: if the difference is perishability vs. imperishability, and the aeons are all imperishable, how does the difference exist among them? For the answer to this we note their association with the elements of time that are listed on the right column of the diagram above. “Time” begins on the fifth level of the first ennead and is seen to itself emanate into its lowest level, that of “hours and moments”. Perishableness, among the imperishable aeons, is associated with the passage of *nhh*-time. At first glance this time would appear to start with the fifth level of the first ennead, at least in archetypal fashion, but is more probably to be associated with “the heavens of chaos”.

With its firm Egyptian *Sitz* and theological presence, its reference to a “knowledge principle” and complete lack of magical elements, *Eugnostos* is perhaps our earliest example of Hellenistic Gnosis. It is our one text that can with fair certainty be placed in Egypt before Roman rule. An important indication of the time and date here is the calendrical evidence to link this text with the Egyptian civil calendar, also the case in the *Pistis Sophia*. The cosmological numbers 6, 9, 12, 72, and 360 are emphasised, while the calendrical figures of 12 and 360 are notable. It is therefore of decisive interest that the Christianised redaction of this text into *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* drops all numeric allusions, retaining only the number 12. As Benno Przybylski rightly observes, “the author of *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* in turn found even the reworked calendrical system of *Eugnostos the Blessed* to be a cause of embarrassment. Not wanting to be in conflict with the official calendar of the Roman Empire he dropped the reference to the number 360 and only retained the number 12”.⁹³ 12 was a safe number to retain as it was common to all calendrical systems. The transition here is from Egyptian/pagan/Ptolemaic-period Gnostic text, to Egyptian/Greek-Christian Roman-Period Gnostic.

There is no dissimilarity in the dualist *mood* that subtends the speculations of all of the above: emanationism itself is the primal source, the system from whence these conceptual hypostases stream forth, be they theurgic, philosophic, or Gnostic. For lack of convincing evidence our other texts are to be dated later than *Eugnostos* and it is to these that we now turn in order to discuss Hellenistic Gnosis more fully, along with its spiritual sister Archaic Gnosis.

⁹¹ Jan Assman, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im Alten Ägypten: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Ewigkeit* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1975), 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹³ Benno Przybylski, “The Role of Calendrical Data in Gnostic Literature,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980): 66.

Chapter Eight: Roman-Pagan Egypt: Archaic Gnosis vs. Hellenistic Gnosis

A central hermeneutic problem, one that arises in attempting to differentiate the “philosophical” from the “mythological” in retrospect, results from fact that the modern tradition of “Philosophy”, in the polarised occidental pseudo-scientific sense, introjects itself within an “oriental” milieu, a speculative soil wherein the roots of philosophy itself are historically intertwined with the mythological. While the split can be traced between Platonist/Aristotelian antipathies towards their less analytical counterparts, and vice versa, the Middle Platonic era as coincident with the Gnostics does not demonstrate any great schism. The pronounced dualisms of Plutarch and Numenius, their openness to Persian and Indian thought, their affinity with the Egyptian, and their physical and temporal proximity to the Gnostics, these do not allow them to be exclusively situated upon the philosophical side of the divide; nor do the kindred metaphysical speculations of the Greek-educated Gnostic teachers of Alexandria allow them to be slotted onto the mythological side of a rift between two supposedly distinct geo-cultural or methodological plates. Disclaimers from both sides notwithstanding, the Middle Platonic philosophers were working on quintessentially Gnostic cosmological concerns; the Gnostics for their part were able to use Greek philosophical terms and methods.

Perhaps the greatest failure of the orientalist approach to this array has to do with the fragmenting indirections of a hermeneutic prepossessed with notions of the “syncretistic”, a marginalising strategy which etiolates this “dazzling tangle of metaphysical thought” beneath the broader trajectories with which the Traditions involved would prefer to ally themselves.¹ Classical Studies and Christian Origins are disinclined to speak of synthesis in this wide-spread dualist Hellenistic *Weltanschauung*, preferring instead to temporise about incompatible points of origin, hopeless derivations, and parasitical relationships, as though a wild chaotic sea of mental disorder existed about an archipelago of firm philological landfalls, affording such safe harbours as Plato and the Academy, Aristotle, Paul, John and the Synoptics, Plotinus, Clement, the Patristic polemicists, and of course almost all Latin authors. The sunken reefs of the Chaldeans, Middle Platonists, Sophists and Skeptics, Hermeticists, the late-period Egyptian priesthood, the Manichaeans and Gnostics, are seen to be forever slipping back into the watery syncretistic abyss from whence they came.²

One is often dealing with a “gut level” reaction to these movements: either one is sympathetic in large measure, or one is not. An orientalist approach has everything to do with a lack of sympathy. This negative view, itself a long-lived historical

¹ Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 10, points out the mistaken etymology of syncretism which is often taken from *synkerannumi*, to mix or join together: *sugkretismos*, the correct etymological root, denotes the combining of two parties against a third. And so we note the irony involved here of Classical Studies and Christian Origins, in laying the charge of *synkerannumi*, are themselves acting out the etymologically correct meaning of *sugkretismos*.

² With the Sophists and Skeptics of course we might more accurately speak of a sea of relativism, equally abhorrent to Classical-Christian sensibilities.

tradition, arises from the perception of these movements as having unattractive, or simply unuseful attributes. There is more at stake here, however, for the above perception of oriental inferiority is often coupled with a direct apprehension of the subversive embodied in these religious views. The notion of the “heretical” of course arises from a sense of indignation at perceived illegitimate appropriations of traditional trajectories. The hyperbole of a metaphorical depiction of “safe harbours” and “sunken reefs” is therefore appropriate: gut-reactions are hyperbolic, and the western academic appreciation of Oriental religions is coloured by the historical threats these traditions have maintained. The rise of Islam, *sans* dualism, became the new target for orientalist antipathies with the fall of Toledo to the Saracens in the 8th century, and the dramatic capitulation of Constantinople in 1453.³

We must bear this general dynamic in mind as we turn to examine the phenomenon of Gnosis more closely, for it is to be noted that modern inclusivising tendencies within so-called “Gnostic Studies” have created a virtual canon of Gnostic texts which are subject to incessant inquisition, while others languish in virtual anonymity as has been demonstrated in Appendix A.⁴

On its highest level Hellenistic Gnosis pertains to a fusion between the very roots of Occidental thought and the Orient, between the ideal of philosophical discipline and the immediate inner transformation of mystical experience – this can be called *synchronic gnosis*. The Gnostics were unable to dispense with a preparatory phase to the gnosis experience; hence while many texts adopt a sophisticated deconstructionist approach to language as a vitiated “fallen” medium bound up with noetic refractions (the mendacious indirections of the phenomenological underworld), the Gnostic rhetors were still compelled to make use of it. These Gnostic texts do not contain a recipe for *gnosis* itself, rather they delimit a preparatory phase, a mode of cosmic-critical awareness (we note in passing that the usual “anti-cosmic” tag is far too simplistic) that will prepare the soul for the direct ascent, often written in a “code” for the initiated.

The cosmic-critical stance of the Gnostic movement arises from an acute sense of entrapment, of numbness, sleep, and intoxication in the flesh, a drunkenness of the world induced by “the wine of ignorance”. Ignorance is a historical condition, one which is itself a hypostatic result of the larger theogonic process. As Jonas puts it:

³ I am, in the main, raising the critical concerns addressed by Edward Said in his provocative works *Orientalism*, and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), and I am focusing upon what he defines as the starting point of “Orientalism” *per se*, that being the early Greek and later Roman attitudes towards the Persians and Egyptians. Orientalism, according to Said, is a form of textual appropriation undertaken by the Western mind in its efforts to assimilate the East; more fundamentally, it represents a scholarly effort that is often made in concert with the extension of actual political control. From the historical root of large scale Greek and Roman hegemony established over the East, accomplished under Alexander and Augustus, the entire colonial tree has grown, flourishing in the 18th and 19th centuries, but still very much with us now, to the extent that one can agree with Said’s perspective upon “the worldwide hegemony of Orientalism,” and that “the principle dogmas of Orientalism exist in their purest form today in studies of the Arabs and Islam”. *Orientalism*, 328, 300.

⁴ The most frequent to appear are as follows: *The Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2), *The Gospel of Truth* (I,3 & XII,2), *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1, III,1, IV,1 & BG8502,2), *The Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3), *The First/Second Apocalypse of James* (V,3 & 4). All of these texts can be described as Gnostic christocentric in some measure.

The metaphor [“wine of ignorance”] makes it clear that ignorance is not a neutral state, the mere absence of knowledge, but is itself a positive counter-condition to that of knowledge, actively induced and maintained to prevent it. The ignorance of drunkenness is the soul’s ignorance of itself, its origin, and its situation in the alien world: it is precisely the awareness of alienness which the intoxication is made to suppress; man drawn into the whirlpool and made oblivious of his true being is to be made one of the children of this world.⁵

It follows that Philosophy, proper, is indicted insofar as it is content to reside on the ratiocinative level, the phenomenological or historical, without realising its malign makeup, and without therefore aiming most of its endeavours towards the ultimate existential omega-point of *gnosis*, the otherness of the non-historical spiritual source. In recalling the anti-philosophical stance expressed at the beginning of *Eugnostos* we note that this was retained into the Christian redaction of *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4 & BG 8502,3). The passage from *Eugnostos*:

For the ordering is spoken of in three opinions by all the philosophers, hence they do not agree. For some of them say about the world that it was directed by itself. Others, that it is providence, others that it is fate. But it is none of these. (NHC III 70.12-22).⁶

has a marked similarity to a passage from *The Tripartite Tractate* already cited:

They have introduced other types (of explanation), some saying that those who exist have their being in accordance with providence. These are the people who observe the orderly movement and foundation of creation. Others say that it is something alien. These are the people who observe the diversity and lawlessness and the powers of evil. (NHC I,5 109.5-15)⁷

and the text goes on to further indict the philosophers as follows:

The things which they thought of as wisdom was the similitude deceiving them: they thought that they had attained the truth when they had (only) attained error. (109.35-110.1)⁸

The Apocryphon of James specifically indicts reason as being part of the lower spirit/soul dualism:

That you be full of the Spirit, be in want of the deliberation, for reason is of the soul. (I,2.4.19-22)⁹

⁵ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 71.

⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVII, 42, 44.

⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 290.

⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 290.

Other examples follow:

Then when she (the soul) becomes young again she will ascend, praising the Parent and her brother, by whom she was saved. In this way the soul will be saved by being born again. And this is due not to rote sayings or to professional skills or to book learning.

The Exegesis on the Soul (II,6.134.25-31)¹⁰

The powers of the luminaries said to me, “Cease hindering the inactivity that exists in you by seeking incomprehensible matters; rather hear about him in so far as it is possible by means of a primary revelation and a revelation”.

Allogenes (XI,3 61.24-31)¹¹

The philosopher who is in an outer body, he is not the one to whom it is proper to pay respect, rather (it is the) philosopher according to the inner man.

The Sentences of Sextus (XII,1.34.17)¹²

From the above, along with the evidence of Hippolytus, for example, who claims nothing but plagiarism from Greek philosophy on the part of the Valentinians, we can be sure that the Gnostics were aware of the philosophies which came before them, and which existed in their own times. Major figures such as Valentinus and Basileides can be expected to have had a full Greek education along the lines of Plotinus. Plotinus in fact probably manifests a normative biography for the Egypto-Greek Hellenistic theological thinker – elite, privileged, afforded a good education, and inevitably ending up in Alexandria seeking a suitable mentor.

At its most basic level of definition, *gnosis* is knowledge, patently a catalyst for *transcendence*. One sees, again and again in Coptic-Gnostic texts, this slipping from the normal sense of “knowledge” to *gnosis*, whether the latter term be the Greek or the Coptic *COOYN*, which often takes on its higher numinous cast solely through literary context. However, having said this, there is a concomitant to this notion of “higher knowledge” and that is the view of a lower world, a dualist cosmology which attempts to answer *why* illumination is necessary for the reascent to the Pleroma. Gnosis is a particular Hellenistic soteriology which sees the archetype of humanity – Anthropos – as mirroring the larger cosmogonic rift. Literate and Philosophy-critical Hellenistic Gnosis, embellishing upon the Memphite view, often places its emphasis upon the word “wording” reality, upon human subjectivity’s true relationship with

⁹ Coptic transcription from *FENHC, codex I*, 8.

¹⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXI, 160. See also, Luther H. Martin, “The Anti-Philosophical Polemic and Gnostic Soteriology in ‘The Treatise on the Resurrection’ (CG I,3),” *Numen* 20 (1973): 20-37.

¹¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 224.

¹² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 320. In a text that is otherwise rather un-Gnostic (it is attributed in a number of other non-Gnostic, non-Christian sources), this saying fits in well with Gnostic thought which may explain its inclusion in the Nag Hammadi corpus.

historical process or cosmogonic hierarchy, an awareness attained through synchronic epiphany, one to be associated with a certain amount of intellection.¹³ Archaic Gnosis might be said to place its own emphasis upon the Memphitic Word, but one that does not see the numinous power originating in the pneumatic Anthropos, but rather in the divine hierarchy that can be made to serve humankind through correct procedure, the semantic ornamentation of the diachronic rite. The upper end displays a keen sense of the ironic with respect to language – the earlier Memphitic word by Hellenistic times takes on a double entendre, or hypostatic stature, and this bright blade of ‘numinous discourse’ is wielded by a sophianic figure.¹⁴ At the other extreme words exist upon a theurgic palette, or doctrinal liturgy, often applied with a marked penchant for mind-numbing literalism and cant. Two respective examples can be given here:

There was a time, says he, when there was nothing: not even that nothing was there, but simply, clearly, and without any sophistry there was nothing at all. When I say ‘there was’, he says, I do not indicate a Being, but in order to signify what I want to express I say, says he, that there was nothing at all. For that, says he, is not simply something ineffable which is named (indicated); we call it ineffable, but it is not even ineffable. For what is not (even) inexpressible is called ‘not even inexpressible’, but is above every name that is named. For the names do not even suffice, he says, for the world, so multiform is it, but fall short. And I do not have it in me to find correct names for everything; rather it is proper to comprehend ineffably, without using names, the characteristics of the things which are to be named. For (the existence of) the same designation(s for different things) has caused the hearers confusion and error about the things.... Since therefore there was nothing, no matter, no substance, nothing insubstantial, nothing simple, nothing composite, nothing non-composite, nothing imperceptible (non subjective), no man, no angel, no god, nothing at all that can be named or can be apprehended by sense perception, nothing of the mental things and thus (also nothing of all that which) can be simply described in even more subtle ways, the non-existent god... without intelligence, without perception, without will, without resolve, without impulse, without desire,

¹³ J.F. Borghouts, “*3h.w* (akhu) and *hk3.w* (hekau). Two Basic Notions of Ancient Egyptian Magic, and the Conception of the Divine Created Word”, in *La Magia in Egitto al Tepi dei Faraoni*, 39: “*3h.w* or *hk3.w* is best translated as ‘magical utterance’... the ‘creative emanation’ sometimes takes the form of a stream of thought, and one gets the impression that especially in the Late Period such creative power is chiefly vested with ‘intellectual capacity’.”

¹⁴ This impression of the female divinity wielding discourse with irony is nowhere more evident in the Gnostic corpus than in the *Thunder: Perfect Mind*.

For I am the first and the last:
 I am the one who is honoured and the one who is scorned.
 I am the whore and the holy one...
 I am the sound of the manifold voice, and the word of many aspects.
 I am the story: (I am) my name...
 I am the hearing that is attainable to everything,
 I am the speech which cannot be grasped.
 I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name.

(13.16-28; 14.12-15; 20.28-33: Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 234, 236, 250 & 252).

wished to make a world. I say 'he wished', he says, for want of a word, wish, intelligence, and perception being excluded. By 'world' (I mean) not the flat, divisible world which later divided itself, but a world-seed.

Basileides (according to Hippolytus)¹⁵

Again when you reach the rank of the three amens, the three amens will give you their seal and their mystery. And again they will give you the great name, and you will pass through to their interior.

When you go to the rank of the child of the child, they will give to you their mystery and their seal and the great name. Again you will go to their interior.

When you reach the rank of the twin saviours, they will give to you their mystery and their seal and the great name. Again you will go to its interior to the rank of the great Sabaoth, he of the Treasury of the Light. When you reach his rank, he will seal you with his seal and he will give to you his mystery and his great name.

Again you will go in to its interior to the rank of the great Jao the Good, he of the Treasury of the Light. He will give to you his mystery and his seal and the great name.

Again you will go in to its interior to the rank of the seven amens. Again they will give you their mystery and their seal and the great name.

The Second Book of Jeu (119.1-21)¹⁶

The above text continues with twenty-one more passages beginning with "Again" and well illustrates the point in its emphasis upon seals, names, and external procedure. The passage by Basileides is one of the most important secondary sources we have with which to appreciate the nature of Gnostic thought in Alexandria. No extant Gnostic tractate exhibits this reflexive sophistication with language outside of the more poetically-conceived *Thunder, Perfect Mind*.

I would briefly digress so as to draw out the subtlety of the Basileidean theogony. The text can be philosophically paraphrased as follows: the words "vacuum" and "space" are intended to refer to *something*, no less so than "planet", "sun", or "asteroid". Consider for a moment that this *something* is defined as *nothing*, with no substance, indeed no spatial or temporal referents *in itself* – it exists only in relation to that which is not void. If all that is supposedly "material" in the universe were to be removed (planets, suns, asteroids etc.) there would be a "pure" void, a state that can be philosophically postulated, yet must be immediately negated insofar as language cannot contain it. For void exists in this situation inasmuch as it "exists" as a concomitant of all physical elements in the cosmos. "Pure Void", as I would call it, is free from this commitment and must therefore exclude language which is itself based referentially upon the cosmos. One might be tempted to think that it *is* possible to conceive of the void without physical referents, yet this is only theoretically possible, for by insisting that *pure void can be conceived* (by human intelligence) the objector has in fact placed himself within the void, philosophically speaking, and so it is no longer a "pure void" but one contaminated by a perceiving referent. Pure void,

¹⁵ Hippolytus, *Refutatio* VII 20.2. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 64.

¹⁶ Coptic transcription from the *NHS*, vol. XIII, 166.

according to Basileides, precludes all substance, all perspective, all subsequent being, and therefore excludes everything in its very nature, including Intelligibility as we know it: it is therefore ineffable. Yet out of this depth, this void, there arose a Will which surfaced, gradually creating intelligibility and differentiation from an inchoate and latent state.

Basileides' very careful description of the almost blind and unconsciously directed attributes of this Creator god, curiously anticipates Schopenhauer's *Will*:

Absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving.¹⁷

Equally, the image comes directly from the ancient Egyptian view of the Primeval Void, the inert depths of Nun wherein the osmotic Atum finally manages to overcome his lassitude and create the ennead, very well described in Coffin Text 80:

While I was alone
with Nut in inertness
I could not find a place to stand or sit
before Heliopolis had been founded in which I could exist
before my throne was formed upon which I might sit
before I made Nut that she might dwell above me
that she might marry Geb
before the first had been born
before the Ennead had come into existence
that they might dwell with me
Atum said to Nun:
"I am upon the flood-waters and becoming very tired
and my patricians are inert..."¹⁸

In Basileides we are witness to all the intellectual refinement we would expect from an Alexandrian schooled in Greek thought, one who employs rhetorical schemes and tropes in his writings if we are to take Hippolytus' transcription at face value.¹⁹ The conceptualisations and language employed are very much philosophical, and one senses a sophisticated *caution* in the handling of words with which to convey a rather abstruse line of thought: what is striking in this passage is the deconstruction of naïve verbal realism and a focus upon the limitations of language.²⁰ Not so the author of

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, trans.E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 164.

¹⁸ Hieroglyphic transcription from Adriaan de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 33-34.

¹⁹ There is surely no reason not to given that the addition of the rhetorical scheme of anaphora (which adds marked emphasis through repetition of opening phrases) for example, would hardly have been added by Hippolytus who sought to denigrate.

²⁰ The extended use of the oxymoron – the “master-trope of mysticism” – in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* demonstrates comparable sophistication to Basileides' use of anaphora to cite two examples out of many. A study of Gnostic *rhetoric* is acutely required in this field. Gnostic texts were undoubtedly esoteric, intended to offer a way beyond the incipient mendaciousness of human knowledge and therefore words – these factors suggest a

The Books of Jeu, whose mind revels in the repetition of formulae, in the twists and turns of a ritualised passage through the underworld maze where diabolical forces are to be confronted with magical names and passwords. The difference in form and substance between the two passages, I would suggest, is on par with any passage from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and the rulebook to *Dungeons & Dragons*, the modern gothic role-playing game.²¹ Lest the image seem overstated, it should be mentioned that the Egyptians in fact had a board game named "passage" in which the player had to find a path through 30 inimical realms to attain the sustenance and justification of a god.²² The question of whether Valentinian Gnostic thought with its thirty aeons was itself directly descended from an Egyptian board game must be left open given the lack of hard evidence.

The "archaic" approach to divine knowledge has its roots in the Egyptian religious tradition of elite priesthoods who alone possessed the ability to read sacred texts and utter the requisite formulae, incantations, and sacred sounds used to appease or simply affirm the gods, more critically a distinct hortatory view towards cosmogonic manipulation which can be traced back to the Old Kingdom Pyramid texts. In the following the king addresses Nun:

O Nu, let these (gates) be opened for me, for behold I have come, a god-like soul (PT Utt. 360, §603).²³

The mere possession and use of this "divine discourse" was a mode of political power in itself, as evidenced by the priesthood's immense influence throughout Egypt's long history, and we are dealing more with *class distinctions* as opposed to the more individualistic attainment of insight, a hallmark of Hellenistic Gnosis. The tendency in this mode of religiosity is to form a hierarchy of 1) Principle Teacher or revelation 2) Inner elite 3) Auditors or Simple believers. In conjunction with this, there is a general preoccupation with the notion of "sacred space" (who's

rhetorical intent on the part of gnostic writers which could be said to be deconstructive. We say this in the loose sense of a shared attitude toward meaning (as context-bound), which is rejected as ultimate. Yet Gnostic philosophy does not "celebrate the abyss" or crumple its own epistemological-discursive underpinnings into nihilistic "vain agitation"; rather, reference is made to *otherness*, an extraperspectival omega point for the historical self. There is no attendant deconstructivist mystical drought – context (time and space itself), for the Gnostic, is essentially pernicious, and the indeterminacies inherent in our use of language reflect our Fall: "Utopia does not require rhetoric."

²¹ Jan Assmann, "Death and Initiation in the Funerary Religion of Ancient Egypt," in *Yale Egyptological Studies 3: Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. William Kelly Simpson (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1989), 143-44: "The topography of the hereafter [the Coffin Texts] described in these spells is so full of dangers because of the demonic creatures inhabiting it. The netherworld appears therein first and foremost as a social sphere, in which the deceased must move and, eventually, integrate himself by means of the spoken word: by appealing, conjuring, intimidating, beseeching, threatening, answering, etc... The accumulation of such an enormous body of knowledge based on pure speculation and meant to insure individual salvation (i.e. in the sense of overcoming death) reminds one of the Gnosis and must surely represent one of its roots."

²² Assmann, "Death and Initiation," 148.

²³ Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 117.

allowed where, at what time, and under what conditions, and so on). And so we see a more conservative, class-conscious, and utilitarian conception of Gnosis herein. To mention a few examples: the *Pistis Sophia*, *The Books of Jeu*, *Marsanes*, Manichaeism in Egypt, Hermeticism, and the Chaldean system are all examples of diachronic or archaic gnosis. It is not necessary to delve into these and other texts separately, instead we shall focus purely upon the *Pistis Sophia*, a non-Nag Hammadi Gnostic text.

The *Pistis Sophia* is a critical text to consider and it is interesting to note that this voluminous tractate has been scanted by Gnostic Studies, or more to the point, Christian Origins scholarship. The reason for this, it seems clear, is the strong magical elements in the work that have already been detailed in Chapter 5. Along with this the Christian framework of the text, undoubtedly a later redaction, has been rather unevenly stitched upon an immense and complicated pagan cosmology whose inscrutability patently supersedes the teacher's best efforts to carry it. It is not a good candidate for "Christian Gnosis".

At various junctures throughout the entire four books of the *Pistis Sophia*, the largest Gnostic text to surface thus far,²⁴ the literary ceiling opens up as it were, revealing a dense and intricate cosmology. To supply a philosophical justification for this many-tiered metaphysical hierarchy is clearly not the purpose of this massive work, and a detailed picture must be painstakingly put together by the patient reader. A fundamental exegetical question must ask whether the writer(s) did indeed presuppose this fantastic backdrop as a required liturgy in the minds of the congregation, or whether it was intended as a pedantic course of esoteric instruction for new auditors. In any event, the rhetorical purpose of the *Pistis Sophia*, if it can be ascertained, is a touchstone to an understanding acutely required in this Gnostic text – perhaps more so here than in any other.²⁵

Our hypothesis presupposes a Christian frame to have been superimposed upon a deeper mythological substratum. The consistency of the cosmology throughout the *Pistis Sophia*, as held up against the inconsistencies of the self-consciously liturgical formulations of the foreground text, argues that the "given" in the minds of the worshippers was likely a cosmological *Vorlage* from an earlier pre-Christian system of thought, certainly Egyptian. The infiltration of the "Christ-myth" into these Egyptian systems of thought has been graphically attested within the Nag Hammadi find.²⁶ We likely have evidence here of an early phase following this transformation where the cosmological backdrop still powerfully intrudes upon the tendentiously Christian setting of the main text. In effect, the work attempts to move off in two non-complimentary directions; as a result, the biblical scenario of Christ instructing his

²⁴ This text, which may have been uncovered originally in 1769 by the Scottish explorer Bruce, is entitled the Askew Codex after its first owner, a London doctor who bought the codex in 1772. It totals some 346 pages of original manuscript.

²⁵ This text and the Bruce Codex, were made available to scholars over a century ago, and up until the surfacing of the Nag Hammadi find (an ongoing process now, over 40 years after the actual discovery of some 52 gnostic tractates in upper Egypt) these represented the only primary source materials for "Gnostic studies". Yet the difficulty in ascertaining a *Sitz* for this text, I would argue, coupled with its off-putting lack of overall stylistic merit, have consigned this work for the time being to an obscure fate.

²⁶ *Eugnostos the Blessed with The Sophia of Jesus Christ* is the most definitive example of this, however it is present in a number of other tractates which shall be treated further on.

disciples is flattened by the ideational weight of the pre-Christian cosmological “fugue” of the emanationist system pressing down from above. In particular the presence of Sophia contends with Christ as a cosmic-player – a typical result of this fusion of Christ-myth with Barbelo/Sophia systems – and the disciples are predictably wooden, or stock characters. Interestingly enough, while Sophia is not allowed to directly address the congregation, her archetype can be seen to be at work in the epicentre of disciplic action, symbolised by the consummate dominance of Mary Magdalene over all the other disciples in the work, indeed in a characterisation of her that is more 3-dimensional than that of Jesus himself.

It is not possible to appreciate what is going on in the cosmic drama presented in the *Pistis Sophia* unless one has an appreciation of the larger setting. The text moves about this vast cosmic stage with a flashlight, illuminating various parts of the whole without attempting to backlight the entire *mise en scène* – most curious. I would attempt then to reverse a process that is forced upon the unwary reader and proceed from the whole to the parts. In this the themes of light and darkness are ubiquitous in the text, and the entire effect of this dualism is to present the upper reaches of Zone 1 as being blindingly brilliant, whereas the lowest reaches of Zone 9 are of unredeemable blackness. Between the four zones which make up the realms of light and darkness respectively, is The Treasury of Light (Zn. 4), a transition zone where particles of light are processed downwards and upwards.

It is interesting to note that there is no primary theogonic process developed with respect to this elaborate set-up: it simply is. It is the starting point for a drama that takes place in a localised setting in the 13th aeon of Zone 7. Here, Pistis Sophia suffers a Fall down into Zone 9 which activates an eventual response in Zone 2. This directs the Saviour in Zone 3 to descend to her aid.

The text goes to great lengths to make it clear that the entire series of existential levels are peopled with innumerable spirits. The historical Jesus, located in Zone 8 along with all of humankind, is thus one player upon a vast multi-dimensional stage, situated here within the dimension of *kosmos*. Like the chorus in a Shakespearean drama or Greek tragedy, he leads the disciple/reader into various “scenes”. His ascent into “heaven” (as humans conceive it) is, on the scale of things in the *Pistis Sophia*, a relatively localised movement from Zone 8 to Zone 7. His return and subsequent teachings form the historical premise of the entire work. Jesus attempts to teach the disciples about the entire system we have briefly sketched. This is the essential plot of the *Pistis Sophia* – *it is also the literary function of the piece*, insofar as the reader/listener is expected to identify with the disciples. This will be taken up again further on.

At this point the nature of each zone might be described to some extent by drawing from various descriptions that are found throughout the entire text.²⁷ A schematic and description of the zones is as follows:

Zone 1

²⁷ There are some minor inconsistencies throughout the text which I have “editorialized” in the interests of pursuing a manageable discussion. In particular, Book Four of the *Pistis Sophia* stands apart from the others in form and substance to some extent, offering a somewhat simpler cosmology. These amount more to omissions than anything else, and no radical changes in the system have been noticed by myself.

One Father
Realm of Light: 15 great mysteries
of the Father, mediating the powers of redemption.
Mystery of the Seven Voices

Zone 2
Primary Mystery
Realm of Light: 15 great mysteries
of the Father, mediating the powers of redemption.
Mystery of the Seven Voices

Zone 3
Twenty-four Mysteries

Zone 4
Treasury of Light
12 gathering points of light
(each with 12 guardians set over
a further 12 organisers)
7 spirits
5 trees of light
3 gemini guardians
12 other guardians

Zone 5
The Right
Jeu (Bishop of Light)
Melchizedek
The Great Sabaoth (Father of the
soul of Jesus)

Zone 6
The Middle
Zarazaz
IAO the Good
The little Sabaoth the Good
The Light-Maiden (Judge of souls)
7 Light-maidens with 15 helpers
Sun and Moon

Zone 7
The Left
[The 13th Aeon]
The invisible god and his
great power the Barbelo
3 spirits including Authades

12 syzygies (pairs of aeons)
The last female aeon Pistis Sophia
6 aeons ruled by Jabraoth (who has been redeemed)
[Realm of visible Cosmos]
6 aeons ruled by Sabaoth Adamas (unredeemed)
with 12 zodiac spirits
5 great Archontes:
Kronos, Ares, Hermes, Aphrodite, Zeus
[Realm of Air]
5 great Archontes:
Parapleth, Aethiopica, Hekate, Paredron Tupson,
Iaksthanabas, ruling over
360 Archontes of Adamas

Zone 8
Beneath The Middle
The firmament (with innumerable spirits)
The Earth

Zone 9
The Underworld:
Orcus ruled over by Ariel
Chaos ruled over by the lion-headed Ialdabaoth
(along with Persephone and Adonis)
The Outer Darkness (a great dragon encircling the earth
with its tail in its mouth)
12 chambers of punishment

The *Vorlage* was written in Coptic²⁸; in this case the Sahidic dialect points towards a southern religious community although, as a later redaction, it is hardly conclusive. Towards the end of the work a vehement disclaimer is put forward to the effect that the group condemns the Gnostic libertines. Thomas asks about those who mix semen and female menstrual blood with lentils to eat; Jesus responds: “Truly I say that this sin surpasses every sin and every iniquity” etc.²⁹ This might be in response to the charges raised by Epiphanius against the Gnostic libertines of Egypt in his *Panarion*, written about 375. The appearance of the Coptic BAINCHOOCH and numerous other magical connections detailed in Chapter 5, place the composition of the *Urtext* anywhere back to the first century B.C.E.

²⁸“Our book, as it stands, has an Egyptian, non-Greek origin,” in F.C. Burkitt, “Pistis Sophia,” *JTS* 23 (1921/22): 274; and “Pistis Sophia and the Coptic Language,” *JTS* 27 (1925/26): 148 in which the author rejects the linguistic analysis of Carl Schmidt that Coptic, not Greek, was the language of composition. Carl Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia, em gnostisches Originalwerke* (Leipzig, 1925).

²⁹Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 762.

However, the *Sitz* is Egyptian as is made clear by a number of overlaps with the magical papyri and Egyptian theology. With respect to the latter, there is the vision of uroboros and the outer darkness, the Egyptian symbol of unending time set against chaos, present especially in the New Kingdom; the sun and moon ships, descriptions of the water Nun and Amente in the *Pistis Sophia* are also derived from Egyptian thought;³⁰ finally, the creation of humankind from the tears of god, the original homophonic connection drawn from the Egyptian *rmt* = man, and *rmjt* = tears, as in the following Coffin Text:

It is with my sweat that I created the gods. Mankind is from the weeping of my eye (CT 1130)³¹

Book IV 333.14-17 of the *Pistis Sophia* continues this motif:

If, on the other hand, it is a new soul (which) they take from the sweat of the archons, and from the tears of their eyes....³²

The Egyptian legend of the eye of Re is to be strongly connected in other ways with the *Pistis Sophia*.³³ In Book 1, chapters 20, 31, 32, 35, 58, and 81, Sophia is described as being attracted to this great light; this, in turn, aroused the emulous hatred of the archons below her level. The head archon here emanated his own great light and Sophia mistakenly descends towards this without her partner. At this point the great lion-faced archon Jaldabaoth and all his minions surround her, oppressing her and attempting to steal her light. Sophia cries out for help in the form of a number of “repentance’s”. The light-power she originally saw above is eventually despatched to her aid, and she is brought up from Chaos. The Leyden demotic papyrus I 384 (not the Leiden-London magical papyri), dated to the 2nd century C.E., describes the departure of Tefnut, daughter of Re, to Ethiopia following her rejection of her partner. Re sends Thoth in order to bring Tefnut back, for her absence has caused a disruption in Egypt. Thoth finds her in the desert where she has been attacked by an Ethiopian cat which subsequently changes into a lion. In the form of a baboon Thoth persuades her to return to Egypt. This myth, which exists in fragmentary form in the Leiden papyrus, is a derivation of the earlier story of the eye of Re, found in the tombs of Seti I and Ramses III, in which the eye of Re is despatched in order to end humankind’s revolt against himself.³⁴ The eye of Re accomplishes this in the form of Hathor who

³⁰ Philippe Derchain, “Mythes et Dieux lunaires en Égypte,” in *Sources Orientales V: La lune, mythes, et rites*, 17-68. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962.

³¹ Leonard H. Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 130.

³² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 666. See also Kákosy, “Gnosis und Ägyptische Religion.”

³³ Frantisek Lexa, “La légende gnostique sur Pistis Sophia et le mythe ancien Égyptien sur l’oeil de Ré,” *Egyptian Religion* I, no. 1-3, (April 1933). I am indebted to Lexa for this connection. I link up this myth with the broader Valentinian myth in Chapter 12.

³⁴ Erich Hornung, *Der Ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh*. Also Kurt Sethe, “Zur altägyptischen Sage vom Sonnenauge das in fer Ferne war,” in *Untersuchungen zur*

descends to earth. Once on earth, Hathor takes the form of a lioness (Sekhmet), unleashing a terrible slaughter upon humankind:

That is how the Powerful One (Sekhmet) came into being, the Confused One in the night, to wade in their blood as far as Heracleopolis.³⁵

The decisive similarity here with the *Pistis Sophia*, besides the obvious lion-figure, is the depiction of it operating as an independent force of evil, for Re becomes alarmed at her excessive will in this regard. Re is forced to send emissaries and devise a ruse whereby Hathor/Sekhmet would desist in her sanguine activities: the point is that she was no longer an extension of his will, but was effectively saying “*non serviam*”. As with the later Sophia myths, this terrible lower aspect of the goddess Hathor/Sekhmet is later redeemed by Re as she assumes the higher form of his Eye once again. The eye of Re in this capacity, is also to be found in the Book of the Dead. This is one of two critical Egyptian myths that form the main Sophia myth in Valentinian thought, for example, and the same derivation in the *Pistis Sophia* is quite apparent.

The calendar used in the *Pistis Sophia* is based upon the Egyptian civil calendar in widespread use until 239 B.C.E. Even after the Ptolemaic decree, in which the 360 day +5 calendar was to be replaced by a 365.25 day calendar, it is argued that the traditional Egyptian calendar continued to be used in Egypt. Other specific calendrical references in the *Pistis Sophia* show that the calendar is indisputably the Egyptian civil calendar.³⁶

Apart from these compelling factors, there is the emphasis at various junctures upon the sacred *sound* of the name; there are the passwords given the ascending soul, that it may pass beyond the lower regions into eternal life; there is the ascent of the master to heaven and his return to teach; finally, the whole collection could easily be entitled a “Book of the Dead” given the emphasis placed upon the soteriology of the individual soul – this involves understanding a specific cosmological *system*, a scheme of things rather alien to orthodox Christianity. The nine zones of course suggests the traditional Egyptian emphasis upon the ennead, and the primacy of the initial three reinforces this.

The syncretism with various Greek mythical figures, as with the connection made with Bubastis “who is called Aphrodite in the cosmos” (Book IV.140), suggests an Alexandrian context; as well, the heavy reliance upon the psalms – which for rhetorical effect are likely to have been presumed as a *donné* in the reader/listener – may indicate a strong Jewish influence.³⁷ Alexandria, again, had its influential Jewish community, a community that was headed towards *complete* assimilation and this

Geschichte und Altertumskunde Aegyptens, vol. 5 (reprint; 1912, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), 119-56.

³⁵ *The Book of the Divine Cow* in Alexandre Piankoff, *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon*, Bollingen Series XL.2 (New York: Panthen Books, 1955), 28.

³⁶ Przybylski, “The Role of Calendrical Data in Gnostic Literature,” 57.

³⁷ However, these attributes are limited to Books IV and II respectively and cannot be generalised for the entire text.

obviously represents some interim phase upon that trajectory.³⁸ One thinks of the period following the decimation of the Jewish community in Egypt and the stripping of their privileges following the failure of their revolt in C.E. 115-17. A turning to the Gnostic concern with Evil in the world, a radicalising reassessment of Jahweh as a result of their own suffering and despair, this might be expected on the part of a number of Jewish speculative thinkers at this historical juncture in particular.³⁹ This acme of Jewish disheartenment in Alexandria occurred only a few years before the appearance of Valentinus and Basileides there. Then again, the overt dualism of the piece could point strongly towards an Essene group.⁴⁰ However, all these considerations are to be tied to the later redaction. The earlier pagan cosmology and attribute of archaic Gnosis link it with the south. In this regard the most important point to make here is one made by Francis Legge some 70 years ago, that the worldview expressed in the *Pistis Sophia* is “so thoroughly Egyptian that it must have been written for Egyptian readers”.⁴¹

There is also a pronounced Manichaean influence at work throughout the *Pistis Sophia*.⁴² Apart from further specific instances which will be noted in the next chapter, there is a Manichaean “feel” about the whole work: the obsessive detailing of the cosmology and attempt to present salvation as being almost a system of physics; the whole cosmic dualism in both systems which simply is, without genesis; as well, both depict a spiritual apogee, a point of fallenness for the soul from which there is no return. Finally, the doctrinal and syncretistic nature of the work suggests the Manichaean approach. All of this is not to say however, that these factors must follow the rise of Manichaeism (Mani lived from C.E. 216-277); Taken by themselves they could as easily be current or prior to the teachings of Mani. My conclusion, based largely upon connections with the magical papyri and Egyptian religion, is that they

³⁸ At least one assumes this to be the case; perhaps it would be safer to simply say that the community became more and more Hellenised as time went on.

³⁹ The term “Jew” is as nuanced as any other in this time and place. There were numerous nominal Jews in Egypt who were neither Jewish by race, circumcised, or expected to strictly follow Jewish religious laws. See Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 12.

⁴⁰ This is strongly suggested at 124.24 cont.: “It is this which baptised and forgave the race of mankind and made them to be at peace with the Sons of the Light” (Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 248). The final battle between “the Sons of Darkness” and “the Sons of Light” is of course a central motif in the Essene cosmology.

⁴¹ Francis Legge, *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.*, vol. 1 (1922; reprint, New York: University Books, 1964), 175.

⁴² I would briefly list a number of compelling similarities that occur in the text. Reference is made to the “tyrants [who] began to wage war against the light.” Their ignorance is stressed, “because they saw nothing except the greatly surpassing light,” (25). The sun and moon are depicted as processors of light particles, and the light is “swallowed” by the archons: both are familiar Manichaean motifs (35-36). The tragedy of the *mixture* (light and darkness) is at the heart of Manichaean thought and this key concept is expressed in the *Pistis Sophia*: “And when the perfect number is completed so that the mixture is dissolved...” (77). The Manichaean idea of processing the particles of light in one’s food is exactly mirrored here (282).

pre-date Mani – likely a part of a pervasive world-view which Mani was to subsequently appropriate.

Archaic Gnosis is not a later “degenerate” form of Gnostic thought. This seems to me too easy a way out of a complex situation: it also has the suspicious advantage of justifying the decision to ignore some rather long and difficult works, a course adopted by most in the field to this day.⁴³ The key here is the cosmological system we have detailed. If one strips away all of the artifice in this myth, one is left with a rather embellished form of pre-Christian Egyptian-Gnostic thought which parallels – perhaps even anticipates – the teachings of Valentinus in particular. Granted, the descriptive style of this system is one driven to excess, but this was the accepted norm in an Egyptian milieu. The “rewrite” of the original Coptic text would then have occurred in an Alexandrian milieu towards the end of the fourth century. The textual evidence we have before us suggests the *Sitz im Leben* of an early group of Egyptian-Gnostic religionists, likely living far to the south of cosmopolitan Alexandria.

With respect to Hellenistic Gnosis there are a number of texts that evidence the sort of sophistication we would expect; however, it must be said that the majority of texts in our possession do not accord all that well with the depiction of Basileidean rigour in Hippolytus, or the renown of Valentinus. Enough has been written about *Gospel of Truth* as a candidate for authorship by Valentinus that it not be entered into here. Certainly the text espouses an emanationist system of thought akin to what we know of Valentinus through the patristics. Rather, I shall treat the *Tripartite Tractate* briefly, for it is of comparable length to the *Pistis Sophia*, equally neglected outside of a handful of scholars, and is perhaps the most philosophical of works found in the Gebel al Tarif.

Judged stylistically, the work is almost certainly the work of one author. The over-riding Egyptian emanationist framework, the numerous parallels with the system of Basileides among other Egyptian Gnostic sects, and Hermetic thought, indicates that this work was likely part of the Alexandrian milieu of Greek-educated poets, mystics, and theosophers, many of whom were undoubtedly Graeco-Egyptians or Egypto-Greek. The analogy of a poetic genre (perhaps less of an analogy than we are inclined to think) might explain the marked lack of cohesion exhibited by the Nag Hammadi corpus as a whole. According to what we know about various Gnostic sects, none of the works contained therein can be considered exemplars for any particular school, although we can ascertain strong tendencies in some. This certainly holds true for the *Tripartite Tractate*, easily among the most dense, difficult, often

⁴³ Consider Bentley Layton’s recent work, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, in which there is no mention whatsoever of this text. Even Hans Jonas, one of the more profound philosophical thinkers in the field, judged the work to be “later” and “degenerate,” etc. By contrast he is clearly impressed with the sophistication of the Valentinian myth (*Gnostic Religion*, 174-205). I would argue that the cosmogonic difference between the Valentinian system and that of the *Pistis Sophia* more likely results from a “gloss” achieved by the rhetorical genius of Valentinus which is in accord with the model we have developed—that of Hellenistic Gnosis appearing after the Archaic. Of course this in itself reflects the larger situation in Alexandria – that of native Egyptians being educated into the architectonics of Greeks systematic thinking (the literary result of which would undoubtedly be much more appealing to a Heideggerian). Amongst modern post-Nag Hammadi scholars, Jean Doresse is one of the few to have accorded the *Pistis Sophia* a prominent place in his discussion of Gnostic texts; *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 67-71.

florid, and beguiling poetic/philosophical metaphysic in the entire collection, yet it powerfully displays key features of the Valentinian myth. The work is not easily approached analytically and is comparable in style and theme with the later mystical writings of Jakob Böhme, or Meister Eckhardt.

Overall the work describes the entire theogonic devolution of the Godhead into its own depths, the creation of evil, the mission of the Son/Logos, and an extended elucidation upon determinism and free-will as exemplified by the aeons, most particularly in the last aeon to be begotten – Sophia. Part I deals with the determinism of the Father and the free-will of the hypostatized aeons; Part II describes the creation of humanity, evil, and the fall of Anthropos; Part III deals with the variety of theologies, the tripartition of humanity, the actions of the Saviour and ascent of the saved into Unity. As with all Valentinian Gnostic systems that have come down to us, the concern is with theodicy – the justification of God in the face of *de facto* radical evil. More essentially the reciprocity between Creator and created finds its flash-point in *gnosis*. Whether the created are hypostatic aeons or human beings, the entire ontological equation of being is affected by the movement of each independent entity towards salvation or perdition.

The emanationist focus of the text, as with so many Gnostic works in this regard, commences at the beginning of the tractate:

He, the incomprehensible, ineffable, illimitable, unchangeable: he is sustenance, he is Felicity(*Macariotes*), he is *Aletheia*(Truth), he is rejoicing, he is repose; that which he contemplates is that which he sees, that which he utters, that which he has as thought. By him, all of *Sophia*(Wisdom) is raised up and is above *Nous*(Mind), and is above all honour and beauty, and all sweetness and greatness, and is above *Bythius*(Depth) and every exaltation. If this one who is unknowable in his nature, to whom all power which I mentioned pertains, if out of his exceeding sweetness he wishes to bestow Gnosis that he be known, he has the ability to do so. He has his power, which is his will. Now, however, he holds back in Silence(*Sige*),⁴⁴ he who is the great cause, begetting the eternal existence of the All. It is in the sovereign sense that he begets himself ineffably; he alone is self-begotten; he realizes himself and knows himself in the way that he is. What is worthy of admiration and glory honour and esteem, he brings forth because of the boundlessness of his greatness, the unsearchability of his *Sophia*(Wisdom), the immeasurability of his power, and his untasteable sweetness. He is the one who manifests himself in conception, having glory and honour, marvelous and lovely, the one who glorifies himself, the one who wonders, honours, and also loves; He is the one who has a Son (and) who subsists in him, who is Silence(*Sige*) to him, who is the ineffable one in the

⁴⁴The term *Sige*, denoting the female aeon, is not used here and yet the unusual feminine suffix on *kapwc* is clearly intended to allude to the feminine hypostasis Silence without being explicit. This then is a standard Valentinian feature (as found in Valentinus, Ptolemaeus, and others) although this author keeps it on an esoteric level in the text. See the system of Ptolemy in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (1.2.1): “And it (Mind or Intellect) thought to communicate the size and extent of the parent’s magnitude to the other aeons, and the fact that it was beginningless, uncontained, and not capable of being seen. But by the will of the parent, silence restrained it because it wanted to elevate all of them into thought and into longing for a search for the aforementioned ancestor of theirs.”

ineffable one, the invisible one, the incomprehensible one, the inconceivable one in the inconceivable one.

It is in this manner that he exists: the Father, as we said earlier, in his underivative state, knows himself and begot him (the Son) by having a thought, which is the thought of him, that is, the perception of him which is [the hypostasis]⁴⁵ of his constitution forever. That is, then, the sovereign sense given in Silence(*Sige*), *Sophia*(Wisdom), and *Charis*(Grace), named properly in this way. (55.13-57.8)⁴⁶

I have put the *qualities* of the Godhead in italics for they manifest a distinct rhetorical presence in the text. These are in fact all Valentinian aeons, hypostases of the Primal Parent which form the ennead, ogdoad, and hebdomad of pleromic extension. The subterfuge here also extends to the ambiguous “Logos” figure in the text who is essentially Sophia in disguise. The only possible reason for this is to play down the ostensible “polytheism”, along with the potent female figure of Sophia who usually manages to occlude all other male aeons or “saviours” in her immediate vicinity; all this seems to be accomplished with a view towards making the text acceptable to orthodox sensibilities. The redaction we are presented with here is therefore to be dated in the mid to late third century C.E., not too long before it was buried to save it from the effects of persecution. An important rhetorical concern here lies in ascertaining the subtlety of an exoteric appeal commensurate with the transmission of a deeper esoteric substratum: does the text in fact demonstrate the superior literary skills required to convey explicit and hidden levels that complement one another? As with *The Gospel of Truth*, another Trojan horse for orthodox sensibilities, *The Tripartite Tractate* is often eloquent, ostensibly avoiding the repetition of arcane rites, passwords, and magical spells, nor does it lay out labyrinthine underworld maps. Instead, both emphasise the glory of the Primal Parent which creates the sense of a monotheist temperament. However, neither text is monotheistic in the classic occidental sense, and in fact this is precisely because the emanationist depiction of events is true to the ancient pattern. The theogonic/cosmogonic process is the primary concern in *The Tripartite Tractate* as it follows the theogonic story from beginning to end, attempting to explain the purpose of the one and the many:

At the time they existed in the Idea(*Ennoea*) of the Father, that is, in the hidden *Bythius*(Depth), *Bythius* knew them, but they were powerless to know the Depth in which they existed; nor could they know themselves, nor could they know anything else. They existed together with the Father; they did not exist by themselves. Rather, they were only able to become like a seed,⁴⁷ so that it has

⁴⁵The lacuna here does not allow for any certain translation. This term, however, makes perfect sense philosophically in the development of the text and is suggested here.

⁴⁶Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 198, 200.

⁴⁷This is the first reference to the metaphor of the “seed” which is also used extensively in Basileides as a way of conceptualizing that which doesn’t yet exist, but which nonetheless exists in potential. In other Alexandrian systems this metaphor is used primarily by way of explaining the creation of the material world. Contrast this with Basileides as reported by Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7.21): “The seed of the world had everything within itself... thus the non-

been discovered that they existed like a fetus. In the same manner as the *Logos*(the Word), he begot them, (they) subsisting spermatically along with those who had not yet been brought into existence by him. The Father, therefore, initially thinking of them – not only that they might exist for him, but that they might exist for themselves as well, that they might then exist in his thought in the substance of Idea(*Ennoea*) and that they might exist for themselves too⁴⁸ – sows Idea(*Ennoea*) like a seed of [knowledge]so that they might conceive of what exists for them. (60.16-61.11)⁴⁹

We note the presence of Nun here as Bythos (the Depths), and its traditional relationship to the generation of the various divinities.⁵⁰ As well, the Memphite emphasis upon Ptah creating gods and the world through utterance and thought is also present.

A major focus of the work is upon the aeons, their free-will, and their function as independent hypostases of the Father. These names are not at all gratuitous (as many scholars seem to assume – remarkably little has been done in this regard), and their functions, if not exactly clearly defined in this tractate, are at least adumbrated:

Each one of the aeons has a name, each of which is a quality and power of the Father, since he exists in many names, which are intermingled and harmonious with one another. (73.8-12)⁵¹

Marsanes also demonstrates the emanationist focus upon the nature and relationship of the various aeons:

existent god made a non-existent world of non-existent things, setting down and hypostasising a single seed that has within itself the all-seed of the cosmos in its entirety”, trans. Catherine Osborne, *Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy*, 287; also Libellus IX from the *Hermetica*: “The Kosmos is an instrument of God’s will; and it was made by him to this end, that, having received from God the seeds of all things that belong to it, and keeping these seeds within itself, it might bring all things into actual existence,” trans. W. Scott, *Hermetica* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1985), 183. Many of the concepts used in the *TripartiteTractate*, the thought of Basileides, and the *Hermetica*, display a close affinity with the so called Barbelognostics who were pre-Christian and whose system was built about the concept of a female aspect of the Father (Barbelo, or Sophia). Cf. also with Melchizedek (NHC IX, 1, 9:5-10): “They were engendered, the gods and the angels and the men, out of the seed, all of the natures, those in the heavens and those upon the earth and those under the earth” (Coptic transcription from *NHS*, Vol. XV, 56, 58). There is an interesting possibility that the word “Barbelo” is derived from the Coptic word for seed, “BLBILE.” The seed, apart from the above metaphorical expression of potentiality, also represents the Gnostic ideal of bisexuality – the pre-Fall state of androgynous purity.

⁴⁸ The point made here is that the aeons have been given free will even though they subsist in the thought of the Father. They are independent hypostases.

⁴⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 206, 208.

⁵⁰ In section 25, Bythos is referred to as “depth of depth, elder of elders”, a description highly reminiscent of “the father of the gods” epithet of Nun.

⁵¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 228.

And in what way did the unbegotten ones come to be since they are unbegotten?
And what are the differences among the aeons? And as for those who are
unbegotten – how many are they and how are they different from one another?
(NHC X,1 6.23-29)⁵²

Of the 33 Valentinian aeons in the system of Ptolemy for example, disciple of Valentinus, no less than 30 are alluded to in the *Tripartite Tractate*. There are some 245 aeonial allusions in the entire text. Many of these allusions are rather faint, the majority are quite strong, and some are completely explicit. It should be stressed however that these would have been obvious to any Valentinian of the time.⁵³ For the orthodox mind this recondite emanationism would have been extremely difficult to ascertain and modern translators have in effect followed in this regard. It is important to realise that it is not an either/or proposition with respect to aeonial hypostasis/semantic attribute of the Parent. The double entendre was intended by Gnostic writers as the aeons are seen as archetypes exerting their influence into our own realm.

The Tripartite Tractate qualifies as an example of Hellenistic Gnosis in its philosophical/theosophical synthesis of diverse ideas. The architectonic is essentially Egyptian emanationist with the usual development of enneads and ogdoads in male-female pairs.⁵⁴ Further thematic attributes will be developed in Part III.

I have noted elsewhere the main problem of redaction here as we have very few clues outside of the late-phase Christianising tendency as to the stages of redaction involved. It is for this reason, among others, that a socio-historical model is required in order to obtain a more direct view of Gnostic thought 100 B.C.E.-300 C.E.. It is ironic indeed that we must turn to the Patristics for evidence of this thought. The evidence on Valentinus is of critical importance here for he was, by all accounts, a prolific and seminal thinker for whom not one work survives. Likewise Basileides, and both of these Gnostic teachers draw upon traditional Egyptian theology in the mythopoeic formulation of their systems as we shall examine in Part III.

To summarise, in the Roman era in Egypt we are presented with these different manifestations of Gnosis in Egypt. Both show up as mythopoeic “syncretistic” endeavours undertaken by select literate classes, one undoubtedly to be closely associated with Alexandria and her libraries, Jewish community, and mystery cults, along with the Greek cities in Lower Egypt and Fayyum; the other descended from the priesthoods from Behbeit el Hagar in the Delta to Philae in Nubia. The first, which we are calling Hellenistic or synchronic Gnosis, displays a more sophisticated concern with the qualities of the various levels of emanationist theogonies, advancing an architectonic that is at once Greek and Egyptian, and which focuses upon *the immediate inner transformation through Gnosis of the individual soul*. The other, which we are terming Archaic or diachronic Gnosis, manifests a grassroots disenchantment with the cosmos and a turning to a religiosity that relies upon

⁵² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV, 268.

⁵³ This in fact represents a major interpretational difficulty with all of the Nag Hammadi texts: the familiarity of the reader (or listener) with the gnostic myth is often presupposed.

⁵⁴ “The androgynous Creator god is to be found in several Coptic-Gnostic texts which originated in Egypt, and was already known in pharaonic times.” Jan Zandee, “Der androgyne Gott in Ägypten”, 241.

incantation and spell for safe passage through or above a demonised underworld thought to so closely subtend the apparent world; this Gnosis is more conservative and doctrinal in nature, relying upon an understanding of multi-tiered cosmologies, passwords, various forms of hortatory address and the like, strenuously focused upon *the externals of historical religious practice to vouchsafe Gnosis*. In terms of the Egyptian priestly tradition from which it evolved, the emphasis is upon *textual traditions* and a good example of this methodology is an inscription upon a stela upon the isle of Seheil. The inscription reports that the Nile had not flooded in seven years and as a result a great famine gripped the land. As Sauneron notes, “what was to be done at this point? Revise the system of interior distribution or import wheat? Improve the irrigation system? Not at all.”⁵⁵ The inscription details the correct procedure:

Then, says the king, I resolved to turn to the past and I asked a priest (...) about Imhotep...: ‘Where does the Nile rise? What town of the winding river is there? What god rests there to assist me?’ He rises: ‘I am going to the city of Thoth, I will enter the room of the archives, I will unroll the holy books, and I will take guidance from them’... He revealed to me marvelous and mysterious things.⁵⁶

And this from a period when the patent improvements of Greek irrigation techniques were there for all to see. The referring back to ancient tradition, to the texts for proper procedure, is of course quintessentially Egyptian, and Archaic Gnosis displays all the hallmarks of a tradition-bound religious view in this sense. Hellenistic Gnosis is, by comparison, anarchic in throwing off the whole cultural incubus of a formalised religiosity, proclaiming the ability and right of the individual with true *gnosis* to attain complete spiritual truth, in essence forgoing the Archaic need to stand firmly within a religious Tradition.

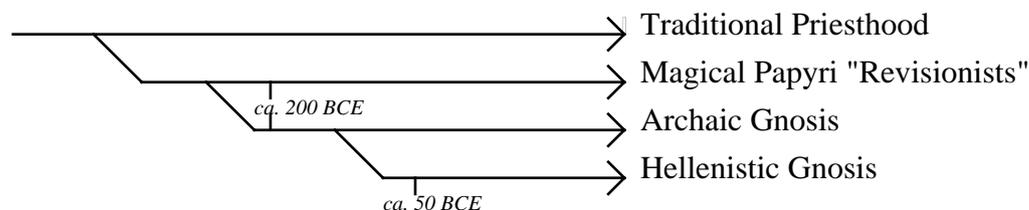
Archaic Gnosis, by definition, precedes the Hellenistic by an indeterminate period of time, and is to be associated with an increased theological concern with the problem of evil in Egypt, as manifest in the magical papyri. As we shall see in Chapter 9, this sociological split in dualist adherent also shows up a few centuries later on in the evidence of Manichaean success in the *agora* of Lower Egypt, including the conversion of Greek Neoplatonic philosophers, as well as a widespread appeal to the peasants, priests, and artisans of the Sahid and Thebaid to the south. This points up a capacity in Archaic Gnosis to encompass a radical dualism, whereas Hellenistic Gnosis is concerned more with theodicy, with the descensus of a part of the godhead, and is in that sense a mitigated dualism.

It is my thesis that Greek magic interacted with the Egyptian via a bilingual class of philosopher-priests, and that the whole evolution of a more starkly dualistic *Weltanschauung*, powerfully manifest in the magical papyri, was due to the “revisionist” activities of this group. Here we must include the Mysteries, especially since this particular Graeco-Egyptian fusion broke down the traditional barriers

⁵⁵ Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, 119.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

between priesthood and laity in cultic observances.⁵⁷ The Gnostic phase followed upon the magical, and continued on in parallel fashion, influencing, and being influenced by, the grass-roots level practice of autochthonic magic associated with the conservative Egyptian priesthood and their “renegade” magical practitioners. Further removed from this was the phenomenon of Hellenistic Gnosis with its Greek philosophical overtones and emphasis upon the individual. This synthetic model can be laid out as follows:



The first offshoot from Egyptian tradition manifests itself as an enhanced concern with the underworld and the incorporation of diverse Greek and Jewish elements among others: the emphasis here is upon day to day effects and thus displays the hallmark of popular religion. The development of Archaic Gnosis from this emphasises traditional Egyptian emanationist thought-structures in a cosmogonic setting where the focus is upon religious practice and soteriology. Egyptian religion had always been acutely aware of the fact that the earth “was perpetually threatened by the revolt of perverse forces, bad spirits, adulterated souls of the dead, obscure and malevolent powers”,⁵⁸ and so the focus remained traditional, even while the methods branched out beyond the sanctions of the temple precinct. One would suspect the dependence here upon a literacy connected with the temples themselves.⁵⁹ Hellenistic Gnosis manifests a more sophisticated analysis of emanationist theogonies with a view towards the internal transformation of the individual and is ostensibly more Greek in tone than the Archaic, wedding philosophy to mysticism against the backdrop of various Egyptian theologies.

The Alexandrian view of Gnosis is inescapably antinomian and anti-ecclesial in the first instance, and the acute need for an external redeemer, to dramatise the Passion of Christ for example, was entirely against their philosophical grain. A.D. Nock, in writing about the Gnostic milieu, noted that, “for these men there was not a redeemer, in the past or in the future; but man had in himself – or some men had in themselves – that divine element which was potentially both redeemable and

⁵⁷ “An important influence was brought to bear in the shaping of the Mysteries. The conception of initiation, formerly restricted to priests, was now extended to all participants.” Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 67.

⁵⁸ Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, 166.

⁵⁹ As Griffiths notes, “ancient Egyptian schools were often attached to temples... and in these schools the priests were probably the teachers,” *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride*, 315. Donald B. Redford, *Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books*, 215-224, gives a comprehensive overview of the likely contents of a temple library in Egypt during the five centuries leading up to our era.

redeemer”.⁶⁰ Nock also makes a point that is at the heart of the present section – that the poor had little time for deep reflection upon religious matters, that introspection requires free-time, *otium*, and that this was only available to those members of the educated classes who were not themselves absorbed by public and private business, or political life.⁶¹ Clearly, we are essentially dealing with the class of philosopher/priest and scribe in Egypt, and for the rapid and dramatic transitional development of some strata of Egyptian religious thought into the Gnostic in this period we are in large measure obliged to focus upon the existence of the Graeco-Egyptian, or Egypto-Greek, intelligentsia.

It follows that if these groups felt no great need for an external redeemer, and we are speaking here of Hellenistic Gnosis as opposed to Archaic, neither would they feel obliged in seeking salvation for themselves to closely follow cult ritual. An evocative piece of evidence comes to us from Irenaeus who writes about Basileides in this regard:

He attaches no importance to the question regarding meats offered in sacrifice to idols, thinks them of no consequence, and makes use of them without any hesitation; he holds also the use of other things, and the practice of every kind of lust, a matter of perfect indifference. These men, moreover, practice magic,⁶² and use images, incantations, invocations, and every other kind of curious art.

From the above we detect an almost full-blown skeptical agenda with respect to religious cultic activity, for it is not viewed as being worthless, rather it is regarded with an attitude of indifference. We have noted earlier the antinomianism of Carpocrates, also indicted by Irenaeus, who proclaimed that good and evil are simply in virtue of human opinion, a relativism that Protagoras, the great Sophist philosopher, would have heartily endorsed.⁶³ This sophistication, from our remove, delimits the rather severe fault-line between Hellenistic and Archaic Gnosis in terms of *belief* in external procedure or *nomos*. The ancient oriental religious attitude, if we can describe it thus, will take the question of cultic observance and praxis extremely seriously. In contrast with this, the new corrosive Gnosis born of heterodoxy will hedge its bets on that score, intuiting, as did the earlier Sophists and Skeptics, that the real dynamic for Truth, be it mundane or celestial, lies within the individual, or at least along a variety of avenues. For this *indifference* is not the closed-off dogmatism of someone who has ceased to seek along the traditional avenues – indeed, in the same breath Irenaeus reports that the Alexandrian Gnostics “practise magic and use images” and there would appear to be a rather sharp contradiction in one who does

⁶⁰ Arthur Darby Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 447.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 450-51.

⁶² *Adv. Haer.*, trans. A Roberts, J. Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 350.

⁶³ Some eleven statues in a half-circle of wall were uncovered in 1950 facing the so-called Sphinx alley leading to the Serapeum at Memphis in Egypt. Among the philosophers on one side, facing the poets on the other, is Protagoras (also Plato, Heraclitus, and Thales). The statues certainly date to the Ptolemaic period, and the inclusion of Protagoras establishes his philosophical influence in Egypt. See Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, 43-44.

this while professing “perfect indifference” to their efficacy. The answer lies in the continuing effort to seek, that this indifference implies an openness to various options, and is in fact akin to Skeptical *ataraxia*, the freedom from dogmatic bondage to either contending viewpoints.

The social and literary realities underlying the rise of *Gnosis* in Egypt thus far examined arise, in part, from the split within the priesthood in Egypt that occurred in Ptolemaic times following the battle of Raphia in 217 B.C.E. The old tensions of Upper and Lower Egypt, between the stronghold of Amun at Thebes and Ptah at Memphis, continue on in this era.⁶⁴ The Memphite priesthood was accorded substantial rewards for their pro-Ptolemaic stance and the marriage of the high priest of Ptah, Psenptais, to Berenice, daughter of Euergetes II aptly reflected this union of church and state. Berenice was the mother of high priest Petubastis (120-75 B.C.E.) and it is clear that the assumption of theological power by a completely bilingual high-priest with an Egyptian theologian for a father, and direct filial links to the crown, furthered the already growing bonds between Alexandria and Memphis. It seems to me that the change of venue for the regular priestly synods from Alexandria to Memphis in 197 B.C.E.⁶⁵ was a signal development occurring in a time of complete secession by the Thebaïd during the successful revolt of Ankhmakis. The Ptolemies sought chthonic legitimacy through the political power of Memphis at a time of great internal weakness. In the year following the relocation of the synod to Memphis one can't help concluding that those bodies of priests who did not join the secessionists in the south were able, as a consequence, to dictate terms to the thirteen year-old Epiphanes.⁶⁶ There is also the possibility that Ankhmakis' father, Harmakhis, was the same figure as the High Priest Harmakhis of Memphis, which underlines the fact that the struggle for chthonic legitimacy by the Ptolemies required appeasing Memphis at all costs.⁶⁷ That any High Priest could head off and set up a separatist kingdom must have been the greatest fear of all Ptolemaic kings and queens. In this sense it is perhaps incorrect to think of Psenptais marrying into the royal family – at least an equally important dynamic at work was that of the royal family marrying into Memphis.

The extensive Ptolemaic temples, built or restored from the Delta to the south at large expense, extend in high relief through the Upper Egyptian heartland and are a testament to Ptolemaic attempts at appeasement in the face of this proud intransigence. With the exception of Memphis, there is every suggestion that this appeasement more

⁶⁴ Crawford, “Ptolemy, Ptah and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis,” 8.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁶ Crawford does not state this as strongly: “it seems unlikely that the thirteen year-old Epiphanes was able to dictate a policy to the priests.” Crawford also notes that this decree was likely composed initially in Egyptian (Ibid., 33).

⁶⁷ Reymond develops this intriguing hypothesis in “Alexandria and Memphis,” 9. Harmakhis became the fifth High Priest of Memphis in 217 B.C.E., the year of Egypt's glorious performance at the battle of Raphia. It is a curious coincidence in the extreme that the earliest expression in proto-Coptic we have bears the epithet of this secessionist king as we have seen in Chapter 6.

or less failed, and that the temples became centres of cultural resistance⁶⁸ In linking this feeling to the south particularly, we note the rebellions, the nationalism expressed in the temple of Edfu, the *Oracle of the Potter*, and the *Demotic Chronicle*.⁶⁹

From the second century B.C.E. the traditional Egyptian priesthood began to attract Greeks, or perhaps more exactly those of Greek descent, and this continued on into Roman times. A papyrus contemporaneous with the main Gnostic teachers in Alexandria presents a very interesting picture of this continued foundation of Archaic Gnosis, one opening itself to Greek-speakers.⁷⁰ The text is to be dated to the middle of the second century C.E. and was translated into Greek from Egyptian by a bilingual author or redactor. Although the text is fragmentary, it is clear that it was concerned with laying out priestly regulations and oaths for initiates as the following passage indicates:

I will not eat and I will not drink the things which are not lawful nor all those things which have been written in the books nor will I attach my fingers to them; I will not measure a measure on a threshing floor; I will not lift a balance in my hand; I will not measure land; I will not go into a clean place; I will not touch sheep's hair; I will not hold the *machaira* until the day of my death". All these things are written down together [in a book]. Taking it up he reads it aloud as testimony...⁷¹

Two classes of priests are mentioned and the text is obviously intended for Greek-speakers entering the Egyptian priesthood. The date of composition for this text may have been much earlier; in any event it both demonstrates the continued traditional strictness of the Egyptian priesthood, as well as the participation of bilingual Egyptians in its inner rites. Current at the height of Gnosis in Egypt, it demonstrates the direct window into the Egyptian faith that Gnostic teachers had at their disposal, either through their own participation, or through the participation of their teachers, students or followers.

The onset of Roman rule in Egypt manifested itself as a direct assault upon these priestly classes, upon the prestige and economic power that was theirs even up until Ptolemaic times. Under the Romans the numbers of the priesthood steadily diminished and a focus upon practical spiritual affairs began to manifest itself outside

⁶⁸ H.W. Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1974), 33: "There is abundant evidence that the native temples were in reality centres of nationalism and that one of the main tasks of the priesthood was to preserve and to fan the spirit of national pride, of nationalism, until the day came when once more the true Horus would sit on the throne."

⁶⁹ See J.Gwyn Griffiths, "Egyptian Nationalism in the Edfu Temple Texts" in *Glimpses of Ancient Egypt: Studies in Honour of H.W. Fairman*, eds. John Ruffle, G.A. Gaballa and Kenneth A. Kitchen (Warminster: Aris & Philips Ltd., 1979), 178. These are three examples from a fairly long list of similar examples. See Donald B. Redford, *Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books*, 276-96.

⁷⁰ Papyri Wash. U. Inv. 138. Verne B. Schuman, "A Second-Century Treatise on Egyptian Priests and Temples," *HTR* LIII (1960): 159-70.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

of the temples.⁷² This socio-economic disenfranchising of large numbers of priests, the rise of “magical” procedure and individual experience beyond the temple walls, along with a markedly increased hostility to the oppressiveness of historical process, all define the socio-historical rise of Gnostic thought in Egypt. Moreover, one can think of no more suitable image of Gnostic forlornness in Egypt, of a sense of being alien, a stranger in a strange land, than the widespread phenomenon of insolvent Egyptians turned fugitive under the pitiless scourge of Roman over-taxation. For these people, abandoning their traditional link with temple and hearth, the teachings espoused by Gnostic theologians to the effect that the physical realm was itself inimicable could hardly have sounded radical.

Indeed, there is a strong sense of the existential *experience* of despair, especially among the recalcitrant Egyptians, responsible for this revolt against the *Heimarmene*. Over 600 years of foreign occupation had, at the commencement of the Roman period, brought the Egyptian populace to its lowest depths in its experience of an alien economic and cultural tyranny. Roman soldiers garrisoning the conquered province were the tangible and unmasked face of Roman rule in Egypt, and a “veritable ancient apartheid” resulted from the Roman orientalising disdain for Egypt.⁷³ This notching up of oppression and misery in Egypt quite obviously fuelled dualist speculation: here was a palpable force of evil set loose in the Two Lands. Of critical importance at this juncture was the overthrow of the high priests of Memphis who had maintained and greatly increased their hereditary hold on theological power throughout the entire Ptolemaic period.⁷⁴ Expressed in the language of the Egyptian priesthoods of the time, one might say that the perennial Egyptian experience of *Ma’at* had fled upwards to become a feminine power untainted by a desacralised Egypt and its demonic overlords. A lower feminine deficiency, left behind, became the wandering lamenting Isis, equated with the cosmos itself, with Fate, expressed by the feminine noun *Heimarmene*.⁷⁵ The Hermetic text *Asclepius*, a version of which was found in the Jebel al Tarif, goes on at great length describing an apocalyptic vision of a desecrated Egypt within which the Gnostics appeared:

Or are you ignorant Asclepius, that Egypt exists as the image of heaven? If it is fitting that we speak the Truth, our land is the temple of the cosmos. It is proper that you not be ignorant that a time will come about (when) Egyptians will appear to have served the Godhead in vain, and all their practice in their Faith will be despised. For all Faith shall leave Egypt and flee upwards to heaven.

⁷² Lewis *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule*, 98.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 19, 34.

⁷⁴ Jan Quaegebeur, “The Genealogy of the Memphite High Priest Family in the Hellenistic Period,” in *Studies on Ptolemaic Memphis*, *Studia Hellenistica* 24, ed. Willy Peremans (Louvain 1980), 74.

⁷⁵ Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 161: “By late antiquity, the centrifugal force of Hellenistic expansion extended the locus of deficiency to the outer bounds of the cosmos itself. The necessary conclusion to this cosmic revaluation was that the totality of the finite cosmos, together with its predominantly feminine attributes, was considered to be deficient.” Kákosy attributes this development in Egyptian thought to Pythagorean influences, “Gnosis und Ägyptische Religion,” 242.

And Egypt will be widowed, abandoned by the gods, for foreigners will enter Egypt and shall become masters of it: O Egypt! (70.3-23)

Divine Egypt will suffer evils greater than these. Egypt, lover of God, and the residence of the gods, school of divine teachings, will become an image of impiety.... (71.31-35)

Darkness will be preferred to light and death will be preferred to life. None shall wondrously cast their eyes up to heaven. And the pious man will be counted as insane, and the impious man will be honored as wise... (72.17-23)

The wicked angels will remain among men, existing among them, leading them recklessly into wicked things: atheism, war, and brigandage, accomplished by teaching them things contrary to nature... (73.5-12)⁷⁶

⁷⁶Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XI: *Nag Hammadi Codices V,2-5 and VI*, ed. Douglas M. Parrott, 418-428.

Chapter Nine: Egyptian Manichaeism

According to Persian sources, the first Manichaean proselytisers probably arrived in Egypt between 244 and 270 C.E., some 20-50 years after Mani had received his first revelation in Mesopotamia.¹ Three missionaries were sent westwards in this period and an important Manichaean missionary to arrive in Egypt was one Addas, known in Egypt as Pappos. There it is recorded that he set up numerous monasteries and established a Manichaean community based upon an order of elects and their supporting auditors. He is also said to have used the writings of Mani, as well as his own, to great effect in Upper Egypt before making his way to Alexandria. In the *Acta Archelai* and in Epiphanius a certain Skythanos, an apostle of Manichaeism, is mentioned as having made his first disciples at Hypsele south of Assyut.² Finally, there is the evidence of a major Manichaean textual find made in the Fayyum in 1930 which indirectly supports an Upper Egyptian provenance since the dialect used in this extensive literature is not the Fayyumic Coptic of the area as one would expect, but is rather a type of Achmîmic which places its composition much further to the south in the Assyut area north of Thebes.³ This, then, confirms the presence of a major Manichaean community in Upper Egypt which may have resulted from early missionising efforts there. Although some scholars have argued that the Red Sea trade route with its overland passage to Thebes from the Gulf of Aqaba through the Wadi Hammamat would have facilitated such a development,⁴ this cannot be firmly ascertained and one might equally argue that the Manichaeans, with their penchant for public disputation, would have aimed initially for Alexandria, intellectual and economic nucleus of Egypt at this time. At the very end of this period, from 244-270 C.E., there is indeed direct evidence of a major Manichaean influence

¹ See text M2 in F.C. Andreas and W.B. Henning, *Sitzungsberichte der preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1933), 301-2; also Werner Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, BTT 11, no.3.3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981), 450-51.

² Epiphanius depended upon the latter in his polemical work. See *Acta Archelai*, ed. and trans., C.H. Beeson (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1906), 90-91, and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 69, ed. and trans. K. Holl (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1922). This information, however, is unreliable.

³ See Joseph Vergote, "Der Manichäismus in Ägypten," in *Der Manichäismus*, ed. Geo Widengren (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), 214-24. Vergote takes this to indicate that as the texts are not original Egyptian works, they must have come directly from Syria, thus indicating a historical transmission via the southern route. While this is certainly possible, it is still inconclusive insofar as we cannot say that Manichaean texts written in Fayyumic (or any other northern dialect) did not exist. The existence of these would suggest a northern route.

⁴ See W. Seston, "L'Égypte Manichéenne," *CdE* 14 (1939): 362-72.

extending into Alexandria as Manichaean missionisers arrived in the train of the successful Palmyrian invasion of Egypt in 270.⁵

In assessing the transmission of Manichaeism into Egypt one is faced with two complementary developments: firstly, the spread of a popular Manichaeism which apparently enjoyed great success in Upper Egypt; secondly, the arrival of Manichaean thought in the cities, most particularly Alexandria. One is perhaps best advised to assume that both events occurred more or less simultaneously, for alongside the extensive literary evidence of the Medinet Madi find in the Fayyum, there are indications of major Manichaean successes in the various *agora* of Egyptian cities. In this regard, the completely preserved polemic of Alexander of Lycopolis is an extremely important source for Manichaeism in Egypt. Alexander, a non-Christian Neoplatonic philosopher, was concerned that many of his fellow philosophers were being swayed by Manichaean arguments, even to the extent of joining their ranks.⁶ In response to this, Alexander attempts a full philosophical refutation of their system.

The curtain of censure which was to later descend, beginning with Diocletian's edict against the Manichaeans on the 31st of March, 297, reached its culmination a century later with the decree of Theodosius and the burning of the libraries in Alexandria. It was to be the fate of the Manichaeans, as with the broader array of Gnostic groups in Egypt, to have their teachers and writings driven underground by an ascendant Roman/Christian hegemony, and their contribution to religious thought eventually edited-out for posterity. Yet two fortunate circumstances, both occurring within almost one decade of each other in the present century, have opened up new possibilities for the understanding of dualist thought in specifically Egyptian modes. The extensive Manichaean find at Medinet Madi has its exact counterpart, in terms of its quality and bulk, in the Gnostic collection found in the Gebel el Tarif, both written in Coptic. Both collections were hidden around 400 C.E., undoubtedly to protect them from the effects of persecution.

As it is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate the Egyptian presence in Gnostic thought, Manichaeism must also be included beneath the rubric of Gnosis in Egypt. It shall be demonstrated in this chapter that a distinctly Egyptian variant is evident even in the supposedly foreign mythological flora and fauna of Manichaeism. Egyptian Gnosis here, as well as with the other groups examined in this thesis, is also a legitimate Egyptological concern.⁷

⁵ I am here following the analysis of Michel Tardieu, "Les Manichéens en Égypte," *BSFE* 5 (June 1982): 5-17. Direct evidence for the conversion to Manichaeism of a close family member of queen Zenobia prior to her invasion of Egypt is given in an extant Sogdian fragment; reference is also made here to the Manichaean *Electus* Adda arriving "just as far as Alexandria".

⁶ "I, for one, do not wish to deny that these doctrines are capable of influencing the minds of those who uncritically accept this theory, especially since deceitful expositions of this kind were successful in making converts out of certain fellow-philosophers of mine." van der Horst and Mansfeld, *An Alexandrian Platonist Against Dualism*, 58.

⁷ Tardieu, "Les Manichéens en Égypte," 15: "As a religious concern, Manichaeism belongs to the history of Egypt, as a linguistic concern it brings to Coptology an ensemble of material of great coherence and richness not yet explored, as a codicological concern it is one of the most beautiful chapters in the history of the book. Egyptology, likewise, cannot *not* be conscious of it."

There has also been a strong tendency in the broader field of Manichaean Studies to regard all textual evidence for Manichaeism as a bounded extension from the central complex of ideas which originated with Mani himself. However, Mani was not directly involved in proselytising in Egypt and it is clear that the extensive Manichaean Coptic texts which incorporate central Egyptian religious motifs were not part of the Manichaean canon. This then points towards the existence of a distinctly Egyptian Manichaean sect.

In the first instance I shall be concerned with establishing some aspects of Manichaean thought which appear to be Egyptian. I shall also deal with Manichaeism as philosophy and myth, the interaction of Manichaean thought with Alexandrian Neoplatonism being of primary interest. Finally, I shall consider its affinities with other known Gnostic groups in Egypt, in particular the group which used the *Pistis Sophia* as part of their liturgy.

One must ask what attraction the foreign creed of Manichaeism possessed in Roman times for the Egyptian peasant, priest, and philosopher. Arising from the fact that Manichaeism apparently obtained large initial successes in Upper Egypt – surely a conservative backwater as held up against liberal Alexandria – we must assume that a radically new and exotic message, particularly as it was to be associated with Persia, would have had little chance of acceptance in Egypt; rather, such an appeal would have to contain much in the way of traditional form and substance for any chance at dissemination, most especially in Egypt. This feature goes right to the heart of Mani's well-known proselytising methods and accounts for the extraordinary geographical and cultural breadth that his religion achieved, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Mani clearly tailored his message for the ears of its recipients, blending specific indigenous elements upon his syncretistic palette, thus offering a way "in" for the local novitiate. As time went on following Mani's death, his missionisers would have felt even further unencumbered in developing these local variants into a more localised Manichaean expression, one which still, however, attempted to complement the canonical doctrines of Mani. I propose to consider three specific Egyptian variants: negative confessions, apocalypticism, and heliocentrism.

An important Egyptian aspect of Manichaean thought was the employment of the so-called "negative confession". These statements are neither confessions, nor negative in the sense of admitting guilt; rather they are a declaration of innocence and in Egyptian tradition this is customarily manifested in the context of the deceased standing before judgement in the hereafter. The Manichaean Psalms depict the righteous Elect declaring their pure state of being prior to the ascent of the soul. The Manichaean's extensive use of this literary form is quite clearly derived from the Egyptian as it is not found anywhere else in the Manichaean canon. The Manichaean Psalms to Jesus depict the righteous Elect declaring their pure state of being prior to the ascent of the soul. Various examples follow with the Manichaean text given first, followed by earlier Egyptian examples in italics:

I did not allow my enemies to put out my lamps (*Psalms* CCXLIII 50.7)⁸
I have not served the Error...(CCLXVII 84.22)⁹

⁸ Coptic transcription from C.R.C. Allberry, ed. and trans., *A Manichaean Psalmbook, Part II: Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1938), 50.

⁹ Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 84.

I have never been a slave of baseness that works outrages (CCLXXXII 103.33)¹⁰

I was not robbed, I was not spat in the eyes, owing to the worth of my speech, the competence of my counsel, and the bending of my arm... Never did I hand a person over to a potentate, so that my name might be good with all men. I never lied against any person - an abomination to Anubis.

*First Intermediate Period - Stela of the Butler Merer of Edfu*¹¹

Never was I beaten in the presence of any official since my birth; never did I take any property of any man by violence

*Old Kingdom - Mortuary Inscription of Nezemib*¹²

I have given my soul [armour]; I have not given it instead to the [foul] pleasures... (*Psalms* CCXLIV 51.6)

Your yoke which you intended for me, I did not refuse it my Lord... (51.18-19)

Your lamps of Light, I have not allowed my enemies to extinguish them... (51.21-22)

I was not shamed in any respect in my deeds that I have performed... (51.29-52.1)¹³

I have repelled falsehood for you. I have not done falsehood against men...

I have done no evil...

I have not taken away the food of the spirits, I have not copulated...

(Spell BD 125)¹⁴

I do not that which his majesty hates... my voice was not [lifted up] in the king's house, nor was my step too broad in the palace I took not the reward of lying, nor expelled the truth for the violent.

*Amarna (Akhenaten) Period - Tomb of Tutu*¹⁵

I have not bound my mind to the cares... (*Psalms* CCLXVIII 86.10)

I have not mingled with the sects of Error... (86.14)

I have not defiled my tongue with blasphemy... (86.15-16)

I have not mingled with the intercourse of the flesh... (86.31)¹⁶

¹⁰ Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 103.

¹¹ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol.1, 87.

¹² James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. 1, *The First to the Seventeenth Dynasties* (1906; reprint, London: The Histories & Mysteries of Man Ltd., 1988), §274.

¹³ Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 51-52.

¹⁴ Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 29-30.

¹⁵ James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, vol. 2, *The Eighteenth Dynasty* (1906; reprint, London: the Histories & Mysteries of Man Ltd., 1988), §1013.

*I have not been deaf to the words of truth...
I have not transgressed my nature, I have not washed out (the picture of) a
god...
I have not made conjuration against the king...
I have neither misconducted myself nor copulated with a boy...*
(Spell BD 125)¹⁷

There is a strong, though indirect, link between Egyptian and Manichaean apocalypticism. This link has been well-established in many instances. For our purposes this influence can be considered *a priori* as contrasted with possible *a posteriori* influences effected upon Manichaeism following its inception. Apocalyptic Egyptian influences, alongside Zoroastrian for instance, were a part of the cultural warp and woof of the area of Mesopotamia in which Mani grew up. One particular point can be mentioned here however. The eschatological depiction of the cosmic conflagration which burns for 1,468 years exists in Manichaean and Egyptian Gnostic texts. In the Middle Persian *Shabuhragan* the length of the conflagration is 1468 years, essentially an Egyptian Sothis period of 1460 years.¹⁸ This calendrical figure of 1,460 also finds its expression in other Egyptian Gnostic eschatologies as we shall see. The eschatological import here is that of a fulfilled cycle of time, one which was based upon astrological observation. This essential Egyptian conception became part of the personal teachings of Mani before Manichaean missionaries arrived in Egypt and it survived for half a millennium in China, long after Manichaeism disappeared in Egypt ca. 1000 C.E.

The distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* Egyptian influences upon Mani and Manichaeism can only be tentatively sketched out. Certainly, the above-mentioned apocalyptic influences had found their way into Mani's milieu prior to his formulation of the Manichaean creed. Specific Egyptian heliolatrous sentiments, on the other hand, were more likely to have been grafted onto the Manichaean heliocentric cosmology following its transmission into Parthia and Egypt, homelands of Mithras and Re.

Mani was the self-proclaimed "Apostle of Light" and the imagery of light in his teachings is pronounced. The sun, for obvious reasons, was the most powerful symbol of his realm of Light in the world; as well, it was a vehicle for various divine functionaries who descended from the realm of Light, and it was a transporter of saved souls back to this realm. As his message spread out from Mesopotamia, east and west, it naturally fused with the heliolatrous sentiments of traditions with ancient and venerable histories. The Persian Mithras and the Egyptian Re stand dominant at this time as manifestations of heliocentrist religiosity. The Egyptian jurisdiction over the eastern Mediterranean at various points in history, and the subsequent Persian subjugation of Egypt in the late pre-Ptolemaic phase, allowed ample opportunity for

¹⁶ Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 86.

¹⁷ Faulkner, *The Book of the Dead*, 31-32.

¹⁸ See L. Koenen, "Manichaean Apocalypticism at the Crossroads of Iranian, Egyptian, Jewish and Christian Thought," in *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis: Atti del Simposio Internazionale, Rende-Amantea 3-7 settembre 1984*, eds. A. Roselli and L. Cirillo (Cosenza: Marra Editore, 1986), 285-332.

cross-fertilisation. Religious conceptions revolving around light and darkness expressed a sentiment that united the Persians and Egyptians, in spite of numerous other differences. We might expect that the Manichaeans would employ heliolatrous imagery in their scriptures used in Egypt.

Mary Boyce has identified some of the parallels which exist between Parthian texts and the Egyptian *Kephalia*.¹⁹ It is her conclusion that the core teachings of Mani did not regard the sun as a personal god, but that Manichaeism was drawn this way in its interaction with the Parthian Mithras. As for the “Coptic converts” (*sic*), however, her conclusion is that they had “no predisposition to worship a personal sun-god, [and] kept more strictly to Mani’s original teachings”.²⁰ I shall examine more closely the textual evidence for this supposition and demonstrate that it is without foundation.

Chapter 65 of the Manichaean *Kephalia*, “Concerning the Sun”²¹ and written in Achmîmic Coptic, is one of the longest chapters of the entire text. This work is found only in its Egyptian expression and was non-canonical for the Manichaeans.²² Homiletic fragments exist in Parthian parallels which were dedicated to the Third Messenger stationed within the rising sun in the east, and which was seen to be an executor of the higher Living Spirit in its battle against evil. There is, however, no other extant Manichaean text which presents such an extended discourse upon the sun and one is powerfully struck by its imagery and tone in the Coptic *Kephalia*. In this scheme the sun is more than a mere symbol and transit-zone for saved souls; the writer has constructed a telescopic cosmology in which the Sun is the intermediary between Mani and the realm of Light. As the Father is exalted above all in his realm, so “the Sun is greatly exalted above the all... it exists for the Father of Greatness” (163.1-4)²³ The sun is the great “enlightener” and “illuminator” in the physical world. Mani, in turn, is described in similar fashion, and his disciples are depicted as being his rays (166.2-4).²⁴

Egyptian heliolatry reached its apotheosis in the person of Akhenaten (*ca.* 1358 B.C.E.); the Atenists, in worshipping the physical disk of the sun, simply enhanced what had already been present in Egyptian thought since at least the Twelfth Dynasty (*ca.* 2000 B.C.E.), and of course sun-worship as a state religion dates back at least as far as the Fifth Dynasty (*ca.* 2465-2323 B.C.E.). The heresy of Akhenaten, as it came to be viewed following his death, resulted more from the fact that he had

¹⁹ Mary Boyce, “On Mithra in the Manichaean Pantheon,” in *A Locust’s Leg: Studies in Honour of S.H. Taqizadeh*, ed. W.B.H. Henning (London: Lund, Humphries, 1962), 44-54. Coptic transcriptions for the *Kephalia* from Alexander Böhlig, *Manichäische Handschriften der Staatlichen Museen Berlin*. Band I, *Kephalaia*, 2. *Hälfte* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1963).

²⁰ Boyce, “On Mithra in the Manichaean Pantheon,” 51.

²¹ *MH*, 158-64.

²² The seven canonical works are as follows: *The Living (or Great) Gospel*; *The Treasure of Life*; *Pragmateia*, i.e. “*Treatise, Essay*”; *The Book of Mysteries*; *The Book of the Giants*; *The Letters*; and possibly *Sahbuhragan* which has been omitted from Coptic and Chinese lists.

²³ Coptic Transcription from *MH*, 163.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

suppressed other divinities (and consequently, their priesthoods) than that he had actively promulgated a monotheistic conception of a supreme solar divinity *per se*.

From the Fifth Dynasty onwards (*ca.* 2465 B.C.E.) the name of Re became a regular feature of the royal titulary. The sun-worship of Akhenaten differed from the various Re-cults in placing more emphasis upon the Aten, or visible manifestation of godhead, than upon Re, the hidden power which motivated it. This strongly parallels the Manichaean distinction between the Third Envoy positioned within the sun, and the sun itself. The very name Akhenaten, which translates something like “Glorified Spirit of the Sun-Disk”²⁵ of course idealises the fusion of the king with the visible sun. Chapter 67 of the *Kephalia*, entitled “Concerning the Illuminator”, contains the following pronouncement by Mani:

As with the Sun, the great Illuminator - if it comes in its rising, (at) the time in which it shines upon the world, it extends out its rays upon all the earth; if, again, it is conceived of as setting (then) its rays [disappear] and sink. There is not one single ray left upon the earth: in this way, however, this is also like the image of the flesh into which I have been cast (and) was manifested in the world. All my sons, however, the Elect, the righteous who exist in the houses of every country, are like the rays of the Sun.(165.28-166.4)²⁶

Consider, then, the New Kingdom text, already cited elsewhere, which is concerned with the Egyptian priestly elect, purveyors of Re’s beneficence to the world at large:

It [the book] must be very, very secret, mysterious, invisible. There is only the solar disc which sees into its mystery. The men who enter into it are the personnel of Re: these are the scribes of the house of life. The books which are inside, they are the “emanations of Re” in order that this god may live thanks to those and in order to overcome his enemies.²⁷

With Akhenaten, or the *Litanies of Re* for that matter, and the Manichaean teachings in Egypt, we are dealing with heliocentric cosmologies which had a long history in the entire ancient Near East. This “heliocentrism” represents an intellectual, philosophical expression, as opposed to “heliolatry” which is less systematic, more of a sentiment. The rather fuzzy notion of “sun-worship” incorporates these two tendencies and is to be found in the *Kephalia* and other earlier Egyptian religious texts. This point can thus be made by drawing upon specific textual parallels which exist between Egyptian Manichaean and New Kingdom texts. Some examples of the heliocentric outlook follow, with the Manichaean text given first, and earlier Egyptian counterparts given in italics:

A. The Sun as giver of life

²⁵ Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten*, 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 165, 166.

²⁷ Philippe Derchain, *Le Papyrus Salt 825*, 57-62; 75-78; 83-85.

...he manifests and reveals the world in the sign of the radiance of the Aeon of Light from which he comes, whose sign is here in this world illuminating all of creation.

...he nourishes, gives power, the taste and fragrance of the trees and fruit and vegetables and all herbs and flowers and fertile plains upon all the earth.

(*Keph.* 160.1, 10)²⁸

Thou createdst the earth when thou wert afar, namely men, cattle, all flocks, and everything on earth which moves with legs, or which is up above flying with wings. The foreign countries of Syria and Kush, and the land of Egypt, thou placest every man in his place, and makest their food... Infinite life is in thee to quicken them, and the breath of life for (their) nostrils. Thy beams appear, and all nourishing plants grow in the soil, caused to grow by thy rays!

(‘Great Hymn’, Tomb of Ay, Akhenaten)²⁹

B. The Sun as giver of perception

The first good act which he performs for them is his Light which he shines forth upon them, opening the eyes of all human beings as they see by reason of it and are born in him.

(*Keph.* 65 159.18-20)³⁰

Homage to thee, Re, supreme power, who makes the earth visible, who gives light to those in the West, he whose forms are his being, when he transforms (himself) into his Great Disk!

(*The Great Litany*, 4)³¹

C. The withdrawal of the Sun and the commencement of the Evil time

The first evil accomplished in the world by the night is the darkness of which all the world is full since when the Sun turns away from the world and draws in its rays, immediately from there the night spreads its shade upon all the world. The eyes of human beings become full of darkness.

(*Keph.* 65 160.23)³²

...immediately thence the evil human beings come out and perform wicked deeds, the adulterers, the plunderers and the poisoners, the evil beasts come out with all the snakes from their holes, filled with evil deeds, wandering in the night.

²⁸ Coptic Transcription from *MH*, 160.

²⁹ Redford, *Akhenaten the Heretic King*, 177.

³⁰ Coptic Transcription from *MH*, 159.

³¹ Alexandre Piankoff, *The Litany of Re* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 22.

³² Coptic Transcription from *MH*, 160.

(Keph. 65 161.12)³³

...it shows all creations in their chaotic state; they seethe in their hearts, committing evil and perdition. The fourth: the heaviness of sleep lies upon (one) striking one down with sleep, and one lies, sleeping, resting like a corpse in the night.

(Keph. 65 161.1)³⁴

When thou settest in the Western horizon, the earth is in darkness after the manner of death. Men spend the night indoors with the head covered, the eye not seeing its fellow. Their possessions might be stolen, even when under their heads, and they would be unaware of it. Every lion comes forth from its lair and all snakes bite. Darkness lurks, and the earth is silent when their Creator rests in his habitation.

(‘Great Hymn’, tomb of Ay, Akhenaten)³⁵

D. The overthrow of the forces of Darkness

The living Spirit will come suddenly... he will succour the Light. But the work of Death and the Darkness he will shut up in the dwelling that was established for it... (Psalms CCXXIII 11.13-16)³⁶

Glory and victory to our Lord Mani, the Spirit of Truth, that cometh from the Father. (11.29-30)³⁷

Then he took the darkness in the middle of his Light and swept it out. Again, in this way he dispersed the fear within his peace
...when he shines upon all the world the wicked snake and sharp-toothed beast who are full of baseness run to hide in their caves.

(Keph. 65 159. 25 & 160.4)³⁸

May you be keen, may your soul be glorious, may you annihilate the enemies of Re! The Joined Together makes you breathe, and you shine; your darkness is dispelled while you call the One in His Disk and the One in His Disk calls you... When he sees his (own) bodies and makes his transformations in the region with mysterious qualities, when he places the rays into the darkness of those who hide the naked bodies, he inherits the Mysterious caverns, he gives eyes to the gods - they see, and their souls are glorious.

³³ Ibid., 161.

³⁴ Ibid., 161.

³⁵ Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 241.

³⁶ Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 11.

³⁷ Ibid., 11.

³⁸ Coptic Transcription from *MH*, 159, 160.

The gates of the Netherworld are open, the earth discloses its Caverns. Lo, the mace of Re in the hands of King N smites his enemies, his staff annihilates the evil ones. His extent is the extent of the One of the Horizon, his seats are the seats of Re.

(*The Great Litany*)³⁹

E. The Sun as the transporter of the saved soul

Ferry me across to the sun and the moon, o ferryboat of tranquil Light, above these three lands. O first-born I have become a holy bride in the bridal-chambers of tranquil Light. I have received the gifts of the victory.

(*Psalms CCLXIV 81.10-14*)⁴⁰

Those who jubilate at Re, those who adore the Soul of the One of the Horizon, jubilate at the soul of Re. May ye adore his soul, the One of the Netherworld! When He in his disk calls you, your soul rises to your Creator.

(*The Great Litany*)⁴¹

F. Praise for the Sun-god's prophet upon earth

Sing with the Angels and bless the Mind of the shining Light of the Father, the sun... (*Psalms, CCXXXVII 37.22-23*)⁴²

Let us sing together unto Mani, the man of God... (37.26)⁴³

Light your lamps and... keep watch on the day of the Bema for the Bridegroom of joy and receive the holy rays of Light of the good Father. (37.30-38.1)⁴⁴

Say: Hail new Sun, that has come forth with his Light: Hail Holy Spirit, that you have come today to save us: Our Lord Mani who forgives us our sins. Blessing to thy Father, peace to the kingdom on high.

(*Psalms, CCXLI 42.7-13*)⁴⁵

O Living Aten... Thy rays embrace the lands to the full extent that thou hast made, for thou are Re and thou attainest their limits and subduest them for thy beloved son [Akhenaten]. Thou art remote yet thy rays are upon the earth.

(*'Great Hymn', Tomb of Ay, Akhenaten*)⁴⁶

³⁹ Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*, 31-32, 37.

⁴⁰ Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 81.

⁴¹ Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*, 37.

⁴² Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

Ho all living upon the earth, and those who shall be young men someday! I shall tell you the way of life.... Offer praises to the living Disk and you shall have a prosperous life; say to him 'Grant the ruler health exceedingly!' and then he shall double favours for you.... Adore the king [Akhenaten] who is unique like the Disk, for there is none other beside him!

(Amarna inscription: Akhenaten)⁴⁷

A number of important features expressed here contain specific dualistic sentiments and philosophical ideas. The sun is the abettor of life on earth, the foe of darkness, at once a symbol and direct manifestation divine energies whose source is distant. This essential dualism finds its basis in the long-standing Egyptian world-view and the expression of it given here often aspires to the level of poetry.

The many parallels which exist between Egyptian Manichaean texts and New Kingdom inscriptions clearly demonstrate surface similarities between the heliocentrism of Akhenaten and Mani as he is depicted in the Coptic *Kephalia*. Both saw themselves in a three-tiered cosmology in which they were in a position of direct authority for humankind (for Akhenaten, the Aten priesthood and his chosen people the Egyptians, for Mani his Elect and all humanity) beneath the visible presence of god in the world: the sun-disk. Both saw themselves as the prophet of the sole god who created himself daily in the form of the sun. The sun, for both, is the most concentrated locus of divinity in the physical universe: to experience the sun's rays upon oneself was literally to feel the hand of God. Yet a differentiation is made between the physical presence of the Sun and the realm of the Father which is quite distant and invisible for humans. The Father gives to the Sun, and the Sun to the Great Enlightener upon earth: Akhenaten/Mani, both of whom become the tangible focus of the faith. When the higher divinity goes to rest, in both systems, the world becomes a dark and hostile place, sleeping in the manner of death until the life-giving rays of the sun appear again on the eastern horizon. Akhenaten and Mani take on the role of spiritual suns in the physical darkness during this time, and the dawn defines the prophet's role upon earth as the executor of the overthrow of darkness. It is no overstatement to stress these aspects of the two systems, although it must be added that this core-theology can be somewhat obscured in Manichaeism given the intricate convolutions of Mani's entire pseudo-scientific system of thought. These similarities, while interesting, do not argue any necessary historical connectedness; what they do suggest, it seems to me, is the heliocentric *donnée* drawn upon in similar fashion by two distinct groups of religionists in Egypt. The fact that the Manichaeans accomplished this some 1500 years after the Atenists, in the last phases of Egyptian autochthonic thought, bespeaks the powerful longevity of heliocentrism in the Egyptian religious experience

Throughout Ptolemaic and Roman times the Egyptian priesthood had become a repository for nationalist sentiment, their various leaders often existing as ethnarchs among the populace. At the time when the Manichaeans arrived in Egypt these priests could still read the ancient texts and it is to be expected that the general mythological view of the masses still drew upon their own venerable traditions via this learned

⁴⁶ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 1.

⁴⁷ Redford, *Akhenaten the Heretic King*, 181.

class. This in fact is borne out in the textual evidence that we have.⁴⁸ The imagery surrounding the figure of Re was commonplace as was, for instance, the continued association of Seth with the hostile deserts. In the temple of Isis at Philae, Ptolemy II Philadelphus is entitled “Son of Re, Lord of the Crowns, Ptolemy, given life like Re”.⁴⁹ Tiberius, some three centuries later, was accorded similar titles.⁵⁰ Overall, theological texts inscribed in Ptolemaic and Roman times demonstrate a vibrant renaissance in hieroglyphics, and all temples built in this era provided facilities for a rooftop celebration of the rite of the Union with the Disk.⁵¹ The Coptic verb *παιρε* in the Manichaean texts is used in close association with PH as in the above-mentioned passage from the *Psalms*:

ΧΟΟC ΧΕ ΣΔΙΡΕ ΠΡΕ ΝΒΡΡΕ ΠΕΤΑΥΠΡ̄ΙΕ ΜΝΠΘ ΟΥΔΑΙΝΕ (“Say: ‘hail new Sun that has come forth with his Light,’” *Psalms* CCXLI 42.7⁵²) and the verb comes

from the hieroglyphic *pr̄*  ⁵³, also invariably used to describe the sun god’s coming forth. It is difficult to see then how Boyce arrives at the view that the “Coptic converts” had “no predisposition to worship a personal sun-god, [and] kept more strictly to Mani’s original teachings.” All historical evidence points to the contrary and, indeed, the Manichaean texts known from Egypt display the heliocentric emphases, and even Egyptian etymologies in the texts themselves, which one would expect. The point then is that there was a split between the original teachings of Mani and what was being disseminated in Upper Egypt, and probably elsewhere in the ancient world.

Papyrus Rylands 469, an official church anti-Manichaean document of some sort, explicitly condemns sun worship in Egypt:

If there be found man or woman in one of the cities which the Lord thy God giveth thee that has wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God *and*

⁴⁸ See in particular Eberhard Otto, *Gott und Mensch: nach den ägyptischen Tempelinschriften der griechisch-römischen Zeit* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1964); also Maria-Theresa Derchaine-Urtel, *Priester in Tempel: Die Rezeption der theologie der Temple von Edfu und Dendara in den Privatdokumenten aus ptolemäischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1989).

⁴⁹ From Hymn V in Louis V. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1988), 59.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Hermann Junker and Erich Winter, *Das Geburtshaus des Tempels de Isis in Philä* (Wien: Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, 1965), 309.

⁵¹ At various important junctures the divine statue left its sanctuary and was carried to the rooftop to be exposed to the first rays of the rising sun. See Jean-Claude Goyon, “Ptolemaic Egypt: Priests and the Traditional Religion,” in *Cleopatra’s Egypt: Age of the Ptolemies*, ed. Robert S. Bianchi (New York: The Brooklyn Museum in association with Verlag Phillip von Zabern, Mainz, 1988), 37-39.

⁵² Coptic transcription from *M.P.*, 42.

⁵³ Cerný, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, 127.

hath worshipped the sun or any of the host of heaven, it is an abomination unto the Lord thy God.⁵⁴

It is also no coincidence that the Neoplatonic philosopher Alexander of Lycopolis concluded his anti-Manichaean polemic with an extended attack upon the apparent absurdities inherent in Manichaean heliocentrism. The Manichaeans were clearly emphasising this integral part of their teachings, not just for the Egyptian masses, but for the intellectual élite in Alexandria and other cities of the Delta.

There are two main polemical sources for Manichaeism in Egypt. Of these, *Adversus Manichaeos* by Serapion of Thmuis (an early orthodox churchman writing in the mid 4th century in Lower Egypt) is for the most part propagandistic and has only marginal utility in detailing Manichaean philosophy.⁵⁵ Those few passages in the work with any expository value are in accordance with the writings of Alexander of Lycopolis who wrote his main work roughly a half century earlier. Alexander's treatise is of course equally polemical; the difference is that Alexander was a philosopher who saw fit to describe the system he disagreed with in order to more effectively refute it. The information it contains is therefore of great use in assessing Manichaean thought in Egypt. An even greater service, however, is provided by this work: Alexander conclusively demonstrates that Manichaean philosophy was taken seriously by the philosophers of his time, and that it was actively engaged in disputation within the Neoplatonic schools. Alexander's own philosophical stance shades off into the positions of Plotinus and Porphyry; he must, therefore, be considered a part of the larger Alexandrian school. I shall neither attempt to examine the full breadth of the Manichaean positions conveyed to us by Alexander nor detail his refutation of these points; rather, I shall continue our examination of heliocentrism through an analysis of Alexander's refutation of it. At a rough count, 15-20 percent of Alexander's treatise effectively deals with the issue of heliocentrism, indicating the importance he placed upon it.

In isolating those passages in Alexander's polemic which deal with the sun and moon, one is quickly struck by the complete absence of heliolatrous sentiment in Alexander's exposition of Manichaean thought. One might suspect that he was more concerned with the heliocentric infrastructure of their thought were it not for a categorical statement he makes at the very beginning of his presentation: "Sun and moon they honour most of all, not as gods, but as the means by which it is possible to attain to God".⁵⁶ This statement, in conjunction with the rest of his discussion, accords with a more original form of Manichaean thought, that is, with the direct word of Mani himself which saw the importance of the sun and moon in terms of their critical salvific functions. The difference between the heliocentrism in Alexander's depiction of Manichaeism in Egypt and that of the overt heliolatry in the *Kephalia*, it would seem, graphically illustrates the Egyptianisation of the sect. This would also

⁵⁴ Emphasis added. This is a free adaptation of Deuteronomy 17:2-6 wherein those who worship the sun and moon are sentenced to death by stoning. From C.H. Roberts, ed., *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, vol. 3, *Theological and Literary Texts* (Manchester: University Press, 1938), 43.

⁵⁵ Robert Pierce Casey, ed., *Serapion of Thmuis Against the Manichees* (Cambridge: Harvard Theological Studies, 1931), 17.

⁵⁶ van der Horst and Mansfeld, *An Alexandrian Platonist Against Dualism*, 57.

appear to delimit a north-south distinction. However, it is clear that Alexander had a limited understanding of the broader Manichaean system, as indicated by the fact that he thought he was dealing with a Christian sect.

It is interesting that Alexander nowhere indicates what it is *exactly* which has caused some of his fellow-philosophers in Egypt to convert to Manichaeism: is it the more mythological elements or the pseudo-philosophy? There is indignation and resentment in his exclamation towards the end of the treatise:

What is told in poetry about the giants is mythological. Those who discourse about these in allegorical form put forth such things hiding the solemnity of their tale behind the form of the myth... [they] adorn their poetry in this way in order to persuade by the marvellousness of their tale. The Manichaeans, however, understand nothing of this; whenever they are able to come to false conclusions, they appropriate these as a god-send, whatever their origin, making every effort, as it were, to vanquish truth by all possible means.⁵⁷

The corollary of this very revealing passage is that in spite of flouting Alexander's notions about Truth, the Manichaean message *worked*. One senses that Alexander would not have objected half as much if these were the workings of a more purely myth-evolved system. The point to keep in mind is that the Manichaean "myth" did have a tremendous existential appeal, an allure that was able to traverse an impressive number of cultural boundaries. It also had a great intellectual fascination as witnessed by the conversion of Neoplatonic philosophers in Egypt, and by Augustine's participation in the faith for some nine years.

Within Egypt the success of Manichaeism took the form of a broad "mythic" appeal to the Egyptian people. With Alexander we are witness to the success of their efforts in a radically different forum. For surely, in quite general terms, the cultural and rhetorical environment of the Graeco-Egyptian intelligentsia of the Delta was worlds removed from that of the peasants, artisans, and priests of the Achmîm and Sahid to the south.

In examining other Egyptian Gnostic groups which display affinities with the Manichaeans, the *Pistis Sophia* stands out first and foremost as a liturgy used by an unidentified Gnostic group with pronounced Manichaean "tonalities". As well, the text is likely from Upper Egypt and was likely composed in Coptic. The work has been examined in the previous chapter at some length and a brief listing of similarities will suffice here.

The taking of hostages and the partial curtailment of archontic power with the perpetuation of entrapped light in "animal forms" in the *Pistis Sophia* is a strikingly Manichaean depiction of events. Early in the text, reference is made to the "tyrants [who] began to wage war against the light". Their ignorance is stressed: "because they saw nothing except the greatly surpassing light"(I.25.1-5⁵⁸) The light is subsequently "swallowed" by the archons: all of these are familiar Manichaean themes.

The function of the Treasury of Light in the *Pistis Sophia* is an obvious parallel to the function of the sun and moon in the Manichaean myth, in particular the depiction of light being processed upwards and downwards. In the *Pistis Sophia*, there

⁵⁷ *An Alexandrian Platonist*, 95.

⁵⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 25.

is a level beneath the Treasury of Light which is organised around twelve gathering-points of light.⁵⁹ Various functionaries are arranged about these principles and serve to conduct the energies of light into the lower zones. The function of this realm is to mix and separate pure and impure energies. Below this is “the Middle”, containing various functionaries who are specifically empowered with the guardianship of human souls. The Light Maiden’s function, for example, is the judgement of souls, while the sun and the moon transmit light down into the lower zones, ensuring that every soul has a spark of light energy intermingled with it. The *Pistis Sophia* uses a more elaborate system of levels to account for the process described in the Manichaean myth. While the sun and moon function as transmitters, they are not quite as exalted as in the Manichaean system although they, too, operate in conjunction with divine functionaries. Moreover, the critical difference is that the Manichaean transmitters only send light upwards: in the *Pistis Sophia* the light travels both ways. There are philosophical reasons for this and I shall return to this point.

It follows that the soteriology for the individual soul in both systems is similar. In the *Pistis Sophia* the disciple who is able to receive “the one word of that Mystery” is enabled to ascend past the archons to the Treasury of the Light: “For it becomes a great beam of light and flies to the height, and no power is able to restrain it”(II.228.4 & 229.9-11).⁶⁰ Manichaean texts are redolent with imagery such as this.⁶¹ Above all, the *Pistis Sophia* stresses the critical Manichaean concept of *mixture*:

And when the perfect number is completed so that the mixture is dissolved, I will command that all the tyrant gods who did not give (up) what is purified of their light be brought. I will command the fire of wisdom, which the perfect ones transmit, to consume those tyrants until they give (up) the last of what is purified of their light. (I.77.19-25)⁶²

The overall impression in placing the two systems side by side is that of two meticulous and tendentious cosmological catalogues which extensively chart the hierarchical details of immense metaphysical systems. Yet a great philosophical disparity exists between the two modes of dualistic thought. In Manichaeism there can be no acceptance of necessity for the tragedy of life on earth. The mixture of light and darkness, good and evil, simply put, is a tragic error which must be ruthlessly rectified. In the *Pistis Sophia*, Sophia herself makes an enlightening assertion:

⁵⁹ Various descriptions are found throughout Book I, in particular Chapters 26 and 27.

⁶⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 456, 458.

⁶¹ For example, see the Manichaean Hymn Cycles from the Parthian as presented in Jes P. Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature* (Delmar, New York: Scholar’s Facsimiles & Reprints, 1975). “You shall put on a radiant garment, and gird on Light; and I shall set on your head the diadem of sovereignty”(86); “For through that will go out the chosen and all the beneficent, and all who knew the mystery and understood the belief”(87); “Truly you shall pass their border, and shall not be held at their watch-posts,”(87).

⁶² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 154.

And I alone among the invisible ones, in whose place I existed, transgressed, and I came down to the Chaos. I transgressed before you *so that your ordinance should be fulfilled.* (I.111.10-13)⁶³

In suggesting a higher determinism at work in the Fall, this system dramatically develops the story of a theogonic process of internal rift and reunion. This last division forms the essential fault-line between “radical” and “mitigated” dualistic religious expressions – in this we must endorse Jonas’ original distinction between “Iranian” and “Egyptian” modes of Gnostic thought.⁶⁴ Iranian dualism *rejects* the possibility of synthesis between the two realms of Light and Darkness; Egyptian dualism *reconciles*. It is for this reason that Light is processed upwards and downwards in the mitigated system; in Manichaeism the Light must only attempt its escape upwards.

Another issue provides a sociological bridge across this philosophical chasm. In the *Pistis Sophia* the presence of Sophia competes with Christ as the main salvific agent while the disciples function as wooden or stock characters. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the “Sophia archetype” is manifest in the emphasis given to Mary Magdalene. Of the 108 appearances of various disciples, Mary has 58 - more than all of the other disciples combined. The quality of her appearances is even more striking: in all sections, she is clearly described as the superior disciple, and in line with this she takes certain liberties that the other disciples do not. This is the most striking redactional tendency in the work.

The emphasis placed on Mary finds a curious parallel in the Manichaean Psalms. The veneration given to the Egyptian Manichaean Elect in their Psalms is in sharp contrast to the mythopoeic philosophising of the *Kephalia*. The Elect referred to are listed and prioritised according to the number of references: Mary (110); Theona (39); Jmnoute (17); Pshai (16); Plousiane (10); Apa Panai (7); Sisinnios (2); “Martyrs” (2); Cleopatra, Eustephios, Innaios, Gabriah, Salmaios, Pappos, Addas, Ozeos, Sethel, Apa Polydoxus, Apa Pshai (1 each).

It is important to note of course that a number of the names (Panai and Pshai for example) are definitely Egyptian.⁶⁵ Of even greater interest is the preponderance of references made to the female Manichaean Elect. The first five figures are repeatedly raised together as objects of praise, presented in the form of doxologies which conclude almost every psalm in the collection.⁶⁶ Although the gender of Jmnoute, Pshai, and Plousiane is not quite certain, it is likely that they, along with Mary and Theona, are female Manichaean Elect. When one considers that the references to Mary and Theona are more than double those of all of the other members of the Manichaean church, one may conclude that these women occupied a position of great importance in the Manichaean church in Egypt. The word “martyrs”

⁶³ Ibid., 222, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, *passim*.

⁶⁵ These names appear in their earlier forms, *p3-n-3* and *p3-š3i* in Hermann Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, Band 1, *Verzeichnis der Namen* (Glückstadt: Verlag von J.J. Augustin, 1935), 105.23 and 117.23, respectively.

⁶⁶ For example, the end of psalm CCLXXII: “Glory and victory to our Lord Mani, the Spirit of Truth, who cometh from the Father, and his holy perfect Elect, and the soul of the blessed Mary, Theona, Pshai, Jmnoute.”

is used twice in association with the Manichaeans Mary and Theona, which leads one to the conclusion that they may have been executed as a result of Diocletian's edict of 297 C.E. A critical piece of historical information is provided in Papyrus Rylands 469 which specifically attacks the Manichaean missionaries who,

with deceitful and lying words steal into our houses, and particularly against those women whom they call the 'elect' and whom they hold in honour, manifestly because they require their menstrual blood for the abominations of their madness.⁶⁷

The concluding *ad hominem* need not be taken seriously, and it is clear that the female Manichaean missionaries had a rather high profile and were effective in their endeavours, thus becoming targets for orthodox invective.

This stands in marked contrast with Manichaeism outside of Egypt which, while certainly affording women the roles of Elect teachers and missionisers, did not go so far as to venerate historical women in their liturgy. The emancipation of women in Hellenistic times found its ideal locus in Alexandria, especially as the city became more and more Egyptianised. The Greeks intermarried primarily with Egyptian women who had always enjoyed more social and political freedoms than their Greek counterparts. This elevation of the *social* functions of women naturally found its expression in the Gnostic sects of the Roman period which thus prepared the way for the Manichaeans.

The first Manichaean missionaries headed towards Egypt along the trade routes to Alexandria and overland from the Red Sea to Thebes. They did this perhaps knowing that they were heading towards a kindred community of fellow Gnostics. Egypt, along with Rome and Parthia, would have been high upon the list of targets for the Manichaean mission. The story of Skythianos, whether or not it is based upon historical fact, points towards the likelihood that the Egyptian Gnostics may have sought out the teachings of Mani abroad and brought them back with them. The fact that Manichaean and Egyptian Gnostic texts both appear almost entirely in the dialects of Upper Egypt suggests that the southern route was an important link for the transmission of Manichaean teachings into Egypt. The presence of the Christ myth in these dualist groups along with such Manichaean mythological figures as Saklas and Nebrod, and a radically anti-world eschatology, clearly provided the Manichaean proselytisers with a sympathetic and receptive audience

It is important to consider the fact that there were Gnostic groups in Egypt who fell on the Manichaean side of the philosophical radical/mitigated divide. At least six of the Gnostic texts found in the Jebel el Tarif show a marked affinity with a more Manichaean type of radical dualism.⁶⁸ In this regard the distinction between radical and mitigated is not an abstruse theological point, but a grassroots issue that must have been exceedingly contentious. Many Egyptian Gnostic texts equal or exceed the Manichaean predilection for extended cosmological systematisation; however, there is little evidence to suggest that this was accompanied by a political/social agenda. Indeed this is not to be expected from a tapestry of thought whose overall weave

⁶⁷ Roberts, *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri*, 43.

⁶⁸ *Zostrianos* (VIII, 1, 1.10 and 5.11), *Apocalypse of Peter* (VII, 3, 77.21), *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (VII, 2, 68.30), *The Paraphrase of Shem* (VII, 1, 1.21), *On the Origin of the World* (II, 5, 97.30), *The Apocryphon of John* (II, 1).

displays an eclectic individualism: antinomians are not likely to miss the contradiction involved in substituting one brand of *nomos* for another.⁶⁹

It is probable that the radical/mitigated dualist split which existed among various Gnostic groups in Egypt was polarised even further by the arrival of the Manichaeans, for social as well as philosophical reasons. The Manichaeans, in effect, were saying that Gnosis as a form of individual insight was not enough. A rigorous adherence to a mode of *doing*, i.e. concerted religious affiliation, was of soteriological consequence. In proselytising among the Gnostic groups of Egypt, the native priesthood, and the Graeco-Egyptian philosophers, the Manichaeans offered a plan of action which was in direct response to humankind's carnal predicament, and this took the form of an extreme asceticism for the Elect. If we are to take seriously the evidence of the 1st century Egyptian "Stoic" priest Chaeremon, the Manichaeans would have felt an especial sympathy for the ascetic activities of this class. Further, in allowing for a whole sub-class of supporters beyond the actual monastery walls, the movement ensured three things: it expanded the boundaries of belief to include those who could not live by the strict code of the Elect; it fitted into the Egyptian religious view of professional and semi-professional priesthoods functioning within a "sacred space", this far better than the adherents of Hellenistic Gnosis; and, it insulated the Elect from the exigencies of physical existence, allowing them to lead "pure" lives which would serve as an example for all. In short, in not being anti-ecclesial in their outlook, the Manichaeans were far better able than most Egyptian Gnostic sects to draw upon Egyptian religious tradition in the concrete, as opposed to the subtler philosophical issues the Alexandrian Gnostics devoted themselves to.⁷⁰

I would conclude by suggesting that a difference in sociological foundations for the Manichaeans and Gnostics in Egypt likely lies at the root of the "radical-mitigated" dualist split. The teachings of the great Gnostic teachers, Valentinus, Carpocrates, Epiphanes, and Basileides, are to be associated with Alexandria and other Greek cities in Lower Egypt, although their incorporation of specific Heliopolitan, Hermopolitan, and Memphite theologies strongly suggests a participation in the full-breadth of Egyptian religious thought. It is surely no coincidence that a more heterodox and liberal form of Gnosis was espoused there in conjunction with sophisticated mitigated-dualist systems. The distinctly archaic, "orthodox" versions of Gnosis in the *Pistis Sophia* and the Manichaean religion, as expressions of radical dualist cosmologies, would have appealed more to a deeply entrenched Egyptian conservatism in religious matters. If so, the bulk of the Manichaean auditors would have been drawn from this group, and a larger percentage of the elect from among the redoubtable priesthoods in the south. This division is supported by the traditional split between Upper and Lower Egypt attested from the earliest phases of Egyptian history: conservatism was manifestly a feature of the

⁶⁹ Rudolf, *Gnosis*, 265: "Whilst Hellenistic political theory understands earthly sovereignty as a system controlled by divine reason (*nous, logos*), and so provides a justification for it, Gnosis disputes alleged conformity to reason of the whole world, since this world had its origin in a blunder and a 'senseless act'."

⁷⁰ Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire," *JRS* 59 (1969): 92-103, perhaps overstates the difference in approach here: "The eclecticism, even the confusion, of Gnostic literary remains at Nag Hammadi contrasts vividly with the organized dogmatism of the Manichaean scriptures. Manichaeism was a religion organized for survival in a harsher age than that which saw the spread of a *salonfähig* Gnosticism," (99, n.97).

south, a more “worldly” stance was unavoidably assumed in the Delta.⁷¹ This traditional split was further enhanced in Ptolemaic times by the Proximity of Memphis to Alexandria, and by the secessionist activities of the south.⁷²

On the level of popular religion there is strong evidence to suggest the development of an Egyptian Manichaean sect with distinct characteristics of its own: the negative confessions, apocalypticism, and in particular a pronounced heliocentrism injected with heliolatrous sentiments, all are quintessentially Egyptian. This again suggests Upper Egypt as the primary milieu within which Egyptian Manichaeism evolved. The great Ptolemaic temples of the south all demonstrate the perpetuation of vital Egyptian theological concerns far removed from the extraneous languages of power of Greek and later Roman rulers. Here, too, we might suppose that a significant number of Egyptians, most especially priests, were disposed to seek out a new evolution of their religious experience, one that might explain the failure of *ma'at* in Egypt.

While preserving the supra-national characteristics of their theology, Manichaeism likely became increasingly Egyptianised during the time following the death of Mani in 274 C.E.. In this they duplicated the fate of previous foreign religious movements in Egypt, the last being the Egyptianisation of the Ptolemaic state: only the Romans, with their centralised bureaucracy and Emperor-by-proxy, were able to withstand in large measure the powerful pull of Egyptian culture. Amongst the Egyptians the Manichaeans were extremely high-profile and effective in their frequent debates, leading lives of impressive self-discipline.

So effective was this last factor that one might say that the Christian desert fathers were obliged to assume the same role in their bid to convert Egypt to orthodoxy. For the precursors of early Christian monasticism we look to the strict didacticism of the native priesthoods and the Manichaean missionaries in Egypt, both armed with their venerable texts scrolled in compelling calligraphics, and especially the extreme asceticism of the Manichaeans. Diocletian's edict drove Manichaeism in Egypt underground to some extent although it was able to function in a reduced capacity for centuries. One important result of this must have been the eradication of Manichaean monasteries in the cities and towns, thus creating an opening for an orthodox Christian substitution. The *Annales* of Eutychius gives strong evidence for the existence of the Manichaean Elect and their Listeners in Egypt at this time.⁷³ The patriarch of Alexandria also mentions that in the late 4th century the majority of the metropolitans and bishops of Egypt were Manichaean.⁷⁴ The Manichaean church was

⁷¹ Again, the fact that the Coptic dialects used in the *Pistis Sophia* and the Manichaean *Kephalia* are both from the south, while not conclusive, in itself reinforces this impression.

⁷² Crawford, “Ptolemy, Ptah and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis,” 8.

⁷³ This text was used by Ém. de Stoop, “Essai sur la diffusion du manichéisme dans l'Empire Romain,” *ReT* 38 (1909): 74-75.

⁷⁴ In noting certain apparent doctrinal differences mentioned in Eutychius' testimony, Jacques Jarry, “Le Manichéisme en Égypte byzantine,” *BIFAO* 66 (1968): 121-37, comes to the unlikely conclusion that “the majority of the Christian clergy at the time of Timothy were Marcionite and not Manichaean,” (131). As well, there is a Coptic sermon, attributed to Cyril of Alexander, from the ninth or tenth century, which clearly mentions the Manichaeans in Egypt in the same period. This “Sermon sur la Pénitence,” is edited and translated by M. Chaîne, in the *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université Saint Joseph* 6 (1913): 493-

undoubtedly repressed and maintained a tenuous existence in these later centuries before it, along with Christianity, was engulfed by the tide of Islam.⁷⁵

While the new Christian message broke from its Jewish roots permeating the Roman state, Manichaean syncretism was, in a way, correctly identified by Diocletian as a foreign doctrine whose message could properly be associated with the Persians, the hereditary enemies of the Romans. The rise of Manichaeism resulted initially from the active support given to Mani by the Persian state. In effect, the suppleness of the Manichaean teachings allowed it to move through the mythological water-tables beneath national boundaries. It was eventually thwarted in the West due to the efforts of its great rival which effectively foiled any attempt by the Manichaeans to enlist the support of the Roman state. Christian orthodoxy used precisely the same methods as the Manichaeans and was in a far better position to do so insofar as it was not perceived to be an alien creed during the later phases of its development. Egyptian Manichaeism was left like a tidal pool once the high-water mark of Manichaeism in the West receded.

Putting aside the hackneyed heresiologies and the too-often narrow polemics of modern scholarship in order to view Manichaean texts upon their own merits, we discover a movement that was at once efficiently organised, ultra-literate, and extravagantly poetic. Manichaeism in Egypt, apart from demonstrating the openness of the Manichaean missionaries to Egyptian religiosity, also indirectly affirms the strong existence of Egyptian religious thought at the end of a vast era of religio-philosophical self-determination. The mythopoeicising *élan* of the Manichaeans in this regard bespeaks a sensitivity to a humanist universality not yet seen upon such a grand trans-cultural stage. This last factor undoubtedly explains their survival in Egypt for some seven centuries in increasingly hostile circumstances. By the fourth century Egyptian Manichaeism had undoubtedly become more than the Egyptian sect of the religionist Mani; by the tenth century it was surely the last repository of many ancient autochthonic religious conceptions, indeed the last manifestation of Gnosis in Egypt.

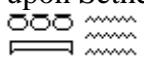
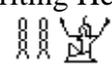
519. I am indebted to G. Stroumsa's article, "Monachisme et Marranisme chez les Manichéens d'Égypte," *Numen* 2 (1982): 184-201, for this source and for the *Annales* of Euty chius referred to above.

⁷⁵ It is interesting that this date makes the Manichaeans in Egypt contemporaneous with Priscilianism in northern Spain (and I note the legendary tradition attributed to Priscillian, of a Manichaean master from Egypt, Marc of Memphis). The survival of the Manichaeans beyond the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt was undoubtedly due in part to their ability to pose as Christians, meeting in secret to affirm the radical divergencies of their faith.

Part III – The Egyptian Foundations of Gnostic Thought

Chapter Ten: The Primacy of Nun and the Emanationist hierarchy of Monad, Dyad, and Triad

I propose to begin by reviewing the direct evidence for Nun available to us in texts ranging from Old Kingdom to Graeco-Roman times. It will be of particular interest to see if an evolution or pattern can be drawn out from this immense period of time (*ca.* 2500 B.C.E. - 400 C.E.).

The earliest body of texts we have concerning Nun comes to us from the Pyramid texts. It is notable that Faulkner, in relying upon Sethe's transcriptions, translates the group of signs for Nun, variations on , as either the capitalised "Abyss" or as a personified god Niu, according to his reading of the context.¹ "The King's meal is in the Abyss"; the king departs to the flood, avoiding the "wrathful ones", and Niu and Nenet (Nun and Naunet) protect him. Nun is also mentioned as being at the head of his "Chaos-gods". Now, apart from the hermeneutic problem involved in deciding when Nun is "Abyss" and when he is himself as it were, we also have the problem created by Faulkner in calling the Heh gods the *Chaos* gods, as there is no specific word for chaos in Egyptian *per se*.² I shall later suggest that as the creation of these eight gods is a diachronic development in the theogonic process, they only transmit the original *Ur-prinzip* through themselves, that as hypostases they were not regarded as being completely synonymous with that original state. In fact precisely the same ambiquoy exists between Nun and the Abyss as exists between the Heh gods and Chaos gods. It is seen by some Egyptologists that it is our own interpretative insistence upon a sharp division between personification and principle which likely creates this interpretative problem: undoubtedly the Egyptians had no such difficulty – Nun was both a principle of primeval water, and a personal god. That said, there is in fact an ambiguity in Nun and the Heh gods which goes back through the earliest texts. Their shared equivocal stature has to do with their close proximity to disorder and the inimical forces that are to be found in Egyptian thought. Nun and the Heh gods are valorised to the extent that they are seen to hold this tendency towards dissolution in check, providing the most fundamental ontological frame for the initiation of the theogony, graphically depicted as a mound rising up out of the watery abyss; as well, the determinative employed in writing Heh depicts the figure of a god with arms upraised in order to support the sky: .³ In this light they are

¹ *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 173. The phrase that Faulkner renders as "born in the Abyss," (PT Utt. 486), Lichtheim translates as "born in Nun", *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1, 47.

² So ingrained is the Greek word in our own collective psyche that even Hornung slips into using it routinely in *Conceptions of God*.

³ Barta, "Die Bedeutung der Personifikation Huh im Unterscheid zu den Personifikation Hah und Nun," 7.

“Nun” and “Heh god”; their darker side in the theogonic process, however, sees them functioning as “Abyss” and “Chaos”.

Nun is conceived in his inchoate state as verging upon differentiation – in the dynamic commencement of this process the latent becomes manifest, usually in the form of the first hypostasis Atum – “the hidden one” – and as a concomitant to this deity, a feminine creative principle inasmuch as he is seen to be androgynous.⁴ Nun is conceived as the abyss above the sky, while Naunet is the watery abyss below the earth.⁵ This feminine counterpart of Nun sometimes occurs alongside Atum, but is more usually depicted as a conflation of Atum-Nun creating Shu and Tefnut/Ma’at. The theogony is thus conceived of as monad – dyad – triad, which marks the hypostatic moment of plurality for the Egyptian theologian. This primal plural, three, attains its apotheosis in being squared, and the ennead of nine members results. The emphasis upon the formation of this primal three with Nun as the ordering principle is found in the Gnostic tractate *Zostrianos*:

It is the water of Existence which is possessed by Divinity, that is, the Kalyptos... (15.10-12)

The first perfect water of the tripartite power of the Autogenes (is) the perfect soul’s life, for it is a word of the perfect god while coming into being... for the Invisible Spirit is a fountain of them all... (17.6-13)

Then [he said] ‘How then can he contain an eternal model? The general intellect shares when the self-generated water becomes perfect. If one understands it and all these, one is the water which belongs to Kalyptos, whose image is still in the aeons. (22.1-14)⁶

Kalyptos (from the Greek *καλυπτός* for “covered”) also appears in *Allogenes* as the head of a triad of aeons and is obviously to be identified with Atum: directly beneath him in both tractates is Protophanes (first-visible), followed by Autogenes (self-generated). The triad itself in the two Gnostic systems, synergistically creates a female hypostasis Barbelo-Sophia whose nature and actions are depicted in an ethical light, and so is reminiscent of Ma’at.

As one might expect in the Old Kingdom, Nun is portrayed in the Pyramid texts as a bestower of recognition and favour upon the departed king. Nun is a critical deity to beseech in this regard, as he is seen to allow the passage of the king across the watery waste in the solar barque; in this he saves the king from “inimical gods” as in Utterances 272 & 607 in the Pyramid Texts where the king says,

O Height which is not sharpened, Portal of the Abyss, I have come to you; let this be opened to me... I am at the head of the followers of Re’, I am not at the head of the gods who make disturbance (PT Utt. 272, §392).⁷

⁴ See Zandee, “Der Androgyne Gott in Ägypten.”

⁵ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 4.

⁶ Coptic transcriptions from *NHS*, vol. XXXI: *Nag Hammadi Codex VIII*, ed. John H. Sieber (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 58, 60, 68, 70.

⁷ Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 79

The King was fashioned by Nu at his left hand when he was a child who had no wisdom; he has saved the King from inimical gods, and he will not give the King over to inimical gods (PT Utt .607, §1701).⁸

“Disturbance” and “inimical” are taken from the verb  *thth* which means to “make disturbance” or “disorder”. The verb carried on into Coptic as **ⲧⲁⲛⲧⲉ**⁹ and it is interesting to note its employment in the *Tripartite Tractate* for example where “the beings of the similitude”, the equivalent of the ancient Egyptian inimical gods, through deceit and arrogance initially mislead those seeking salvation, with

things which are written by the hylics who speak in the fashion of the Greeks, the powers of those who think about all of them, attributing them to the right, the powers which move them all to think of words together with a representation which is theirs and (which) they apprehended so as to attain the truth using the *confused* powers which act in them. Afterwards they attained to the order of the *unconfused* ones, the one which is established, the one, only, who is preserved as a representation of the representation of the Parent. He is not invisible in his nature, but Wisdom envelopes him, so that he might sustain the form of the truly invisible one. (110-24-111.4)¹⁰

The use of the same word for “*confused* (or *mixed*) powers” and “*inimical* gods” in a remarkably similar soteriological and theogonic setting illustrates the continued presence of specifically Egyptian theogonic elements, even to the extent of employing the same language.¹¹

Ma’at, as that which gathers together the ordered whole from disorder, imbues the entire Egyptian worldview, and in tracing her genealogy back to its starting point, we note that Order is implicit in the whole possibility of theogonic extension from the Primal Source. The Heh gods, for instance, are to be listed on the side of Order, whereas the “inimical gods” and Apep are not. Order is forever bounded by the disorderly and it is interesting that there is no sense in Egyptian myth that Disorder can be finally vanquished. Hornung makes the important point that as a result Egyptian religion did not develop eschatologies as this would point up the lack of order *now*.¹² Significantly it is only in Graeco-Roman times that we first get eschatological texts. There is a profound realism at work in the Egyptian view which depicts an ambiguity in the relationship between these two principles. This blurring of functions, I maintain, is quite acute in the role of Nun, as it is in Seth, so much so that they were both eventually to succumb to their darker sides in Graeco-Roman times.

⁸ Ibid., 251.

⁹ Cerný, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, 206.

¹⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 292. Emphasis added.

¹¹ A close study of Coptic words whose etymological antecedents show up in very similar religious contexts in earlier periods of Egyptian history is an important area that remains as yet completely unresearched. As well, the overall redactional patterns in Ptolemaic-period autochthonic Egyptian religious expression need to be further ascertained.

¹² Hornung, *Conceptions of God In Ancient Egypt*, 162-63.

We might say that Nun is the theogonic principle which arises out of the inimical and disorderly qualities of his milieu; as such he is to be appealed to in the first instance in any attempt to renew a state of equipoise with respect to these forces.

In the Old Kingdom the death of the king is the singular event in the preservation of Order for it represents a cyclic passage to new kingship and the continuing afterlife of the departed king. The death of the king represents a moment of acute crisis for Order as the king must now venture into the vicinity of the “Abyss” and must be preserved by the Depth’s redeemer, Nun. This moment is the most threatening as it occupies, diachronically and synchronically (historically and mystically), the omega-point of creation: that which paradoxically arises out of the void. To fail to attain one’s place in Order after death, to attain a proper afterlife, is to return to the void. There is an urgency in ancient Egyptian religious thought, carried on into the Gnostic, centred precisely upon this threat to the individual.

In turning to the Middle Kingdom we keep in mind the well understood notion of a “democratisation” of Egyptian soteriology. The Coffin texts indicate that Nun continued to be an important figure for Egyptian religion. In reading through the Coffin texts one is repeatedly struck by this problem of timing in the theogony. Nun is still depicted as the “Old One”, as one of the primeval “chaos gods”; however, at other junctures it is clear that the Heh-gods were created by Shu who of course normally appears further down the familial chain as a son of Atum. Atum’s role also merges with the *Ur-Sitz* of Nun as his own self-generation takes place within the context of Nun. In fact the theogonic roles of these personages and principles blur into each other and we have what amounts to a deification of specific theogonic functions which extend this way and that according to various “rhetorical” considerations. This moment of differentiation, key to every Egyptian emanationist religious view, is here shared at various junctures by Nun, Atum, Shu, and the Heh-gods. In one way this emanation is seen as being chronological: Nun precedes Atum who precedes Shu. It is clear, however, that the Egyptians were also able to view the entire situation in a synchronic light in which all things occur more or less simultaneously. We are not surprised therefore to see that Shu is depicted in the Coffin texts as having created the chaos-gods.

From the Middle Kingdom onwards Nun is described as “the Father of the Gods”. That the Greeks derived this idea from the Egyptians can hardly be doubted, as with Homer who describes, “Ocean, the forbear of the gods”.¹³

I would suggest that it is this proximity to the disorderly pre-existent that empowers Nun in this way. Erik Hornung notes that the Egyptians used the *n sdm.t.f* “not yet” form to speak of time before creation. In a theological context this was a very careful way of speaking about a state that was atemporal and non-spatial. If we can for a moment put it in modern philosophical terms we are dealing with that moment before Kant’s *a priori* categories are actually engaged. Strictly speaking, this may be conceived of as the non-existent, however the Egyptians, as Hornung also points out, had a distinct perspective upon the idea of the non-existent. This is an extremely difficult issue to deal with, both in terms of how the Egyptians actually handled it, but also in terms of the philosophical repercussions that are still with us. Essentially, being and nothingness are identical in this state. To be non-existent is obviously to preclude existence, but it does not preclude the possibility of becoming

¹³ Book XIV of *The Iliad*, trans. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983), 262.

existent. In essence, the whole issue of latency, or potential, is at the heart of this view of the godhead: that which comes to be through the collective efforts of the chaos-gods and their female partners already “was” in a dormant state. This precise moment is also clearly delimited by the Egyptians as a shift from this primal inchoate Monad into *two*. This is the basis for an essential dualism that is to be found throughout Egyptian thought: light and darkness, sky and earth, the two lands, dynamic and static, male and female, and finally even time is divided into two aspects: *nhh* and *dt*.

We can also draw in an interesting connection with the practice of incubation. This access to the divine through dreams actually occurred before the Ptolemaic period and there is a strong sense here of “accessing” Nun in this regard. A. de Buck has written a provocative interpretation of this phenomenon, wherein he maintains that sleep itself was regarded as a descent into Nun, hence the feeling of renewal that results from it¹⁴: Nun is, after all, source of all life.¹⁵ The sun and the dead king themselves make the same journey through his depths.

It is in the Late Period that a profound transformation of religious views occurs, even if these results are more dramatically apparent beyond the temple precincts. Foreign subjugation under the Persians, Greeks, and finally Romans, created a need for redrawn boundaries, definitions of evil, and eschatology. In this process key divinities such as Seth and Nun can be seen to reflect the mythos-shift more than other deities for the simple reason that their own natures had always been depicted in proximity to the forces of darkness and chaos now set loose upon the land. Certainly Nun was still depicted on the walls of all the Ptolemaic temples in his usual form and is well represented in the larger Ptolemaic temples of the south, often presented in fusion with Ptah (Kalabscha, Philae, Edfu), Sobek (Kom Ombo), Hapy (Opet temple, Karnak), Horus (Opet temple, Dendara), and Khnum-Amun (Esna). Even in poorly preserved temples one finds depictions of Nun on the few standing walls left (e.g. Tod, Medamud, Mut temple at Karnak, Behbeit el Hagar). Nun, along with the entire Hermopolitan Ogdoad forms the large front-court relief at the Opet temple. This temple was quite popular in Roman times in association with childbirth and it is surely no coincidence to find inscriptional variations here that make use of the child determinative in Nun:



In Esna we have a number of depictions of the Ptolemaic kings offering incense to the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, and in one case, specifically to Nun and his female consort Naunet. From these and other examples too numerous to cite here, we draw the obvious conclusion that Nun was well represented in all the great temples of Egypt well into Roman times. We can be sure that this inclusion was not simply rote or formulaic; Ptolemaic inscriptional evidence shows that his role was being actively developed in theological terms, and that his mysterious traditional pre-eminence was maintained within the temple precincts. The Opet temple is important for it shows

¹⁴ Adriaan de Buck, *De Godsdienstige Opvatting van den Slaap Inzonderheid in het Oude Egypte* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1939).

¹⁵ Alexandre Piankoff, *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon*, 24: “...the outflow of the primeval ocean, the Watery Abyss, Nun, in which before the Creation reposed the germs of all living things.”

Nun's role in a more popular mode of religious observance, as opposed to being confined to the more abstruse cosmogonic issues we have examined. This is accomplished in close association with the traditional views on the birth of Re every morning, from the water abyss "between the thighs of Nut" as expressed in the mythological papyrus of Khonsu-Mes dated to the 21st Dynasty:

He takes a seat in the Morning Barge and shines between the thighs of Nut. The name of the gate of this city is Exaltation of the Gods. The name of this city is Outcome(?) of Darkness, Appearance of Birth. The name of the Hour of the night in which this Great God takes a rest in this cavern at the end of utter darkness. When this Great God is being born in his forms of Khepri at this cavern, Nun and Nunet, Heh and Hehet appear at this cavern at the birth of this Great God when he comes out of the Netherworld.

[depiction of Nun holding up the solar barge. Below his left hand]: They proceed in the following of this god.

[Above the head of Nun]: These arms come out of the water, they lift this god. Nun.

[Text to left]:

O hail, tow him, let (him) pass by the cavern of Nun...¹⁶

We surmise that this change in religious views towards a more acutely dualistic cosmology took place more or less outside the main temples; in this regard, the Khonsu Cosmology is of special interest for it displays a syncretism with respect to the generation of Nun and the primal ogdoad:

Amun in that name of his called Ptah created the egg that came forth from Nun... as Ptah of the Heh gods and the Nenu goddesses who created heaven and earth. He ejaculated and made [it] at this place in the lake, which was created in Tjenene [a Memphite sanctuary of Ptah], it flowed out from under him, like that which happens, in its name of "grain of seed". He fertilized the egg and the eight came into existence from it in the district around the Ogdoad. He languished there in Nun, in the Great Flood. He knew them; his neck received them. He traveled (*hns*) to Thebes in his form of Khonsu. He cleared his throat from the water in the flood. Thus came into existence his name of Khonsu the Great in Thebes, the august being in the seed. He turned his face to this seed. It was his Ma'at, that great one who raised herself as a power from the ground, a necklace on his breast fashioned to the likeness thereof, brought from the... high land in Nun. Thus came into existence Thebes in her name of Valley. Thus came into existence Hathor the Great, in the midst of the "grain of seed" in that name of hers of Nunet. Then he put his body upon her, and he opened (*pth*) her as Ptah, the father of the gods. Thus came into existence the Ogdoad... consisting of its four males, and a wife for each one.¹⁷

¹⁶ Piankoff, *Mythological Papyri: Texts*, 210.

¹⁷ From room 5 of Khonsu temple at Karnak. Richard A. Parker and Leonard H. Lesko, "The Khonsu Cosmology," in *Pyramid Studies and Other Essays Presented to I.E.S. Edwards*, ed. John Baines, T.G.H. James, Anthony Leary and A.F. Shore (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1988), 168-75.

The appearance of the female creative principle in the primal waters is most strikingly echoed in *On the Origin of the World*:

Above all, the water was purified by means of the image of the Pistis Sophia who had appeared to the Primal Parent in the waters. Justly, then, it has been said, “by means of the waters”. the holy water, since it brings life to the All, purifies it. (NHC II,5108.30-109.1)¹⁸

The depiction of Ma’at/Hathor/Nunet as the female progenitor of the chaos-gods anticipates this critical concern in Gnostic texts with the appearance of a female consort alongside the Primal Parent as in *The Apocryphon of John*:

The source of the Spirit flowed out of the living water of light and it supplied all the aeons and universes in every manner. It realized Its own image, seeing it in the luminous waters of light which surround It. And Its Ennoia performed a deed, standing in Its presence in the lustrous Light, that which is the power before the All, which revealed herself – this is the perfect Pronoia of the All, the Light, the likeness of the Light, the image of the invisible. She is the perfect power, the Barbelo, the perfect aeon of glory. (BG, 26:19-27:15)¹⁹

Also expressed in its Nag Hammadi variant:

He is the [first of everything] for he is head of all the aeons... For it is he [alone who looks at himself in his] light which surrounds him, [namely the spring of] the water of life. And [it is he who gives to all the aeons] in every form, and who [realises his image] which he sees [in the source of the Spirit]. It is he who puts his desire in his [Light-water which] is in the spring of the water [of purity which] surrounds him. And [his thought performed] a deed and she was unveiled, namely [she who had appeared before him] in the glow of his light... This is the first thought in his image; she became the womb of the All (NHC II,1 4.12-5.5)²⁰

Along with other shared similarities with Hathor, the Gnostic “womb of everything” in the theogony suggests the traditional view of Hathor as a love, sexuality, and fertility goddess.²¹ The text goes on to describe how a lower female hypostasis, Sophia, creates the chaos gods and lower world. The creation of the chaos gods in association with a female aspect of the Godhead can also be found in *On the Origin of the World*:

¹⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXI, 52.

¹⁹ Coptic transcription from Walter C. Till and Hans-Martin Schenke, eds. and trans. *Die Gnostischen Schriften des Koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1972), 92, 94.

²⁰ Coptic transcription from Martin Krause and Pahor Labib, *Die Drei Versionen des Apokryphon des Johannes* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1962), 118-121.

²¹ Robbins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 161.

These are the [seven] powers of the seven heavens of [Chaos]. They came to exist androgynous, consistent with the immortal archetype that existed before them, according to the desire of Pistis so that the image of that which existed since the beginning might obtain until the end (NHC II,5 102.1)²²

For proof of this development outside of the temples we look to the magical papyri as a transitional textual medium paralleling the rise of Gnostic thought.

The identification of the deceased with Nun is taken over by the magician in a number of magical papyri, as in PDM XIV.253 wherein the magician claims “I am the serpent who came forth from Nun”²³; PGM XXI.17 includes the entire Ogdoad:

And you, lord of life, ruling the upper and lower regions, whose justice is not shut off, whose glorious name the Muses praise, you whom the eight guards E, O, CHO, CHOUC, NOUN, NAUNI, AMOUN and IO attend, you who possess the inerrant truth; many moving bodies will not overpower me; no spirit, no visitation, no daimon, no evil being will oppose me, for I will have your name as a single phylactery in my heart, PHIRIMNOUN ANOCH.²⁴

These can be contrasted with any number of traditional Egyptian antecedents, as in *The Book of Two Ways*:

[The deceased identifies himself with Nun in order to pass by a gate] The gate of the flaming-front, hidden back, in which there is a man who is bound. It is in the firmament with the sun for a duration. I am Nun, lord of Darkness. I have come that I may have power over the way....(CT 1132)²⁵

or a spell from *The Book of Dead* dating to the period just prior or current to the magical papyri in Egypt:

I am he who donned the white and bright fringed cloak of Nun which is on his breast, which gives light in darkness, which unites the two companion-goddesses who are in my body by means of the great magic which is on my mouth. (BD Spell 80)²⁶

The use of verbal spells with which to bring light to a darkness associated with Nun is also to be found in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, where the Logos descends into the depths: “He [the Logos] revealed himself to those who live in Darkness (KAKE) and

²² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXI, 36.

²³ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 210.

²⁴ “I am he who came forth from Nun”, written out as a sacred incantation, is essentially a Coptic transcription of the usual hieroglyphic pronouncement. *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁵ Lesko, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Two Ways*, 25.

²⁶ Faulkner, *The Book of the Dead*, 78.

informed those who live in the Abyss (NOYN)”, (NHC XIII 37.15)²⁷. Typhon, although usually associated with Seth, at various points appears to take on Nun’s characteristics: “boiler of the waves, disturber of the sea’s great depth”. Sacred names that are appealed to as great powers at times are clearly derived from Nun: e.g. NINOUNO, NOUNI, NOUNAITH, NIOU, NAUNIN, NOUN; likewise a spell to cause separation, strife and war, invokes the sacred name APOPSS, obviously the Apophis snake. In a sacred book entitled “The Eighth Book of Moses” an emanation hierarchy is depicted as follows:

1. Light
2. Watery Abyss
3. Mind (Nous)
4. Generation (Procreation)
5. Fate
6. Time
7. Soul (*Psyche*)
8. IAO (Demiurge)²⁸

The second level is described as a god in charge of the watery abyss: “without him water neither increases nor decreases”. The eight levels depicted in this remarkable text suggest the Hermopolitan Ogdoad and this is rendered quite explicit in another spell wherein “the eight guards” are mentioned, including the pairs of NOUN/NAUNI and AMOUN/AMAUNI.²⁹ Elsewhere there are specific references to Nun and to the “serpent who came forth from Nun” and various references to the primeval waters. What is interesting is of course the entire worldly context that these spells presuppose. Gone is the abiding faith in Ma’at as bound up in legitimate native rule. Instead we have the Hellenistic antipathy towards the dark forces of Fate and the concern with appeasing these powers through submission, bribery, or working of efficacious spells.

Nun is to be equated with these darker forces although there is a lingering numinous afterglow which continues to surround his figure. In ending the traditional trajectory of Nun our last textual example can be cited, that of the Leyden Magical papyrus which was composed in Demotic some time in the early third century C.E.. In this text the following injunction appears: “Open to me Arkhah before every god and every man... For I am the serpent that came forth from Nun”.³⁰

The Hermetic *Poimandres*, the most Gnostic of all Hermetic texts, is also directly inspired by the Egyptian view of chaos, from which creation proceeds. The

²⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 406.

²⁸ From PGM XIII.162. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 176-78.

²⁹ The name BAINPHNOUN is also mentioned and is a good example with which to illustrate a point. Most of these names continue to be viewed by many scholars as nonsensical, however it is clear that BAINPHNOUN, taking the Bohairic direct article before NOUN here, and BAIN as BA N “soul of,” is BA N PE NOYN, the “Spirit of the Abyss”, NUN.

³⁰ F.Ll.Griffiths and Herbet Thompson, *The Leiden Papyrus*, 69, 71.

text describes a “darkness, tending downwards”, appearing as a snake and changing into “something moist”.³¹

We are now well into the Coptic era (100 B.C.E. onwards) and it is worth noting at the outset that the translation of NOYN given by Crum is “abyss of hell. Depth of earth, sea”.³² Crum’s translation, however, is based more upon later Christian-Coptic writings. In Egyptian Gnostic texts NOYN may be an abyss, but it is one that generates every sort of divinity in this text, which is Nun’s traditional role. The Nag Hammadi Gnostic text *On the Origin of the World*, which dates somewhere in 100-400 C.E., does not describe a completely demonised Nun:

Now the eternal realm (aeon) of truth has no shadow outside it, for the limitless light is everywhere within it. But its exterior is shadow, which has been called by the name “Darkness” From it there appeared a force presiding over the darkness. And the forces that came into being subsequent to them called the shadow “the Limitless Chaos”. From it, every kind of divinity sprouted up [together] with the entire place, [so that] also, [shadow] is posterior to the first product. It was in the Abyss [NOYN] that [it] (shadow) appeared, out of Pistis. (98.23-99.3)³³

And you [the ignorant demiurge Samael] will descend to your mother the Abyss [NOYN] along with those that belong to you. (103.22)³⁴

Then when Sabaoth [son of the demiurge] was illumined, he received great authority against all the forces of Chaos. Since that day he has been called “Lord of the Forces”. (104.4)³⁵

He hated his father, the Darkness [KAKE], and his mother the Abyss [NOYN], and loathed his sister, the thought of the prime parent, which moved to and fro upon the waters. (104.10-13)³⁶

...they will fall into the Abyss [NOYN], and the Abyss will be overturned. (126.33)

And the deficiency will be plucked out by the root [NOYNE] (and thrown) down into the darkness [KAKE]. And the light will withdraw up to its root [NOYNE]. (127.4)³⁷

Zostrianos depicts the four aeons of Kalyptos/Nun, describing them, in terms of the Heh gods, as existing in a synchronic array, as opposed to being diachronically prioritised:

³¹ See Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 29; also Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 30

³² *Coptic Dictionary* (1939; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 226b.

³³ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXI, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

But Kalyptos is a single aeon; he has four different aeons. In accord with each of the aeons they have powers, not like first and second powers, for all these are eternities... all of them exist in one, dwelling together and perfected individually in fellowship and filled with the aeon which really exists (1.115.14-116.6)³⁸

It is the description of these four as “eternities” that denotes the Heh-god function, along with the oxymoronic description of their natures that occurs a little further on in the text:

The knowledge of the knowledge is there together with a setting up of ignorance Chaos is there and a perfect place for all of them, and they are strange. True light (is there), also enlightened darkness along with he who does not really exist: it does not really exist. (117.4-13)³⁹

The traditional oxymoronic depiction of Nun’s innerness which still has this moving to and fro of latency within it is to be found in the other “Kalyptos” tractate *Allogenes*:

Since it is impossible for the [individuals] to comprehend the Universal One [situated in the] place that is higher than perfect, they apprehend by means of a First [Thought] – (it is) not as Being (alone), [but] it is along with the latency of Existence that he confers Being. He [provides] everything for [himself] since it is he who shall come to be when he recognises himself. And he is [One] who subsists as a [cause] and source [of Being] and [an] immaterial [material and an] innumerable [number and a formless] form and a [shapeless] shape and a powerlessness and a power and an insubstantial substance and a motionless motion and an inactive activity. [Yet he is a] provider of [provisions and] a divinity [of] divinity...

And that One moved motionlessly in that which governs, lest he sink into the boundless by means of another activity of Mentality. (48.9-32 & 53.10-14)⁴⁰

A most compelling depiction of Nun and the Chaos (Heh) gods is to be found at the very beginning of *The Untitled Text*:

This is the First Parent of the Entireties. This is the first Eternity. This is the King of the Unvanquishable. This is he in whom the Entireties move to and fro.⁴¹ This is he who gave form to them within himself. This is the self-

³⁸ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXXI, 198, 200.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 198, 208.

⁴¹ Charlotte A. Baynes, *A Coptic Gnostic Treatise* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1933), 41, claims the Coptic CWPM comes from the hieroglyphic inscriptions associated with the waters of the inundation. I have been unable to completely detail this. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptisch Sprache*, Band 4 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1930), 198, list the associations with the waters, “to weep”, also “a characteristic of Apophis.” Vycichl, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue*

originated and self-generated place This is the Depth (*bythos*) of the Entireties. In truth this is the great Nun (*NOYN*)... (1.6-11)
This is he whose members are a multitude (“myriad-myriad”) of powers in each of them. (1.16-17)⁴²

The text goes on to describe “the Unoriginated Parent who is Father and Mother, alone unto himself, whose Pleroma encompasses the twelve Depths. (Chap.2. 228.2)⁴³ The twelfth is described as “the Truth from whom all Truth comes forth” (4.8). and the Greek *alethia* is used with the Coptic ME. This “image of the Parent” is described as “the Mother of the aeons” (4.9 & 10), and one is reminded of the ubiquitous presence of the Goddess Ma’at in her role in the various Egyptian theogonies. The system can be laid out as follows:

Copte, 196, lists only the demotic antecedent, “to err”, or “to lose”, while also suggesting a possible association with COPM, “a type of beer.” It seems that, by Coptic times, the associations with losing one’s way, weeping, and inebriation, caused the word to be used in Gnostic texts when speaking of error and ignorance. The Gnostic view on the “drunkenness” of ignorance has been elsewhere remarked.

⁴² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XIII: *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 214.

⁴³ Coptic text taken from *The books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, trans. and commentary, Violet MacDermot (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 216, 218.

Parent=Deep=NUN

Demiurge/Parent/Logos/Nous/Anthropos

	Gnosis		Pleroma surrounding 12 Deeps:
Ennead:	Life	Hope	1) all-source
	Rest	Love	2) all-wise
	Resurrection	Pistis	3) all-mystery
	Rebirth	Seal	4) all-gnosis
		5) all-chaste	
		6) every silence	
		7) insubstantial door=substance	
		8) forefather of forefathers	
		9) all-father/self-father	
		10) all-powerful	
		11) invisible one	
		12) Truth: Mother of the Aeons	

Demiurge/Forethought:

4 Monads & 4 Gates, each with:

6 helpers/24 myriad powers/9 enneads/10 decads/12 dodecads/5 pentads

1 Overseer w/ three aspects:

1) unbegotten

2) true

3) unutterable

Aphrêdon + 12 beneficent ones

Forefather

Adam of the Light

Perfect Mind

DEEP

3 Parenthoods: 1) Covered One/Hidden God
2) 5 Trees/Only-begotten Logos
3) Silence/Source

IMMEASURABLE DEEP

3 Greatnesses: 1) Still One
2) Unknowable One + 365 Parenthoods = year
3) Infinite One

+ Sonship/Christ/Verifier

DEEP OF SETHEUS w/ 12 Parenthoods:

1) indivisible 2) incomprehensible 3) unknowable 4) silence
5) still 6) all-father 7) all-mystery 8) rest & resurrection 9) covered
10) thrice-male 11) triple-powered 12) truth

Separation of Existent from Non-Existent
(Existent = Eternal; Non-Existent = Matter)

Lord of Glory Separates Matter into Two Lands:

Land of Death and Darkness Land of Life and Light

It is important to lay out a schematic, even in the face of such a surfeit of apparent erroneous elaboration, for it is only in this way that larger patterns can be drawn out. In this case there are a number of apparent similarities with *Eugnostos* (see Appendix B). The role of Nun and his enneads is replicated here, as is the emphasis

upon the number 12. Likewise the Sophia figure, Truth/Ma'at, is the final figure in a series just before the creation of the lower realms. The generation of a specific number of powers is equated with the divisions of time, in this case the 365 days of the year, and the emphasis upon radical evil is likewise minimalised in both tractates.

The figure of Seth is ambiguous in both tractates; certainly to be linked with the entire Sethian/Old Testament model, but also suggesting the Egyptian. At one point in our text an only-begotten one hidden in Seth is referred to as “the Darkness of Light” and the one “through whom Setheus is King” (12.25&27). Seth rules over his own Deep, but there is also a suggestion of the traditional myth of Horus and Seth towards the end of the text wherein the end of the theogony is reached in the division of matter into *two lands*.

Apart from these considerations the tractate leans more towards Archaic Gnosis in its descriptions on innumerable realms and hierarchies. The entire text is theogonic, along the lines of the *Tripartite Tractate* to be sure, but displays a more hackneyed obsession with its vast hierarchy in the same spirit as the *Pistis Sophia*. However, Charlotte Baynes, in the introduction to her translation of this text, is quite justified to remark that it is “a treatise which must rank among the best products of philosophical Gnosticism of the early centuries A.D”.⁴⁴ The specific terminologies employed, in terms of the Greek loan-words, are much akin to the *Trimorphic Protennoia*.

In the Valentinian system of Ptolemy as derived from Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, Book 1), the first aeon of the primal ogdoad is Bythos with his female consort Silence (*Sige*), and Bythos, the Deep. Bythos is a constant feature of Valentinian thought, his role being the *Urstoff* out of which the theogony proceeds. In *The Gospel of Truth*, for example, Bythos is obviously Nun in the following description:

Because of the Depth they received the Error, (the Depth) of the one who encircles all spaces, there being none that encircle him. It was a great wonder that they were in the Parent, not knowing him, (or) that they were able to come forth by themselves, since they were unable to understand or know the one in whom they were. (NHC I,3 22.24-34)⁴⁵

and we have a very similar passage from *The Tripartite Tractate*:

But since he is [as] he is, [he is] a spring, which is not diminished by the water which abundantly flows from it. At the time they existed in the Idea(*Ennoea*) of the Father, that is, in the hidden *Bythius*(Depth), *Bythius* knew them, but they were powerless to know the Depth in which they existed; nor could they know themselves, nor could they know anything else (60.11-26)⁴⁶

Tertullian reacted to the peculiar nature of the head aeon in Valentinian Gnostic thought as follows:

⁴⁴ Baynes, *A Coptic Gnostic Treatise*, vii.

⁴⁵ Coptic transcription from EV, 14.

⁴⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 206.

Such stories of the heavens you would imagine to be detached tenements in some happy isle of the blessed, I know not where. There the god even of the Valentinians has his dwelling place in the attics. They call him indeed, as to his essence, *Perfect Aeon*, but in respect of his personality, *Before the Beginning*, and sometimes *Bythos* (Depth), a name which is most unfit for one who dwells in the heights above! They describe him as unbegotten, immense, infinite, invisible, and eternal.⁴⁷

With the Hermopolitan theology, we have noted their emphasis upon the primordial ogdoad, the so-called Chaos gods. In this system Nun has been dilated into eight apophatic qualities and has therefore had his Heliopolitan pre-eminence somewhat diluted. Tertullian appears to be detailing exactly this phenomenon with respect to diverging opinions among the Valentinians:

There are some who do not claim the first place for Bythus, but only a lower one. They put their Ogdoad in the foremost rank.⁴⁸

The names of the primal ogdoad in this variant leave no doubt as to their derivation from the apophatic Hermopolitan eight: “Inconceivable”, “Indescribable”, “Invisible”, “Nameless”, “Unbegotten”, etc.

The final fall of Nun occurred in the Christian era in Egypt, from 400 C.E. onwards, although it was facilitated in this by the ambiguity of the word as it was used in Gnostic and magical texts. More than this, the association of the word with a “pagan” deity was undoubtedly recognised and so Nun’s fate was sealed. Nun, although venerated for the longest of ages throughout Egyptian history eventually suffered from his proximity to Chaos and Disorder, forces which were conceptually, as well as politically, set loose upon occupied Egypt in the Late Period and which betokened the flight of Ma’at to a higher supernal realm. The Hermopolitan chaos-gods were found guilty by association and the darkness in Nun eventually overcame his august properties as later Coptic texts demonstrate. However, this dysteliological element of perversity, always symbolised by the need to slay Apophis who lived in the Abyss, fulfilled an essential theogonic role in both Egyptian and Gnostic cosmologies. Simply put, this need pertains to the whole question of the original *necessity* for aeonial extension, god and goddess hypostatisation etc. The parent wished to “find his root” as one Gnostic tractate puts it; likewise great pains were taken by the Egyptian theologians to ensure that the orderly masculine *nhh* aspect, and the feminine, chaotic, *dt* side of Nun remained ever-present: Nun upholds the solar bark, he also contains the deadly and destructive Apep in the entrails of his darkness: this is a perfect image for the duality of the Egyptian view of creation, and of the Gnostic Parent and his or her “Depths”. Thousands of years later, Jakob Böhme was to put into words the very conundrum addressed by the earliest Egyptian theologians, that of a will to emanate appearing in a boundless pregnant void:

⁴⁷ *De Praes. Haer.* IV.VII, , trans. P. Holmes, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 506-7

⁴⁸ *De Praes. Haer.* IV.XXXV, , trans. P. Holmes, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 519

We are able then to recognize that the eternal Unground out of Nature is a will, like an eye wherein Nature is hidden; like a hidden fire that burns not, which exists and also exists not...

For all is comprised in the will, and is an essence, which, in the eternal Unground, eternally takes its rise in itself, enters into itself, grasps itself in itself, and makes the centre in itself...⁴⁹

Böhme elsewhere refers to the first principle as “the Abyss, the Nothing, and the All”, out of which proceeds “the Will of the Abyss... the Father of all Beings”.⁵⁰ Schelling, too, is no pantheist in seeing the essence of freedom as a dark principle in the Godhead. Like Böhme, passages in his writings have been labeled “gnostic” for their depiction of an umbral and irrational divine abyss that precedes being. One cannot escape the connection, however we can see that Gnostic thought is but a conduit in this regard, one through which the ancient Egyptian view of Nun is drawn:

Following the eternal act of self-revelation, the world as we now behold it, is all rule, order and form; but the unruly lies ever in the depths as though it might again break through, and order and form nowhere appear to have been original, but it seems as though what had initially been unruly had been brought to order... Without this preceding gloom, creation would have no reality; darkness is its necessary heritage... This primal longing moves in anticipation like a surging, billowing sea....⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Six Theosophic Points* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 6, 8.

⁵⁰ “Four Tables of Divine Revelation,” in *Jacob Boehme Essential Readings*, ed. Robin Waterfield (Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1989), 215.

⁵¹ F.W. Schelling, *Philosophical Enquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 34-35.

Chapter Eleven: The Heliopolitan Theology of Aeonial Extension

Jan Zandee makes a critical observation with respect to the Gnostic derivation of the androgynous Creator and Ennead from ancient Egyptian thought:

The outcome of the comparison of the Gnostic and ancient Egyptian primordial creator-god is that there is at the very least an agreement in phenomenological terms. In both forms of religions it is a question of the androgyny of the creator god, containing masculine and feminine fecundity within itself... As well, there first came forth, before the development of the phenomenological world, a transcendent number of gods, the Ennead of Heliopolis, the Pleroma of the Gnostic texts.¹

On the Origin of the World, besides adumbrating the Heh-gods, also describes this adherence to the androgynous archetype that permeates Egyptian and Gnostic thought:

These are the [seven] powers of the seven heavens of [Chaos]. They came to exist androgynous, consistent with the immortal archetype that existed before them, according to the desire of Pistis so that the image of that which existed since the beginning might obtain until the end (102.1)²

The “Untitled Text” presents as clear a Heliopolitan-derived description of the androgynous Atum creating his ennead as one could hope to find in Gnostic thought:

It is this [the Monad] which stirred everything with its radiance And they received Gnosis, and Life, and Hope, and Repose, and Love, and Awakening, and Faith, and Rebirth, and Seal. This is the Ennead which came forth from the Unoriginated Parent who is Father and Mother, alone unto himself, whose Pleroma encompasses the twelve Depths. (227.22-228.3)³

In addition to this, we are presented with a graphic example of Atum’s procreative act in *Melchizedek*:

all the archons and angels along with the sperm [which] lept [forth from the Father] of the Entirety.... [They being] engendered, the [gods and angels] along with human beings from out of the sperm: all of [the natures], those in [heaven and] those upon the earth, and [those] under the earth.... (9.1)⁴

¹ Jan Zandee, “Der androgyne Gott in Ägypten”, 277.

² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXI, 36.

³ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XIII, 216, 218.

⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XV, 56, 58.

I note in passing that Atum's name connotes "everything" or "entirety" from the Egyptian *tm*, and thus underwrites the ubiquitous Gnostic ideal of the *pleroma*. This act depicts the beginning of the theogonic process, the point at which the Abyss differentiates itself into various hypostases. Although Epiphanius is historically short-sighted in assigning the derivations of Valentinian thought to Hesiod, he is close to the mark in seeing the very architectonic of Gnostic thought in Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Chaos generates all the gods and goddesses:

For he [Valentinus] too wants to introduce thirty gods and aeons and heavens, of which the first is Depth, as he says with his lack of sense, just as Hesiod, the one responsible for his ideas, certainly said: "Chaos is the very first of gods".⁵ Now who does not realize that "Chaos" and "Depth" mean the same thing?⁶

It has been possible in this study to bring out the emanationist foundations of Egyptian Gnostic thought at almost every turn through analysis of various extant texts. I propose to continue with this heuristic in this chapter, however, Patristic evidence will be more closely drawn upon in order to show what reverberations there existed, abroad from Egypt, in the minds of those who recognised a definite alien and pseudo philosophical quality that imbued the writings of the Gnostics in Egypt. It is my contention that this alienness was in its way correctly apprehended by Hippolytus, Irenaeus, *et al.*, and that modern inclusivistic tendencies in Christian Origins to ameliorate this strangeness in favour of a more sanitised "Christian Gnosticism" patently ignores the ancient oriental precepts of Egyptian emanationist thought. While the logos-oriented Memphite Theology is to be found in the teachings of Basileides among a number of other examples, by far the largest proportion of Gnostic emanationist systems display their Heliopolitan pedigree in remaining true to the central procreative pattern of the divine family tree made up of pairs of gods and goddesses: this was most obscure and unpalatable to the early Church polemicists.

Patristic writings of course must be taken *cum grano salis*, yet we have no great need to doubt their larger observations as they targeted the phenomenon of Gnostic aeons and the patterns they appeared within. Theirs was not a great task in terms of refutation, for the systems they reported on displayed as much of an off-putting disregard for clearly defined system in their day as they continue to do in ours. We have seen the primal ogdoad show up in various Gnostic systems of thought, the Heh-god "myriad" and chaotic nature of this ogdoad often obvious. Tertullian, writing around 200 C.E., gave vent to his frustration in dealing with the Gnostic fixation in this regard, and inadvertently confirms the function of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad in Valentinian thought:

Thus you have an Ogdoad, a double Tetra, out of the conjunctions of males and females – the cells (so to speak) of the primordial Aeons, the fraternal nuptials of the Valentinian gods, the simple originals of heretical sanctity and majesty, a

⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116.

⁶ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 31.2.5, in *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis*, ed. and trans. Philip R. Amidon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 109.

rabble – shall I say, of criminals or of deities? – at any rate, the fountain of all ulterior fecundity.⁷

That these four male-female pairs of aeons are seen as primordial, “the fountain” of all subsequent creations, can leave no doubt as to the Hermopolitan theogony that informs this system. Nor are we surprised to learn, as has been noted elsewhere, that the first original aeon from which all else springs is known as Bythus, the Depths: Nun and the primordial ogdoad together form the well-springs of the Valentinian theogony both in the texts and the patristic sources at our disposal.

It might have been possible for early orthodoxy, or proto-orthodoxy as the case may be, to safely ignore this veritable mythopoeic gushing up from the unconscious had the Gnostics simply existed as an apolitical and powerless collection of fringe groups. The Patristic response connotes that the imaginative fire of Gnostic thought caught on enough to give them at first pause, and then consternation, as Christian thought itself was perceived to be drawn into, perhaps even derived from the Gnostic warp and woof. Jerome noted the acute intelligence of Valentinus⁸, Irenaeus reacted to the considerable presence of Valentinians in the vicinity of Lyon, and others indict the specifically Egyptian mythological backdrop drawn upon by Gnostic authors at various junctures. Tertullian, writing around 200 C.E., saw all heresies instigated by philosophy, the central Gnostic notion of the Aeon as a philosophical figment.⁹

In general, the patristic authors are hard-pressed to understand the mystifying phenomenon of reams and reams of hypostasising aeons that appear in the Gnostic texts before them like a cacophony of sounds, a haphazard confusion of fireworks lighting the darkness of the Alexandrian imagination. This conjectural impetus is curiously wedded to the methods and terminology of philosophical investigation, enough so to convince most heresiologists that pagan philosophy was the true culprit, as with Tertullian:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? what between heretics and Christians?... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!¹⁰

This assumption has carried on current appraisals of Gnostic thought by far and large, and the assumption seems to have been that there is a haphazard, gratuitous, and extravagant imaginative quality to Gnostic expression, one that flies in the face of a more reasoned spirituality based upon true faith. As Tertullian was to exclaim in the midst of the exasperating tedium of setting down the Valentinian system,

⁷ *De Praes. Haer.* IV, Chap.VII. Peter Holmes, *Ante-Nicene Father* vol III (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1908), 507.

⁸ “No one can bring heresy into being unless he is possessed, by nature, of an outstanding intellect and has gifts provided by God. Such a person was Valentinus,” *In Hos.* 11, 10.

⁹ *De Praes. Haer.* IV.VII, 507.

¹⁰ *De Praes. Haer.* I.VII, 246.

I prefer to be ignorant of than to be informed. For what can be right in a system which is propounded with such absurd particulars?¹¹

It might ultimately be as fruitless to attempt a definition of the Four Zoas of Blake as it would be to characterise or philosophically justify each individual member of the Valentinian Ogdoad, although a whole arsenal of methodologies might be brought to bear here, from structuralism to Jungian analysis; however, as one moves from the context of Egyptian theogony to mythological particulars, one begins to see that “the medium is the message” if it can be put that way. For while the individual goddess/aeon is important, as with Portia in *The Merchants of Venice*, this importance is mythopoeically layered, text, or in this case, theogony-bound, as there is a larger role to be played. The overarching pattern of the ennead in Egyptian thought, for example, is of far greater theological magnitude than the individual members, hence we have no less than 84 known variations on the theme of “ennead”; this adherence to the ancient pattern in Gnostic thought likewise explains the proliferation of variations beneath the “constant” rubrics of enneads, ogdoads, hebdomads and the like.

Hippolytus, at the beginning of his anti-Gnostic polemic written around 222 C.E., significantly offers a lengthy primer in Greek philosophy by way of demonstrating his own philosophical credentials before attempting to detail Gnostic derivation and absurdity. Yet Hippolytus came to believe that there was something else going on in this bizarre constellation of teachings. Unlike his heresiological predecessors, Irenaeus and Tertullian, Hippolytus recognised Basileides as a proponent of ancient Egyptian theology: “These are the myths that Basileides tells from his schooling in Egyptian wisdom, and having learnt such wisdom from them he bears this sort of fruit”.¹² This is no idle hearsay or slander from Hippolytus, for he is quite able to describe in some depth the Egyptian insight about their emanationist theology:

Do not the Egyptians, however, who suppose themselves more ancient than all, speak of the power of the Deity? ...they asserted that the Deity is an invisible monad, both itself generating itself, and that out of this were formed all things. For this, say they, being unbegotten produces the succeeding numbers; for instance, the monad superadded into itself, generates the duad; and in like manner, when superadded (into duad, triad, and so forth), produces the triad and tetrad, right up to the decade, which is the beginning and end of numbers... and the elements themselves, when computed and resolved by subtraction of enneads, terminate properly, some of them in the masculine number, and others of them in the feminine. And, again, the ennead is subtracted for this cause, because the three hundred and sixty parts of the entire (circle) consist of enneads.¹³

¹¹ *De Praes. Haer.* IV.XXXV, 519

¹² *Refutatio* 7.27; Catherine Osborne, trans., *Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy*, 309.

¹³ *Refutatio* IV.XLIII, trans. J.H. MacMahon, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 40

It is revealing, to say the least, that this influential early Christian figure has had to wait seventeen centuries to have his view more fully brought to light.¹⁴ In examining the Hippolytan version of Basileides (see Appendix B.10 where this version and the Irenaeian Basileides are both detailed), one is struck once again by the usual theogonic progression of entities from the “Non-Existent God” in his Void, to the Egyptian model of the egg (with which they very effectively conceptualised the idea of latency), to the appearance of “threeness” exactly where it should appear, in the usual Atum – Shu – Tefnut configuration. Following this is the normative development of numerical aeonial patterns, in this case an ogdoad (whether or not it is Hermopolitan-derived is impossible to say from the text), and a hebdomad. The system described by Irenaeus (see Appendix B) has enough in common to be sure that it comes from the same constellation of “Basileidean thought” – whether it is a younger or older Basileides, a contemporary disciple, or later follower, does not matter. The emphasis upon a Memphite Ptah Word-generated cosmos, the naming of Abrasax as ruler of the 365 heavens in both texts, leave little room for doubt.

Hippolytus also reports on the Naasenes, their name derived from the Hebrew word *nahash* for serpent. Their system, expressed in a gospel which has not survived entitled *According to the Egyptians*, describes the tripartite division of Man whose archetype is bisexual.¹⁵ The Egyptians, in the view of this group, “are of greater antiquity than all mankind”.¹⁶ Whether or not this was a group of Egyptian Gnostics is impossible to say; however, their dependence upon Egyptian mythology is quite striking according to Hippolytus :

And this is the great and secret and unknown mystery of the universe, concealed and revealed among the Egyptians. For Osiris (the Naasene) says, is in temples in front of Isis; and his *pudendum* stands exposed, looking downwards, and crowned with all its own fruits of things that are made... And the Greeks, deriving this mystical (expression) from the Egyptians, preserve it until this day.¹⁷

Cerinthus, a Gnostic active outside of Egypt in the first or second century, is reported by Irenaeus to be “a man who was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians”. Cerinthus postulated the demiurge removed from the Primal Source, one ignorant of the realms above him.¹⁸

¹⁴ I do not wish to ignore the work of those early scholars, mentioned elsewhere in this work, who turned their sights upon this possibility. However, Amélineau and others, obviously lacked the philological foundations, not to say extant Gnostic texts, to pursue this thesis adequately; nor do I wish to enter into the debate as to whether Hippolytus actually existed. See Vallée, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics*, 41.

¹⁵ *Ref. V.II. Refutatio IV.XLIII*, trans. J.H. MacMahon, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, 49.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁸ *Adv.Haer. I.XXVI.1.* trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, 351-52; also reported in Hippolytus to be “disciplined in the teaching of the Egyptians”, *Refutatio VII.XXI*, trans. J.H. MacMahon, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, 114.

Irenaeus treats the Ophites in a progression of descriptive passages that likely maintains the order of the teachings he had access to. In this he describes a typical Egyptian emanationist system, proceeding from the pre-existent Nun – “water, darkness, Abyssus, Chaos”.

The descriptions of Valentinian thought passed on by Irenaeus are particularly useful in understanding their own brand of emanationist thought. Irenaeus goes to great lengths to engage the exigencies of Gnostic theology here, in an attempt to demonstrate the inherent absurdities of their system.

It is not an easy task to define “Valentinianism” historically or sociologically. Valentinus was born in Egypt, tentatively identified by Epiphanius as “a Phrebonite, [born] on the coast of Egypt¹⁹”, and received a Greek education in Alexandria. During his formative years there he was also exposed to many diverse dualistic teachings, including those from the Egyptian Thoth (Greek Hermes) tradition, Platonism, and likely Zoroastrian and Essene influences. As a teacher in Alexandria he was a contemporary of Basileides; he is also reported by Epiphanius around 375 C.E. to have taught in Athribus, Prosopites, Arsinoe, the Thebaid, the “lower region of the seacoast” and Alexandria²⁰. The only writings we have from Valentinus are fragments embedded in heresiological works, although *The Gospel of Truth* may be his own.²¹ Valentinus journeyed to Rome around 140 C.E. and almost became bishop there according to Tertullian. His subsequent exile to Cyprus and his death are shrouded in mystery. The school established by this strongly philosophical poet-theosopher was wide-spread and prolific, lasting many hundreds of years before finally succumbing to persecution. It appears as though a western and eastern branch of Valentinianism eventually evolved although this did not result from any major or radical theological schism.

The Valentinian system is best viewed as a theogonic cycle, an evolutionary circle within the Godhead. Like the later poetic/mystical writings of Jakob Böhme, the concern here is with the necessary generation of real and actual radical evil from out of the “depths” of God. The development of aeonial *qualities* itself creates deficiency (as derivative but independent entities, they remain ignorant of the Godhead), but an undergirding necessity continues the evolution of the aeons who exist in sexual pairs. The Valentinian Gnostic perspective upon the fundamental existence of archetypal male-female syzygies (in the Pleroma) and their theogonic generation of offspring is closely allied to the Heliopolitan model.²² This emphasis is perfectly expressed in *A Valentinian Exposition*: “For this is the desire of the parent, that nothing occur in the Pleroma without a syzygy” (XI 2.36.28-31).²³ Valentinian texts emphasise the

¹⁹ *Panarion* 31.2.1. trans. Philip R. Amidon, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis*, 108.

²⁰ *Panarion* 31.7.1; *ibid.*, 113. This based upon the continued existence of Valentinian communities there in Epiphanius’ day.

²¹ Bentley Layton claims this to be the case (*Gnostic Scriptures*, introduction), yet there is no proof for this other than the fact that this tractate contains a fair number of “Valentinian” features, as well as demonstrating some of the rhetorical sophistication one would expect from a figure such as Valentinus.

²² See Zandee, “Der Androgyne Gott in Ägypten.”

²³ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXVIII, 134.

formation of human syzygies, or “heavenly conjunctions” in order to mirror the divine realm and effect personal salvation. Implicit in both Egyptian and Gnostic theogonies, is the existence of an androgynous ideal which stands at the very font of the emanation process. To ascend to this level, to be saved, is to regain this androgynous state. One must agree with M. Scopello in her assessment of this as an eradication or fusion of opposites: “Androgyny, in the Gnostic spirit, *coincidentia oppositorum*, is the annihilation of all sexuality”.²⁴

In the Egyptian Gnostic context the pairing finally broken by Sophia is an obvious disruption of Ma’at, embodying a “Sethian” element of disturber. In a suggestively ambiguous setting, Sophia plunges into the depths by refusing her partner; yet this is a result of her desire to “know” the Father, and she therefore confronts the issue of aeonial ignorance with respect to the Father. The Pleroma is agitated by her “fall”; even so, one imagines their disturbance to result from the sudden awareness of their own ignorance. The result is a “formless abortion” which exists as a negative manifestation of the inchoate side of the original Father from which the aeons proceeded. Thus the qualities contained in this lower formlessness must be actualised and, although the redemptive intercession of Horos and Monogenes is successful, the continued presence of the lower realm bespeaks a loss of innocence and an acknowledgement of the vitality of Evil. The derivation of the Gnostic “fallen” goddess motif from a number of Egyptian antecedents shall be taken up in the next chapter in detail.

Sophia is redeemed by the divine emissary and returns to the Pleroma although she leaves a shadow image of herself behind – the Sophia Achamoth. This lower Sophia is an equivocal female principle responsible for the creation of the ignorant Demiurge and evil archons, as well as the creation of the physical world and mankind through the Demiurge. The Demiurge is seen as the Jewish creator-god Jahweh who proclaims “there is no god but myself!” While other Gnostic systems display a strong “cosmic anti-Semitism” in this regard, Valentinian thought, as well as the system of Basileides, view the demiurge as an ignorant tool who is sooner or later informed as to the true state of affairs.

Mankind is divided into three groups: the hylics (fleshly types); the psychics (those with free will); and the pneumatics (the redeemed ones who also operate as redeemers, like Christ). The question as to whether one is born into one of these groups, or whether one acquires merits or demerits in the course of a lifetime resulting in a final assignation has no clear answer. The pneumatics are saved by nature: these are the Gnostics, hence the charge here of “Gnostic elitism”. The psychics must choose between salvation and perdition, although in the *Tripartite Tractate*, an extensive Valentinian text, even the fallen psychics appear to be saved in the end, and the orthodox Church falls in this group. The hylics are soteriologically doomed by nature. There is a foreshadowing of Gnostic elitism in Egyptian thought in the *Instruction of Amenemope* dating to the Ramesside period although extant copies appear much later. This text emphasises an ideal contemplative man, silent and mindful of a high religiosity. His adversary, “the heated man” is impetuous, filled with falsehood, with a “faulty heart” (XII17):

He who does evil, the shore rejects him (IV.12)

²⁴ M. Scopello, *L’Exégèse de l’Ame: Introduction, traduction, commentaire*, NHS 25 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 121.

You heated man, how are you now?
He cries out, his voice reaches heaven.
It is the Moon [Thoth] who declares his crime. (IV.17-19)
A storm that bursts like fire in straw,
Such is the heated man in his hour.
Withdraw from him, leave him alone (V.14-16)
Do not befriend the heated man,
Nor approach him for conversation. (XI.13-14)²⁵

What suggests the Gnostic view in this division of humanity, is the aura of perdition in the lower group that threatens to carry all along with it, “headed for the abyss” (XVIII.22). Apart from this, the Egyptian underworld was conceived as tripartite, prefiguring the “saved” and “damned” Valentinian categories of the pneumatic and hylic at either end, as well as denoting a “transition” zone in-between which corresponds to the Valentinian psychic.²⁶

The figure of Christ is apparent in Valentinian theology although here, as with most Gnostic-Christian systems, the focus is upon the larger theogonic picture: the descent of the Son to assist Sophia, his appearance in the world working in conjunction with the pneumatics, the final ascent to the bridal chamber preparatory to the higher androgynous ascent into the Pleroma, and the destruction of all that cannot be redeemed in the lower world.

Valentinian thought represents a far more sophisticated exploration of the problem of evil than the rigid dualism of Manichaeism for example. Pushed to its deepest speculations, the mythology of Valentinus is surprisingly monistic in ways; yet this is but a vehicle for a world-view that is strikingly dualistic. The tenor of Valentinian writings is quintessentially Gnostic, by which one might speak of the over-riding Gnostic sentiment of alienation in the tyrannical power-system of *kosmos*, and of yearning to return to a world of Light while yet realising that every individual confrontation with the forces of darkness furthers the entire redemption of Sophia, and hence the Godhead itself. There is an inbuilt necessity in this mitigated emanationist system.

Irenaeus thought the Valentinians derived the main feature of their thought from the pagan Greek philosophers. In particular, Thales’ conception of water as the generative originator of all things: “now it is just the same thing whether we say *water* or *Bythus*”.²⁷ The Valentinian conceptions of shade and vacuity are seen to come from Democritus and Epicurus, and Irenaeus also mentions the philosophical distinction made between that which is and that which is not, the first principle of all things – the One – and its production of Dyad, Tetrad, and Pentad. With reference to the Valentinian Ogdoad, Decad, and Duodecad, Irenaeus asks: “why has it been made into *three* parts and not four, or five, or six?”²⁸ In fact, all of the above features illustrate the Valentinian dependence upon Egyptian theological systems, Bythos in particular as we have seen in the preceding chapter. The “threeness” which appeared

²⁵ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, 146-163.

²⁶ Assmann, “Death and Initiation,” 148.

²⁷ *Adv. Haer.* II.XIV.2. trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, 376.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 379.

so arbitrary to Irenaeus is also one of the key numerological characteristics of Egyptian religion. Irenaeus is correct in ascribing these ideas to pagan thought, and in noting the Greek resonances in this exemplar of Hellenistic Gnosis, however the deepest mythological and theological attributes of so-called Valentinian thought are Heliopolitan and Hermopolitan. We note in particular that Sophia was the thirtieth aeon and that the number thirty had great significance in Egyptian thought. Besides the 30-year Sedfest period, there is the compelling image of a board game, already mentioned, in which players had to negotiate a passage through 30 inimical realms to attain spiritual succour.²⁹

A good textual example to put forward here is the *Instruction of Amenemope* mentioned above. This work is organised into 30 sections and the closing chapter presents a curiously clear anticipation of the Gnostic sense of completion and “fullness” as achieved in the banishment of ignorance, notions which would seem to inform the Valentinian Gnostic view:

Look to these thirty chapters,
They inform, they educate;
They are the foremost of all books,
They make the ignorant wise.
If they are read to the ignorant,
He is cleansed through them.
Be filled with them, put them into your heart,
and become a man who expounds them,
One who expounds as a teacher.³⁰

This text, as Lichtheim notes, stresses “contemplation and endurance” and an “overall regrouping of values and a redefinition of the ideal man” over worldly success. The worth of the text, for Lichtheim, lies “in its quality of inwardness”³¹, all of which anticipate the essentials of Gnosis.

In the end, in detailing the aeonial derivations, the theogonic architectonic, the very foundations of Valentinian thought can be seen to be essentially Egyptian, enough so to vindicate Amélineau who wrote over a century ago, that “Valentinus... had only to cast his eyes upon the monuments which surrounded him in Egypt, to listen to the divine legends, and he found the largest part of his theology”.³² There is, however, an equally important precursor of Gnostic thought to be found in the Egyptian goddesses who combine to become the Valentinian Sophia.

²⁹ Assmann, “Death and Initiation,” 148.

³⁰ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II., 162.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

³² M.E. Amélineau, *Essai sur le gnosticisme égyptien, ses développements et son origine égyptienne*, Annales du musée Guimet, vol. 14 (Paris: Ministère de l’instruction publique, 1887), 293..

Chapter Twelve: The Gnostic Isis, Tefnut, and Hathor

Of all the Egyptian mythological precursors who appear against an emanationist backdrop, none finds such full expression in Gnostic thought as the motif of the youngest and wisest goddess who experienced a passion to know the Parent, the goddess who fled convention, or the goddess who fell to earth archetype. This special intimacy between goddess and father-god, at times suggestively sexual, as well as pertaining to “knowing” hidden aspects of the Primal Source, forms the core motif of Valentinian thought, this and the standard theme of a goddess transgressing – with or without the approval of the Parent – and subsequently generating a lower realm. To briefly review this we shall examine the system of Ptolemy, a disciple of Valentinus *ca.* 185 C.E. (see Appendix B). In this emanationist theogony a primal ogdoad appears from the Source with Bythos appearing as the first aeon, obviously functioning as Nun. This original group of eight both suggest the Heh-gods and the Heliopolitan Ennead when considered along with the Primal Parent. In the latter case a correspondence would be as follows:

Bythius (The Deep)	Shu
Sige (Silence)	Tefnut
Nous (Mind)	Geb
Aletheia (Truth)	Nut
Logos (Word)	Osiris
Zoe (Life)	Isis
Anthropos (Primal Man)	Seth
Ekklesia (Church)	Nephthys

A Decad follows the first Ogdoad and a Duodecad follows on this. The last goddess to appear is Sophia, thirtieth and youngest aeon. Sophia embodies the Seth principle (as discussed in the next chapter) in refusing to procreate with her partner Theletos, instead wishing to “know” the Parent. Irenaeus described the passion of Sophia as follows: “[it] consisted in a desire to search into the nature of the Father; for she wished, according to them, to comprehend his greatness”.¹ The result is a formless abortion (another Seth motif) and the generation of great agitation in the Pleroma. Eventually Horus establishes a boundary between the abortive realm and the upper realms: Sophia is redeemed and returns to the congregation while her lower self, remains with the Demiurge as Sophia Achamoth.

There are two Egyptian myths from which the above sequence of events is derived. The first is the myth of Re and Isis which exists in many versions. The

¹Book I.2.2. *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, 317.

manuscripts we shall be examining date to the 19th Dynasty (1314-1200 B.C.E.).² Isis is herein described as a clever woman, whose “heart was craftier than a million men... more discerning than a million gods” and, “she thought in her heart to learn the name of the august god”.³ Isis took some of the god’s “spittle” and shaped it into a snake which bit him, upon which “the fire of life came out of himself”.⁴ The god’s ennead became greatly disturbed as the god informed them

A painful thing has bit me.
My heart does not know it, my eyes do not see it,
I do not recognise in it anything that I have created.
I have not felt a pain like it;
There is nothing more painful than this.⁵

This is an exemplary Gnostic precursor of what it means for the Primal Parent to confront his “depths”. The depths involve an unintended perversity, evil. In the Egyptian and Gnostic view this centres upon the figure of a goddess with exceptional qualities. Isis appears before the god and promises to relieve his pain if he will tell her his name, to which he eventually agrees, saying:

Give me thy ears, my daughter Isis,
So that my name may come from my body into thy body.⁶

It is surely not overstating things to note the sexual tension in this description: Isis wishes to know the Father and he ends up “bitten”, suffering a burning fever not relieved until his “name” passes from his body into hers. Apart from this we have the same theogonic infrastructure as with later Gnostic systems, in that an amorphous and inchoate aspect of the godhead is transformed by the youngest daughter of the Parent; this transformation causes severe agitation amongst the higher powers, a disruption that requires extreme measures in dealing with it. The upshot of this is an emphasising of the special theogonic relationship between Father god and youngest goddess. The daughter generates the *dysteliological* within the all-perfect Pleroma; the role of Isis in this myth, as with Seth in many others, points up the Egyptian appreciation of this. Isis, as with the later Gnostic Sophia, was a power that was actively involved with the reality of pain and suffering within the visible world, and the mysteries of sexuality. Isis went on from her depiction in the above spell as “Isis the Great, Mistress of the Gods, who knows Re by his own name” to proclaim in Graeco-Roman times:

² All citations are from Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*.

³ Piankoff, *Litany of Re*, 56. See also another version found in A.H. Gardiner, ed. *Hieratic papyri in the British Museum*, vol. 1, *Text*. Third Series (London: British Museum, 1935). “Isis was a woman wise in speech, her heart more cunning than that of millions of men; her utterance was more excellent than that of millions of gods; she was more perceptive than millions of glorified spirits. She was not ignorant of anything in heaven or earth, like Re who holds the earth in his possession,” 116.

⁴ Piankoff, *Litany of Re*, 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

I am the wife and sister of King Osiris...
 I compelled women to be loved by men.
 I caused the just to be stronger than gold or silver.
 I ordained that the true be considered beautiful.
 I invented marriage contracts.
 Languages I assigned to Greeks and barbarians.
 I caused the honorable and the shameful to be distinguished by Nature...
 The island from the depths I brought up into the light.
 I conquer Fate. Fate heeds me.
 Hail Egypt who reared me.⁷

The key feature here is her involvement with the “shameful”, her role in “surfacing” creation from the depths, and her dominion over Fate. The Gnostic *Thunder Perfect mind* comes directly out of the Isis tradition as a few excerpts demonstrates:

I am the bride and the bridegroom...
 I am the mother of my father,
 and the sister of my man and he is my offspring...
 I am the sound of the manifold voice,
 and the word of many aspects. (13.27-32 & 14.12-14)
 I am the judgment of the Greeks and of the barbarians.
 I am the one whose image is great in Egypt (16.5-7)
 Out of shame accept me unto yourselves shamelessly;
 and out of shamelessness and shame,
 indict the parts of my being in yourselves (17.15-22)
 I am the one who is called “the Truth” and “Iniquity” (20.7-8)⁸

The link in both systems, besides the obvious recourse to aretologies,⁹ is the feminine power over beneficence and iniquity, as well as her archetypal presence as sexuality incarnate. The reference to “Nature” is an identification of Isis with Ma’at who subsumes both “honourable” and the “shameful”¹⁰; the corresponding identification with “Truth” in the Gnostic text is also linked to “Iniquity”, and so the dual-aspected goddess present in the lower world is a motif shared by Egyptian and Gnostic thought.

The depiction in the *Thunder* of the goddess as wife and mother of her husband firmly links this text to the Egyptian Isis tradition, where Isis is wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, his reincarnation. As well, Isis assimilated within herself all of the ancient gods, and so it is with the Gnostic goddess “whose image is great in

⁷ Stanley M. Burstein, ed. and trans., *The Hellenistic Age from the battle of Ipsos to the death of Kleopatra VII* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸ Coptic transcriptions from *NHS*, vol. XI, 236, 240, 244, 250.

⁹ See PHEME PERKINS, “Sophia as Goddess in the Nag Hammadi Codices,” 158-176. See also ARTHUR, *The Wisdom Goddess*, 161-62.

¹⁰ Burstein, *The Hellenistic Age*, 147, n. 8.

Egypt” and who claims that “I am the one whose God is many” (*The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, NHC VI,2 6.24).¹¹

The second main Egyptian myth to inform the Gnostic view of the divergent goddess, and on par with the Isis and Re story, is the myth of Tefnut in Nubia. The Leyden demotic papyrus I 384, already cited, dated to the 2nd century C.E., describes the departure of Tefnut, daughter of Re, who rejects her partner and has fled to Ethiopia in the form of a lioness. Re sends Thoth and Shu in order to bring Tefnut back, for her exile has caused disturbances in Egypt.¹² Thoth (and Shu in the Egyptian original) finds her in the desert and eventually persuades her to return to Egypt. This myth, which exists in fragmentary form in the Leiden papyrus, is a derivation of the earlier story of the eye of Re, found in the tombs of Seti I and Ramses III,¹³ in which the eye of Re is despatched in order to end humankind’s revolt against himself. As noted in Chapter 8, Hathor/Sekmet wreaks a terrible vengeance upon humankind, acting as an independent force of evil on par with the lion-faced Authades. Following this main mythological story, the *Pistis Sophia*, along with all of Valentinian myth, depict emissaries being sent from on high to deal with the disruption centred about a key goddess figure. Sekmet was worshipped on the desert’s edge as a mistress of war and strife, and was apparently associated with Nubia in later times as lions were more numerous there. Her main sanctuary was at Memphis; however, the temple of Mut south of Karnak in its prime under the auspices of Amenhotep III had some six hundred 2-metre high statues of Sekmet set up within its precincts. As with Nun, the Heh-gods, Horus, Seth and Isis, Sekhmet took on a darker role in Graeco-Roman times as she was incorporated into the Gnostic myth. In conflating the Isis and Tefnut stories, we are presented with the key function of the Valentinian theogonic myth reduced to its essentials: the daughter of the Creator god rejects her consort and wishes to know the Parent; as a result of this she ends up in a terrifying void – literally an antithetical “emptiness” to pleromic “fullness”. While initially manifesting an acute spirit of *non serviam*, she is redeemed, and order is restored to the divine congregation. This is accomplished through the dispatch of certain divine functionaries who succeed in bringing the goddess back. Sophia, in Gnostic thought, is a conflation of Isis, Hathor, and Sekhmet.

The appeal by Thoth to Tefnut is highly reminiscent of the Gnostic “call”: the soul, far afield from its spiritual source, is reminded by Thoth of her heritage and urged to return.

¹¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 240.

¹² The Greek text varies from the Egyptian demotic original in minor details. See Stephanie West, “The Greek Version of the Legend of Tefnut,” *JEA* 55 (1969): 161; Wilhem Spiegelberg *Der ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenauge* (Strassburg: Strassburger Druckerei und verlagsanstalt, 1917); also Hans Junker, “Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien” (*Abh. d. Kgl. Preuss. Ak*, 1911).

¹³ Kurt Sethe, “Zur altägyptischen Sage vom Sonnenauge das in fer Ferne war,” in *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Aegyptens*, vol. 3 (1912; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964).

I also remain here until the retribution upon myself is fulfilled. You love your land, as do I myself following my yearnings. May you call: come with me to Egypt!¹⁴

The Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* embodies the banished goddess archetype par excellence. Sophia in Chaos performs an elaborate series of “repentances”, the end result of which is the call of Sophia for help and the dispatch of two divine emissaries to save her:

‘O Light, you who has assisted me, may your light descend upon me. For you are my shelter and I come to you Light, believing in you, the Light...’
And I commanded Gabriel and Michael that they should bear the Pistis Sophia upon their hands that her feet do not touch the lower Darkness. And I again commanded them that they guide her in the places of Chaos from whence they would bring her out. (II, 139.1-4 & 12-16)¹⁵

The Thought of Norea is a short Nag Hammadi Gnostic text which also expresses the motif of the goddess who finds herself in the “lower regions” and calls out for help. Four helpers intercede in this scenario, “that she be reconciled to all the imperishable ones” (NHC IX ,2 28.10). Besides suggesting the motif of Tefnut in Nubia, this text also manifests the focus of the Re and Isis myth in its description of the goddess attaining the inner thought and knowledge of the Father. The above-cited passage is embedded in the larger context of this motif:

[She] has inherited the Living Word (Logos) that she be reconciled to all of the Imperishable Ones, and [speak] with the Mind of the Father. And [she began] to speak with words of [life] and (she) remained in the presence of the exalted One [possessing] that which she had learned before the world came to be. (28.8-17)¹⁶

Marsanes (NHC X,1) also suggests the Tefnut motif of the goddess attaining *gnosis* in withdrawing from the Godhead, and is also approached by two powers:

Gnosis stood beyond him because it belongs to him, and she who exists, she who sought, possesses it in the same manner as the Triple-Powered One possesses. She withdrew from them, these two Powers, since she exists outside of the Great One. (9.3-12)¹⁷

The Tefnut motif bespeaks the dual aspects of the goddess, as does the Isis and Re story in which Isis debilitates the god and disrupts the unfolding unity and harmony of the theogony. In the Valentinian model it is Horus who establishes the boundary following Sophia’s transgressions; Sophia is redeemed and ascends to the

¹⁴ Spiegelberg, *Der ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenauge*, XII, 1-20.

¹⁵ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 278.

¹⁶ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV, 96.

¹⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV, 274.

Pleroma, not without leaving her darker double behind as a sort of shadow goddess ambiguously functioning in the Heimarmene through the demiurge. This moment appears to be taken from another Isis myth in which Horus chops off the head of Isis in a rage at her unexpected kindness towards Seth: “he cut off the head of his mother Isis and he took it under his arm and climbed up the mountain”.¹⁸

There is no sense in the Egyptian Re and Isis myth, the Tefnut in Nubia myth, or in the plethora of Gnostic affiliated Sophia myths, that these female divine figures knowingly commit evil. This is the essential feature for both mythologies. Theirs is not a “Fall” as such, although it is clear that they transgress the accepted order in seeking out their own self-fulfilment.¹⁹ It is curious indeed that both myth-systems hint at a sexual link and this points us to the consideration that the goddess was seen to be fulfilling the larger theogonic necessity. If the Gnostic Parent “wished to know his depths”, the earlier Egyptian Re also “came out” to see what he had made, meeting up with an experience of evil that was quite unexpected.²⁰ In both theogonies, a young female goddess empowers herself at the expense of the entire divine court: her punishments for this action range from the very mild to fairly severe, as in the case of the *Pistis Sophia* who ends up tormented and abused at great length by lower powers until her repentances are heard. The overall Egyptian-Gnostic theme is that this goddess acts as a critical catalyst in the assimilation of the lower realms. The Valentinian establishment of the aeon Horus occurs in response to the call of the goddess, and we find this exact turn of events in the earlier Egyptian myth:

Isis called out, and (sent) her voice to heaven, that the souls of the gods in the firmament might hear it, and give judicial commands for Horus, the son of Isis.²¹

In seeking out a catalysing agent closer to the genesis of actual evil, the function of the demiurge must be considered. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this figure is often simply ignorant, or even well-meaning albeit with limited resources and flawed results. However, there are other “archons” that fulfil the role of malevolent agents and the essential dramatic element, present in a host of Gnostic myths, is their attempt to ensnare and torment Sophia. This dichotomy can also be traced back to Egyptian myth in the antagonism that existed between Isis and Seth. Seth kills her husband and brother Osiris, and also attacks the offspring of the goddess who is born in hiding in an inhospitable place. The Sethian principle of wilful perversity shall be dealt with in the following chapter.

In Gnostic texts the role of Sophia, often following her repentance and redemption, is one of a dispenser of justice akin to the role of Isis/Ma’at. The figure of Christ is slotted into a pre-existing Memphite theology of the Word; the result is a close association between this goddess and a Logos-figure. Both are theogonically

¹⁸ *The Contendings* 9,8 ff., trans. Griffiths from *De Iside et Osiride*, 350.

¹⁹ *Pace* a whole host of scholars, too numerous to list here, who define this as a “fall”.

²⁰ Piankoff, *Litany of Re*, 57.

²¹ Junker. *Der Grosse Pylon*, 17, 11-13; also, as Griffiths notes in *De Iside et Osiride*, “Isis uttered a great shriek and the world was disturbed,” 330.

engaged in a descent to the lower realms in order to confront and transform evil. All of this is present in the Isis-myth as relayed to us by Plutarch:

For this reason the longing for truth, particularly for truth about the gods, is a yearning after divinity, since it involves in its training and intellectual pursuit an acquirement of sacred lore which constitutes a holier task than all ceremonial purification and temple service, a task which is supremely welcome to this goddess whom you worship as one who is exceptionally wise and devoted to wisdom. Her name certainly seems to imply that to her more than anyone else belong knowledge and understanding. For Isis is a Greek name; so is Typhon, who is hostile to the goddess and demented by ignorance and deceit; he scatters and destroys the sacred Word which the goddess collects and puts together and delivers to those undergoing initiation.²²

Do we not detect an indictment of traditional religious practice here, in favour of an elitist quest for Wisdom? The text goes on to recommend ascetic practices as a preparation for “knowledge of the First and the Lord” (352.10). These basic motifs could be demonstrated at length, from any number of Gnostic tractates; however, a sampling from *The Tripartite Tractate* will suffice:

Those of whom he first thought that they should attain Gnosis and the good things which are in it, *Sophia* of the Father caused them to ponder, so that they would experience the evil things and might train themselves in them, as a [...] for a time, [so that they might] receive the enjoyment [of good things] for eternity. (126.28-37)

She had the *Logos* of the Son and his essence and his power and his form, who is the one whom he loved and in whom he was pleased, who was entreated in a loving manner. She was light and a desire to be established she was instructed and she was an eye of vision, these aspects of the exalted she possessed and she is *Sophia* that his thought oppose those things beneath the organization; it was a Word for the utterance and the completion of things in this manner. (93.34-94.10)

The powers were good and greater than those of the similitude. For those belonging to the similitude also belong to a nature of [deceit]. From a phantasm of similarity and a thought of arrogance has [come about] that which they became; however, they originate from the thought which first knew them. (82.15-24)

The beings of the similitude, however, were exceedingly afraid, since they were not able to hear about him [the Word] in the beginning, that there is (can be) a vision of this kind. Therefore they fell into the pit of ignorance which is called “the Outer Darkness”, and “Chaos” and “Hades” and “the Abyss” (89.20-28).²³

²² 351.17-352.5, trans. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 119-21

²³ Coptic transcriptions (in sequence given) from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 320, 262, 242, 254.

There does not yet exist in English a translation and commentary of all four versions of the *Apocryphon* (“Secret Book”) of *John*,²⁴ nor has there been any viable theory put forward as to the existence of an *Urtext* from which these four versions have come down to us.²⁵ This, in large part, results from the usual paucity of sociological evidence we have about specific Gnostic sects in general. The lack of a firm date and place of composition, and anonymity of the author, only adds to the difficulty in assessing the rhetorical intent of the work and in what sort of contexts it was actually used. At the very least it is clear that the work attained widespread appeal in various recensions. Certainly if *The Apocryphon of John* made it to the wilds of Lyon where Irenaeus reacted to it,²⁶ as well as to Alexandria and southern Egypt,²⁷ it was as likely to have been used in Syria and the cities of Asia Minor.

The depiction of aeonial generation follows the description of primal unity of the Source. In the *Apocryphon of John*, this Source creates “its own image”, a first entity separate from itself which is a female “forethought”, called Barbelo, referred to as “the womb of everything” (NHC II, 5:5).²⁸ Through Barbelo, various aeons are created forming a Pentad made up of male-female pairs. It is at this point that the

²⁴ There are in fact five versions if Irenaeus’s rather abbreviated account (*Adv. Haer.* I 29,1-4) is included. The Coptic tractates contained in Nag Hammadi codices II and IV are rather similar and have been taken together (by B. Layton among others) to provide a long version with a minimal number of lacunae; the tractate contained in Nag Hammadi codice III and the Berolinensis manuscript 8502, now in Berlin (hereafter ‘BG’), differ in more specific details and are the “short” versions referred to in this study.

²⁵ See Martin Krause and Pahor Labib, *Die Drei Versionen des Apokryphon des Johannes* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1962), in which the three Nag Hammadi texts now in the Cairo museum are translated; Walter C. Till and Hans-Martin Schenke, eds. and trans. *Die Gnostischen Schriften des Koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1972); also Michel Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques: Codex de Berlin* (Paris: Les Éditions du cerf, 1984).

²⁶ Referring to “their lies”— and depicting them as a sect descended from the Simonians, Irenaeus describes them as “a multitude of Barbelognostics, appearing like mushrooms out of the ground (*Adv. Haer.* I 29,1).

²⁷ The NHC II “long” version is written in Sahidic Coptic but with a Sahidic with dialectical elements which place it at the northern edge of the Sahidic area. Søren Giversen, in the introduction to his *Apocryphon Johannis* (Copenhagen: Prostant Apud Munksgaard, 1963), concludes that, “we must admit that the linguistic peculiarities only testify in favour of the text having actually been written in the area around that place at Nag Hammadi which is stated to be the finding place, though the area slightly north thereof would fit,”(44).

²⁸ This raises the very important issue (for more orthodox Christian scholars in any case), of whether the Gnostic concept of the Primal Source (“the Unity”, “God”, “Father of the All”, “the Invisible” in our text) was dyadic or strictly monist. The inclusion of the feminine principle at the very beginning of the theogony accords well with many other gnostic texts in creating a certain ambiguity. “The tradition that Valentinus taught an ultimate dyad must be viewed in the light of the extreme ambiguity of the term ‘dyad’. In philosophical usage it could mean (a) plurality as such, the ‘indefinite dyad’, (b) duality, (c) the number two (two may be added to two, but not twoness to twoness), (d) the second cosmic principle, and (e) the first pair of principles. In theology it could indicate a pair of antagonistic first principles; or again, a God with two complimentary aspects.” G.C. Stead, “The Valentinian Myth of Sophia,” *JTS*, N.S. XX, Pt.1 (April 1969): 88.

Gnostic version of the virgin birth is detailed as Barbelo is impregnated by the Father, giving birth to Autogenes, the Gnostic cosmic Christ-figure. All four versions follow:

NHC II,1 6.2-22²⁹

This is the pentad of the aeons of the Father which is the first man, the image of the invisible spirit: it is Pronoia (forethought) who is Barbelo, together with the Mind, and Foreknowledge, and the Indestructibility, and the Eternal Life, and the Truth – this is the androgynous pentad of the aeons which is the decad of the aeons, which is the Father. And he gazed at Barbelo in the clear light which surrounds the invisible spirit (and) with his spark she conceived. And he begot a spark of light resembling blessedness, but it does not equal his greatness. This was an only child of the Mother-Father which was manifested out (from the Father); namely, the sole offspring, the only child of the Father of pure Light. And the invisible virginal spirit rejoiced over the Light which came to be, that which was first manifested in the first power of his Pronoia who is Barbelo.

NHC III,1 9.3-23³¹

These are the five aeons of the Father which is primordial Man, the image of the invisible: these are Barbelon, together with Ennoia (Thought), the First Gnosis, and Incorruptibility, and Eternal life. These are the five androgynes, the ten aeons of the Father. And Barbelon gazed intensely into the pure light and was enveloped by it. She begot a spark of light resembling the blessed light, but not equal in greatness: this is the only-begotten, made manifest out of the Father – the divine Autogenes, first-born of all the offspring of the Father, the pure Light. The great invisible spirit rejoiced over the Light, that which he revealed in the primordial power which is his Pronoia the Barbelon.

NHC IV,1 9.8-28³⁰

This is the Pentad of androgynous aeons which is the Decad of aeons: this is the Father. And he saw in Barbelo a pure Light enveloped by the invisible spirit, (and) with his spark she conceived a child for him. He begot a spark of light in a blessed Light, but it does not equal his greatness. This was an only child of the Mother-Father which was manifested out (from the Father); namely, his sole offspring, the only child of the Father of pure Light. However, the invisible virgin Spirit rejoiced over the Light which came to be, that which was first manifested out of the first power of his Pronoia who [is Barbelo].

BG, 29:8-30.14³²

This is the fifth of the aeons of the Father, (he) who is Primal Man, the image of the invisible who is the Barbelo, together with Ennoia, and the First Gnosis, and Incorruptibility, and Eternal Life. This is the fifth androgyne³³, namely, the tenth aeon. He is the Father of the Uncreated Father. The Barbelo gazed intensely at him, into his pure Light. She was enveloped by it and she begot a blessed spark of light: it was not however, equal in greatness. This is the only-begotten revealed by the Father, the divine Autogenes, the first-born child of all the spirits of pure Light. The invisible Spirit rejoiced over the Light which came to be, that which was first manifested out of the primordial power which is his Pronoia, the Barbelo.

²⁹ Coptic transcription from DDV 123-25.

³⁰ Coptic transcription from DDV 207-8.

³¹ Coptic transcription from DDV 60-61.

³² Coptic transcription from PB 98, 100.

The core myth is not substantially altered here in any text, however the differences that do exist are not simply syntactical; rather, certain aspects of this process are stressed in different ways. For example, only NHC II lists *Truth* as one of the aeons, this being a key female Valentinian aeon (*Aletheia*) located in the primal ogdoad. In NHC II and IV it is the Father who looks at Barbelo, whereas in NHC III and BG it is Barbelo who gazes at the Father. In this amorous situation, the question of who seduces whom is rather acute, suggesting the incestuousness that exists between Sophia and the Father in the Valentinian system. There is, however, a more fundamental issue as the key feature of all Gnostic “goddess” texts, springing from their Egyptian derivation, is the willful self-empowerment of the female goddess or aeon. As Isis or Tefnut disrupt the godhead through their independent actions, so Gnostic emanationist systems follow this lead in emphasising the independent nature of Sophia, Barbelo, and other female aeons. It is clear then that NHC III and BG 8502,2 are part of this picture, whereas NHC II and IV above are more monistic in their desire to portray the omnipotent will of the Father.³⁴ Further down in the theogonic process Sophia is created as follows:

NHC II,1 9:25-10:1³⁵

The Sophia of the Epinoia, being an aeon, contemplated within a thought of herself with the conception of the invisible spirit and foreknowledge (*prognosis*). She desired to bring forth a likeness from herself, without the consent of the spirit – he had not approved – and without her consort, and without his intention. And though the person of her maleness had not approved and she had not found her chance, and she had deliberated without the consent of the Spirit, (yet with) the Gnosis of her initiative she brought forth because of the invincible power which is in her.

NHC IV,1 15:1-5³⁶

‘...of herself with the contemplation of the invisible Spirit and the foreknowledge (*prognosis*). She desired to bring forth a likeness from herself without the consent of the Spirit – he had not approved....

³³ Clearly what is being referred to here is the final syzygy – each pair made up of a male and female aeon – the female aeon here being the tenth.

³⁴ The lacunae of the shorter recensions aside, we note that it is only the longer versions that made it into English translation in the so-called “third, and completely revised” *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988).

³⁵ Coptic transcription from DDV 134-35.

³⁶ Coptic transcription from DDV 212.

NHC III,1 14:9-15:3³⁷

Our friend and sister Sophia, who is an aeon, contemplated a thought of herself through the conception of the Spirit and the first knowledge. She desired to bring forth her likeness from herself [...] ³⁸ although the Spirit did not approve, nor give his assent, nor did her consort approve, the male virginal Spirit. She did not then find her consort (nor) assent without the approval of the Spirit and the Gnosis of her own harmony which she brought forth because of the amorous inclination which is in her.

BG 36:16-37:11³⁹

Now our friend and sister Sophia, who is an aeon, thought a thought of herself, and through the thought of the Spirit together with the first knowledge, she desired to reveal the likeness out of herself, although the spirit had not consented or granted it, nor yet had her consort approved, the male virgin spirit. She did not find one in harmony with her as she was about to concede it without the consent of the Spirit and with the Gnosis of her harmony, emitting forth because of the passion which is in her.

The reference to Sophia as *sister* occurs in III and BG, while in II it is to *Sophia of the Epinoia*. Sophia seeks a union with the *invisible spirit* and *foreknowledge* in II and IV, *spirit* and *first knowledge* in III and BG. Her erstwhile consort is referred to in II as “the person of her maleness”, “male virginal spirit” in III and BG.⁴⁰ Most importantly, Sophia begets because of an *invincible power* in her in II, and *amorous inclination* and *passion* in III and BG; although IV is missing here (large sections of this tractate have been lost) it seems likely that its version was *invincible power* as well. The sexuality of III and BG are in accord with the parallel in the previous section in III and BG in which Barbelo is seen as the seducer. The following section appears to derive from the Egyptian myth of the eye of Re and Hathor:

³⁷ Coptic transcription from DDV 68-69.

³⁸ There is at this point an error made by the scribe who inserts 15: 4-9 mistakenly. This segment is omitted in the translation here.

³⁹ Coptic transcription from PB 112, 114.

⁴⁰ As in the *Tripartite Tractate* for example, this male aeon (*Theletos* in the Valentinian system) is not named. There is also a similar expression used by Mary in the *Pistis Sophia* (Book 1, 33:14): “And Mary also came forward and said, ‘My Lord, my (inner) man of light has ears, and (therefore) I hear with my power of light.’” This very strikingly portrays the inner syzygy necessary for true spiritual vision from a female perspective.

NHC II,1 20.14-28⁴¹

And he sent, by means of his beneficent Spirit and his immense compassion, a helper to Adam, luminous Epinoia from within him, she who is called "Life." And she assists the whole creation, suffering with him and restoring him to his pleroma (fullness), and by instructing him about the descent of his seed and by teaching him of the upward path, the way which he came down. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam so that the archons would not know (her), but that the Epinoia might be a correction of the defect of the Mother.

NHC III,1 25.6-23⁴³

He sent his beneficent Spirit out and his immense compassion as a helper for the first who had come down, who was called "Adam of the luminous Epinoia", she whom he called "Zoe" (Life). But it is she who works at the whole creation, suffering with him, establishing him in his pleroma (fullness), and explaining to him the descent of the deficiency, and she instructed him about the reascent. Now the luminous Epinoia was hidden in him so that the archons would not know (her), but that our syzygaic sister [...] Sophia is about to rectify her deficiency by means of the luminous Epinoia.

NHC IV,1 31.23-26⁴²

...of the upward path, the way which he came down. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam so that...

BG 53:4-54:4⁴⁴

He sent out the beneficent Spirit and his immense compassion as a helper for the first who had come down, who was called "Adam of the luminous Epinoia", she whom he called "Zoe" (Life). But it is she who works at the whole creation, suffering with him, establishing it as his completed temple for he himself, and explaining to him the descent of his deficiency and instructing him about the reascent. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in him so that the archons would not know (her). But our sister Sophia who resembles ourselves, is about to rectify her deficiency by means of the luminous Epinoia.

We are presented in this section of the cosmogonic tale with the second part of the Egyptian core myth, the descent of Tefnut to Nubia and the despatch of divine emissaries to redeem her to Egypt; as well, there is the motif of the eye of Re and Hathor sent to quell the revolt of humankind against the heavens. Also suggestive is the depiction in *The Litany of Re* of a long invocation which asks that the king be made like Re himself in order to deliver him from the tormenting demons of the

⁴¹ Coptic transcription from DDV 163-64.

⁴² Coptic transcription from DDV 230-31.

⁴³ Coptic transcription from DDV 81-82.

⁴⁴ Coptic transcription from PB 146, 148.

netherworld.⁴⁵ Elsewhere, it is proclaimed of the king that “thou art the bodies of Isis”.⁴⁶

Of all the Egyptian goddesses Ma’at ranks with Nun as a complex ubiquitous archetype, a figure whose presence resonates throughout the entire theogony. In the created world of order, a manifestation of her own puissance, Ma’at is depicted on innumerable reliefs as the recipient of kingly offerings and prayer. When the king dies and sets out upon his underworld journey, it is to Nun that he prays. Nun is an ordering principle – one which contains disorder within itself – therefore otherworldly, whereas Re, solar architect supreme, is at the very centre of life in this world, his role indubitably bound up with the created world born anew each morning. However, Ma’at represents not just a demiurgic dynamic bound up in the maintenance of the world, of society, and royalty,⁴⁷ but a benign demiurgic principle manifest at the very onset of the theogonic process, as in Coffin text 80, already cited, in which Atum identifies his daughter Tefnut as Ma’at. Likewise, when Isis is identified with Ma’at, it is due to her fusion with Hathor.⁴⁸ This dynamic of blending functions, personalities, and theogonic roles in Egyptian thought finds its later distinct manifestation in Gnostic myth.

The so-called Valentinian myth in my view, is not original in the sense of its forming a discrete and novel trajectory amongst the welter of Gnostic ideas surfacing in the first centuries of this era. Certainly patristic evidence has highlighted a number of features that can create this impression. However, the key theogonic figure in the Valentinian myth is Sophia, not Christ, nor any earthly player. It is in the self-contained volition of this female figure that we can see the myth as a reflection and refraction of a host of Egyptian goddess motifs, and we note that the *Pistis Sophia*, or *The Trimorphic Protennoia*, to cite two important examples that are not “Valentinian” are equally theogonically centred upon the goddess who falls to earth. The key feature in the Gnostic extension of the Egyptian myth, and one that is faithfully maintained and elaborated upon into a veritable fugue of variations, is the self-willed aspect of the goddess: Sophia wished to “know” the Father, as did Isis, and she alone of all the aeons procreated from herself alone. And so a critical aspect of the Valentinian myth centres upon the antinomian sexuality of the female aeon in her refusal to accept her ordained partner, instead choosing to procreate by herself alone. This decisive self-empowerment is also a key characteristic of Isis as Plutarch records:

For they often give Isis the name Athena, which has some such meaning as this:
I came from myself, which indicates self-impelled movement.⁴⁹

This characteristic is also to be found in connection with Isis in a Late Egyptian text first noted by W. Spiegelberg wherein Isis proclaims her having given birth to a son

⁴⁵ Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*, 32-33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁷ Aristide Théodoridès, “De l’assimilation à la divinité dans la Sagesse de l’ancienne Égypte,” in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique*, 26-37.

⁴⁸ Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 264.

⁴⁹ *Peri Isidos*, 376.11, trans. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 217.

without male involvement: “I have played the part of a man though I am a woman”.⁵⁰ In this Isis is again demonstrating her special affinity with the creator-god, in this case the androgynous Atum.⁵¹ Yet even her more commonly portrayed union with Osiris suggests the Gnostic theogonic apotheosis, for this follows his death, and the birth of their son Harpocrates is premature resulting in a deformity in his lower limbs, a turn of events in every sense symbolically “Sethian”.⁵²

Plutarch’s view of matter, from the Egyptian mythology at his disposal, is in complete accord with the Valentinian view:

The images which the perceptible and corporeal nature fashions from it, and the ideas, forms and likenesses which this nature assumes, are like figures stamped on wax in that they do not endure for ever. They are seized by the element of disorder and confusion which is driven here from the region above and fights against Horus, whom Isis brings forth as an image of what is spiritually intelligible, since he is the perceptible world... made spurious by matter. ...matter, being shown by its nature to be incapable of itself brought forth the first creation. For this reason they declare that god to have been born maimed in the darkness....⁵³

The Valentinian myth, as we have seen in Chapter 11, embodies one of the clearest and strongest Sophia myths in its variants. The intriguing issue of imperfection in both Isis and Sophia is at the heart of their theogonic functions, and is a key to their broad appeal. This issue, initially investigated by Albert Torhoudt in *Een Onbekend Gnostisch Systeem in Plutarchus’ De Iside et Osiride*⁵⁴, is shown by Torhoudt to exhibit a close connection between the Valentinian system recorded by Hippolytus, and chapters 54ff in Plutarch’s *De Iside et Osiride*.⁵⁵ It is interesting to consider the likelihood that it was Plutarch’s own dualistic propensities which lead him to note this connection.

The *Gospel of Truth* takes the negative attributes of Isis further, depicting the goddess as the demonised *Plane*, the hypostasised Error in the theogonic process. Following Torhoudt, Jan Helderma notes the enabling myth of Osiris as creative Logos, Isis as the receptive material element, and their offspring Horus as the created

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Spiegelberg, “Varia: Eine neuelegende über die Geburt des Horus,” *ZÄS* 53 (1917): 94-97.

⁵¹ CT Spell II, 136, “I am Atum who created the great ones, I am he who fashioned Shu, I am these Two, male and female.” Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 116.

⁵² Torhoudt sees the maimed Harpocrates as emblematic of the material element of the world; indeed, the word used by the Valentinians for the material “abortion”, *ektrwma*, in Torhoudt’s view recalls the premature nature of Harpocrates’ birth. *Een Onbekend Gnostisch Systeem*, 36f, and 119.

⁵³ 373.13, trans. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 205

⁵⁴ Lovanii: Studia Hellenistica, 1942.

⁵⁵ Seen to be “convincing” by Griffiths for one; *De Iside et Osiride*, 49.

world.⁵⁶ This myth is seen to be derived in the Late Period from “an Alexandrian milieu lying behind this gnosticising source”, from which Plutarch also drew.⁵⁷ Gnostic reversal which redeems Seth as we shall see in the next chapter, here turns Isis into the personification of ignorance and evil:

Ignorance of the Parent brought about Terror and Fear. The Terror became dense in the manner of mist so that no one could see. Because of this Error found strength (and) she made her own matter vainly, without knowing Truth. (NHC I.3 17.9-17)⁵⁸

“Oblivion” comes into being from Error (17.36), and we recall the establishment of Horus in the Valentinian scheme, a boundary to separate the disruptive abortion of Sophia from the pleroma. Horus is born of Isis in this sense, and although Plane is an unredeemable evil in this tractate there is, as always, a theogonic necessity in this turn of events:

Oblivion, which did not come into existence close to the Parent, came into existence because of him. (18.1-3)⁵⁹

Apart from this nadir in the fortunes of Isis, this goddess overall embodies human attributes in the sense that she shares in the travails of the lower realm that we inhabit. She is a purveyor of *gnosis* in the Isaic tradition,⁶⁰ seen to be a more efficacious alternative to many forms of traditional religious observance as the above citation from Plutarch demonstrates, and is able to overcome pernicious Fate. This famous declaration “I overcome Fate!” finds its theogonic extension in various Gnostic myths where Sophia is seen to descend to the level of the Heimarmene and eventually overcome it through various dynamics. It is the melancholic search for the scattered Osiris,⁶¹ the ignorance, wandering, and lamentation in a lower world that form the archetypal appeal of this Egyptian/Gnostic female salvific figure. The rejection of astrological determinism underlies the perceived numinosity of both goddesses. In the conflated mythological person of Sophia, the Egyptian goddesses Hathor, Tefnut, and Isis continue to lead the downward theogonic extension into darkness, one that paradoxically leads to eventual pleromic completion.

⁵⁶ Jan Helderman, “Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth?”, 33.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Coptic transcription from *EV*, 4.

⁵⁹ Coptic transcription from *EV*, 6.

⁶⁰ “At the same time, Isis is to him [Plutarch] a goddess of wisdom, and her mysteries lead to *gnosis* of the highest being, that is, Osiris,” Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 51.

⁶¹ Plutarch, *Peri Isidos*, 59.1.

Chapter Thirteen: The Seth Principle: Demiurgic Backlash to Pleromic Limits

In the field of Gnostic Studies the figure of Seth stands at the centre of Sethianism, “properly or improperly so called”. The caveat is proposed by Frederick Wisse who likens the enterprise, in zoological terms, to past attempts to establish the historicity of the unicorn.¹ The tractates that appear to indicate the Sethian presence rarely contain all six themes laid out by Schenke; even then, the same themes appear in different forms and in different contexts and are often obscure and muddled in their focus and variations. Wisse then goes on to make an important hermeneutic critique of Schenke and all those in Gnostic Studies who have followed his lead. These exegetists insist upon viewing Gnostic authors as “sect theologians”, and all contradiction and confusion apparent in the array of texts before us must therefore, in this view, result from inept translation and copying or redaction processes that refract the system far from its systemic inception. Wisse then turns to examine the nature of Gnostic composition, one that is at the heart of the present study and which, when properly understood, must remove the “ism” from Gnostic thought. Wisse’s conclusions are worth citing in part:

- 1) The gnostic tractates in question must not be seen as the teaching of a sect or sects, but as the inspired creations of individuals who did not feel bound by the opinions of the religious community.
- 2) Recurring themes such as those Schenke isolated were not part of a particular gnostic system but “free-floating” theologumena and mythologumena which one could use as one saw fit. As Klijn and others have shown, quite a number of these can be traced back to esoteric circles, and they can be shown to have been available to persons of diverse religious backgrounds. Even if a definite meaning was attached to these theologumena the gnostic author felt free to change the meaning and original context.
- 3) This group of writings should be evaluated and interpreted differently from theological treatises in the orthodox tradition. They do not adhere to the expected pattern of systematic thinking and argumentation. Conflicting thoughts do not appear to offend the author....²

So far so good, however Wisse goes on to recommend that a penetrating analysis of the structure of such writings would be improper, and that they were intended primarily for meditation. Yet the two aims are not mutually exclusive: Wisse’s analysis is correct in devaluing the attribute of a *self-conscious cultic cohesiveness* upon the Gnostic movement as a whole; however, this must not obscure the host of mythological substructures, in terms of the emanationist systems employed, that

¹Frederick Wisse, “Stalking Those Elusive Sethians,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 2, *Sethian Gnosticism*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 563-76. Wisse very effectively details the problems with the thematic filter established by Hans-Martin Schenke, “Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften,” in *Studia Coptica*, ed. Peter Nagel (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1974), 165-73.

²Wisse, “Stalking Those Elusive Sethians,” 575-76.

surface in a large segment of Gnostic theology. As with the well-understood literary and musical “variations on a theme”, one does not imagine these works as an attempt to dogmatically convey the original text or score, rather they take the earlier work as inspirational and use it as a starting point for variations and new explorations. The new work is expected to display the inspirational genius of the artist, and to indict the work as derivative, or conversely to claim that it isn’t true enough to the original, is to entirely miss the point of the “mythopoeic” enterprise. And all of this of course is not to deny the underlying literary and musical conventions that all such variations must adhere to.

We have a similar problem with the scholarly construct of Valentinianism, properly or improperly so called. We essentially have little idea about the cultic activities of such a group, nor can we say that there was a proselytising group of missionaries who promulgated a system in the manner of the Manichaeans, or the orthodox church for that matter. What we can say, in light of the above observations, is that a number of Gnostics created a constellation of “Variations on a Theme by Valentinus” in the key of Egyptian emanationist theologies as we have seen in Chapter 12. It is the clear adherence to emanationist convention that demonstrates the ultimate derivation of so-called Valentinianism and Sethian Gnostic thought.

I adopt a middle ground between Wisse and Schenke, for the Sethian motif is apparent and does point towards the “esoteric Jewish” component in Gnostic thought. It is the very eclectic esotericism in this genre which precludes the need for strict theological clarity in occidental terms. Our task at hand is to examine the role of the Egyptian Seth in Gnostic thought. In doing so we do not posit Seth’s continued role within Egyptian myth, but rather note his demonisation, his fusion with the Greek Typhon, and most importantly his suggestive archetype subtending Gnostic demiurgic functions.

It is my contention that as the disruption of native pharaonic rule continued from Persian times onwards, the Egyptian sense of *ma’at* was severely shaken. If order in the visible world, and therefore the invisible as well for the theogony results in the creation of Egypt, wherefrom does the new disruption and evil in the land originate? Nun and the so-called Chaos gods are obvious candidates as evidenced in the magical papyri and Gnostic texts. However, this level of divinity is not directly bound up with the created world and is to be associated with the Primal Source of a hypostatic stream of Order, forever bounded by Disorder. The seasonal flood and withdrawal of the Nile to its orderly banks, leaving behind the possibility for organisation and beneficence in the newly fecundated fields – this was but a reverberation of Nun’s more central role in bounding Disorder as an ontological predicate.

The significance of Seth for Gnostic thought ranks alongside that of the Isis/Tefnut myths we have already examined. Seth is a self-directed agent who revolts against established order, even before birth in breaking through Nut’s side. As a result of his controversial behaviour, Seth is often replaced in the ennead by Horus or Thoth for example.³ He is the principle of the dysteliological *within* the bounded theogonic order, whereas Nun and the Heh-gods are on the macrocosmic frontier. One sees a desire in Egyptian theology to situate Seth upon this edge as Seth is finally cast out into Asia in the Late Period from whence he returns to wreak havoc in Egypt. The

³ te Velde, “Relations and Conflicts between Egyptian Gods, particularly in the Divine Ennead of Heliopolis,” 242.

Egyptian word *khenenu* “confusion”, is written in hieroglyphs using the Seth animal determinative and represents the opposite of *ma’at*.⁴

As is the case at other juncture points between Gnostic and Egyptian thought, the *significance* of various roles is explored by the Gnostics with certain variations and blurring of identities apparent. The “Seth-principle”, if we can call it that, is shared by the Gnostic Sophia in a large number of mythological examples. Likewise a late-appearing member of an ennead, hebdomad or whatever, she disrupts the cosmic order in sexual terms by breaking with established order, and in unleashing chaotic and destructive forces in the lower world as her negative passions or abortion are hypostatized. At this point – and we are very much drawing on the “Valentinian” myth – the demiurge creates the world out of these elements and rules over it in conjunction with a Sophia-figure above him. He is often arrogant and boastful, yet never a completely evil personage. His role is absolutely necessary in the entire scheme of things, and it is here that we note an equivalent role in Seth. Seth helps slay the Apophis snake daily for Re and this extremely positive function is to be held up against all the disruptive iniquities that occur within the other provenances of Seth’s power.

Seth is at the heart of the Egyptian experience of duality, his “origin and existence is an accident, not in agreement with *maat*”.⁵ In contrast with this, of course Horus establishes his mansion, extending his principle of orderly rulership to the rightful king of Egypt. This theme is to be found in the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu, wherein Horus sets his limit by casting Seth out:

The coward (Seth) is repulsed from the mansion of Horus of the Horus gods, O servant of Horus, Your *h3yt*-chamber is joyful (IV.234,8-9)⁶

The Gnostic appropriation of this concept, in the same literary fashion as the fortuitous alliterative glosses employed by the Ptolemaic priests in the above inscription, discovered the function of Horus amplified in the definition of the Greek *horos*, meaning boundary. The *Tripartite Tractate* illustrates this transformation:

All his(her) prayer and remembering were numerous powers according to *Horus*(Limit) who was established. For there is nothing barren in his(her) thought. The powers were good and greater than those of the similitude. For those belonging to the similitude also belong to a nature of [deceit]. From a phantasm of similarity and a thought of arrogance has [come about] that which

⁴ H. te Velde, “The Egyptian God Seth as Trickster,” *JARCE* VII (1968): 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *hnty hms.ti r hwt Hr Hr w hm Hr h3yt, k m h’wt* : taken from an inscription cited by Barbara Watterson, “The Use of Alliteration in Ptolemaic,” in *Glimpses of Ancient Egypt: Studies in Honour of H.W. Fairman*, ed. John Ruffle *et al.* (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1979), 167. Elsewhere in this temple there are numerous descriptions of “Sethian sacrifices” and rites directed against Sethian animals: “Their tone is vigorously hostile. To describe them as ‘threatening’ would be an understatement,” J.G. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 551.

they became; however, they originate from the thought which first knew them.
(82.10-24)⁷

Of course the qualities of deceit and arrogance well accord with Seth's "trickster" characteristic.

In the Valentinian myth, following the "extension" of Sophia. The aeon finds herself cut off from the pleroma, surrounded by her formless abortion. The androgynous aeon Horus establishes a limit, so as to establish a wall against the threat of disorder, after which Sophia repents and is redeemed. In the main Heliopolitan Egyptian myth, Isis raises Horus in solitude in the inhospitable marshes of Khemmis. Horus, unlike the gods before him, is destined not to have a female consort; in the Valentinian myth this is also the case.

We have elsewhere in so-called Valentinian thought, the scenario of a divine figure declining her partner, resulting in infecundity or abortion. The Gnostic Norea, also known as Nuraita and Nhuraita, is presented as the wife-sister of Seth⁸, and this would appear to derive in part from the Egyptian goddess, Nephthys, or sometimes Neith, wife-sister of Seth. While in the Egyptian myth Nephthys is distanced from the disruptive activities of Seth and their syzygy is never holistically incorporated into the ennead, Gnostic inversion redeems Norea and Seth, and they can be seen to function together as purveyors of gnosis. Be that as it may, all of the disruptive features that operate in the Gnostic theogony can be traced back to the fundamental principles contained in Seth, one of infecundity, incompleteness, prematurity, and abortiveness.⁹ A further sexual parallel is to be found in Seth's homosexual act, one which "threatens to change the cosmos into chaos".¹⁰ Sophia's sexual deviance manifests Seth's dynamic as "an enemy of boundaries"¹¹; Horus establishes the boundary and she comes to realise this "Sethian excess" in herself. Her clash with the pleroma is the archetypal conflict between Horus and Seth.

The Gnostic *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2 and IV,2) depicts an equivocal Seth figure who represents a fusion between the Egyptian Seth and the son of Adam.¹² The text is a hash of redactive layers that are difficult to delimit; certainly the Christian elements are a later addition and the pre-Christian elements of the text are cautiously viewed by F. Wisse and A. Böhlig as being "considerably older" than their provisional 2nd or 3rd century compilation date.¹³ At a number of junctures the

⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 242.

⁸ See Birger A. Pearson, "Revisiting Norea," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 265, for a useful study of this figure, although the Egyptian connection is entirely overlooked.

⁹ Ugo Bianchi, "Seth, Osiris, et l'ethnographie," *Selected Essays on Gnosticism, Dualism, and Mysteriorosophy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 127.

¹⁰ te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹² A point made by Frederick Wisse and Alexander Böhlig, in *Nag Hammadi Codices III, 2 and IV, 2: The Gospel of the Egyptians* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 35. The possible Egyptian provenience of the piece is also noted (36).

¹³ *NHS*, vol. IV, 38.

tractate reveals a solid Heliopolitan emphasis upon Atum/Autogenes and a female power generating a stream of ogdoads which can be laid out as follows:

Autogenes/Female Power

[1st Ogdoad/2nd Ogdoad]

Harmozel

Grace

Gamaliel

Memory

Oroiael

Perception

Gabriel

Love

Davithe

Understanding

Samlo

Peace

Eleleth

Prudence

Abrasax

Eternal Life

– Chaos: hylic Sophia, Sakla and Nebruel, 12 rulers of Hades/Chaos

The text notes that another three ogdoads are formed, for a total of forty aeons, although the names of the other members are not given. The female power responsible for generating the first ogdoad also generates Seth who stands outside the hypostatising order of the ogdoads. The background theogony, and a very intricate and abstruse one it is, is on par with the *Pistis Sophia*, although in this system Seth has a pivotal theogonic importance ascribed to his person. The main function of Seth is as a conduit for the divine light from above to appear in his seed which generates the “race of Seth”. The aeons all give praise to the upper echelons that this might happen; “then everything shook” (54.11)¹⁴ as a series of emanations come forth, culminating in the appearance of a female power, “the mother of the lights” appearing through Seth (56.7)¹⁵. All of this is a Gnostic inversion of the main Egyptian myth of Horus and Seth, whereby the seed of Seth is depicted as a parody of true generative powers. The focus upon the “seed of Seth” in both views, has to do with a critical mode of sexuality that furthers or hinders the theogony. The Egyptian Gnostics drawing upon the figure of Seth and his consort were out to completely redeem their role in the Egyptian myth.

A common feature of Egyptian-Gnostic thought occurs at this point as the underworld is created from out of the last aeon in the main group, in this case Eleleth. The “hylic Sophia” corresponds with the Valentinian Sophia Achamoth, she who is left in the lower world following the repentance of the higher Sophia. The two demons, Sakla and Nebruel, appear in a number of Gnostic texts as well as being central figures in the Manichaean system (Saklas and Nebrod). Sakla is the demiurge and is identified as the Jewish Jahweh: “I am a jealous god and apart from me nothing has come into being....” (58.24-26)¹⁶.

Seth functions as the bringer of pneumatic seed into this lower world, for the formation of “a great incorruptible race” (60.25)¹⁷. Gnostic inversion identifies Seth

¹⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹⁵ Ibid., 116.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126.

¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

with Sodom and Gomorrah; as well, flood, conflagration, famine, and plague appear because of the race of Seth. Seth appeals to the higher powers for protection for his race on earth and divine intervention occurs on their behalf.

There are simply too many echoes of the Egyptian god Seth for the Seth figure in this tractate to be identified solely with the Jewish son of Adam, a point originally made by Wisse and Böhlig.¹⁸ Seth exists somewhat apart from the normal order although he plays an active role; he is associated with Sodom and Gomorrah which alludes to Seth's homosexual act with Horus¹⁹; the main theogonic function of Seth in *The Gospel of the Egyptians* is sexual, specifically concerned with generation; the result of this activity is the appearance of a race of Seth in a lower realm setting off a host of "dysteliological" phenomena. The book of Seth, as the text refers to itself as, was placed "in high mountains on which the sun [Re] has not risen, nor is it possible" (68.3-5)²⁰, and the association of Seth with the underworld and desert is here maintained. Apart from these specific points, Seth's equivocal role is everywhere apparent, as disturber and protector of the theogony.

Sophia desires to "know the father" in "Valentinian" myth, and her incest likewise disrupts the sexual/theogonic process. The result is an abortive chaos that the aeon Horus must delimit from the agitated Pleroma. The Sethian Gnostics, as reported by Hippolytus, likewise posited sexual dysfunction within the theogony as the precondition for the creation of mankind and the lower world:

After, then, the light and the spirit had been received, he says, into the polluted and baneful (and) disordered womb, the serpent – the wind of the darkness, the first-begotten of the waters – enters within and produces man, and the impure womb neither loves nor recognises any other form.²¹

The critical feature of a water-snake performing a theogonic function in the disorderly waters is clearly derived from the serpent Apep in Nun, although the new twist of Apep as the progenitor of humankind is nowhere to be found in Egyptian thought. "The Paraphrase of Seth", referred to in Hippolytus, presumably the source he is working from, displays a number of conceptual overlaps with the Nag Hammadi tractate "The Paraphrase of Shem" (NHC VII.1), although a close identification between the two has been ruled out by some.²² The depiction of the dark waters as the womb, the "great dark water... wrapped in vile ignorance" in *Para. Shem* (2.22), and "the dark, and formidable, and bitter, and defiled water" in Hippolytus, both seen to be womb from which humankind are produced obviously suggests a shared theology.²³

¹⁸ Ibid., 35

¹⁹ Ibid., 35

²⁰ Ibid., 162.

²¹ *Refutatio* V.XIV, trans. J.H. MacMahon, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, 66.

²² M. Roberge, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 341.

²³ Also shared to some extent by the Nicolaitans (ca. 90 CE) of Pergamum and Ephesus attacked by John. Epiphanius mentions their belief that the spirit separated darkness, depth,

The “Seth-principle” also pertains to the duration of destiny²⁴, hence his fusion with the Greek Typhon in the late phase. A study by Jan Assmann’s depicts *nhh*-eternity pertaining to the king, the state, the forces of nature, “the perpetuity of discontinuity, the unities of countable aspects of time” on this side (*Diesseits*).²⁵ *Nhh*-eternity, as we shall examine in Chapter 15, is essentially demiurgic and denotes a realm that has become threatened from within by its own theogonic process, embodied in Seth. For Seth also limits the undisturbed functioning of Horus and the entire theogonic process extending down from above:

Seth also limits the existence of Horus and his mother. The child Horus is brought forth by Isis in solitude. In the difficulties and dangers mother and child have to endure, not in ordered society, but in the inhospitable marshes of Khemmis, the glorious, original divine life is almost lost. Not only is the cosmos surrounded by primeval chaos, the cosmos itself proves to be fissured at Seth’s first stirring.²⁶

In Gnostic myth, especially the “Valentinian”, Isis/Sophia and Horus maintain themselves in the higher supernal realm with Horus establishing a limit; below this the Seth/Demiurge is left to rule over the abortive underworld.

The *limiting* of Seth in Egyptian and Gnostic myth is the key dramatic development in both, for Seth and the Gnostic demiurgic realm are not to be crushed or overthrown, rather they are destined to fulfil their destiny in terms of *nhh*-time.²⁷ The critical nature of Seth and the Gnostic demiurge is equivocal, embodying boastful arrogance and capriciousness, but not quintessentially evil; Seth aids Re daily against Apophis, and the Gnostic demiurge in many systems is enlightened by Sophia and attempts to do the best he can. Both figures fulfil their role in the theogonic process and their eradication because of their perceived negative qualities is not at issue. At the beginning of this study we defined emanationist thought as placing its emphasis upon *the need for theogonic process*, for differentiation arising out of the Undifferentiated. This need, we maintained, is one of *distancing*. Thus the Seth principle represents a polarity, a remove, an apogee from the Source that, paradoxically, takes one into its deepest mysteries. Seth for the ancient Egyptian theologians, and the Demiurge/Sophia for the Gnostics, was an active principle embodying all the dysteliological phenomena in human life – war, famine, plague, disease, abortion, flood, and earthquake – all that which is allowed to occur, in the larger mystery of things, upon the outermost rims of justice, fullness, and order.

and water from which came the womb, which produced four aeons etc., all of which depicts the usual Egyptian Heh-god characteristics.

²⁴ Bianchi, “Seth, Osiris, et l’ethnographie,” 135.

²⁵ Assman, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im Alten Ägypten*, 12.

²⁶ te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion.*, 32.

²⁷ Anthes notes this distinctive feature of Egyptian theology: “Egyptian religion is, I think, completely free of those logics which eliminate one of two contradictory concepts and press religious ideas into a system of dogmas.” “Egyptian Theology in the 3rd millenium B.C.,” 170.

Chapter Fourteen: The Memphite Theology of the Word: Gnosis as the Meta-Rhetorical Response

There is little scholarly debate over the Memphite system existing as an antecedent to the Heliopolitan.¹ Kees, for example, dates the Memphite to the period between the Third and Fifth Dynasties,² while Morenz dates the latter to the transition from the Fifth to Sixth Dynasty.³ The uncertainty of an Old Kingdom dating for the “Memphite Theology” does not change the relationship for purposes of rhetorical analysis.⁴ In the first instance the text refers to the Ennead of Atum, commenting as follows:

His [Ptah] Ennead is before him as teeth and lips: they are the semen and hands of Atum (and) the Ennead of Atum came into being as his semen by means of his fingers. But now the Ennead (of Ptah) is the teeth and lips in this mouth, which proclaims the name of everything from which Shu and Tefnut came forth.⁵

From this it is clear that the Memphite concern was not at all in overthrowing the Heliopolitan view and substituting something radically different, rather the Ennead is affirmed and it is only the creative process that is under revision here.⁶ We might say that the Memphite version of creation is a clarification of the Heliopolitan system, one which seeks to usurp Atum with Ptah, for while Atum is granted his

¹This is, however, a complex issue. When I speak of the Memphite system I am referring to the text that comes from the Shabaka stone whose *Ur-text* is dated anywhere from Old Kingdom to New by Egyptologists, the latter view seeing it as an antique forgery as such. There is clear evidence, however, for the establishment of Ptah, the Memphite creator-god, in conjunction with the new capital built some 10 miles south and across the river from Heliopolis by Menes following his unification of Upper and Lower Egypt in the First Dynasty.

²Kees, *Götterglaube*, 248.

³Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 154.

⁴See Frederick Junge, “Zur Fehldatierung des sog. Denkmals memphitischer Theologie,” *MDÄIK* 29 (1973): 195-204, in which a date in the Ramesside period or later is proposed.

⁵Hieroglyphic transcription from Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” plate II, column 55.

⁶L. Kákosy, “A Memphite Triad,” *JEA* 66 (1980): 53, “While the primitive form of the myth of engendering by onanism never disappeared, the concept of creation in Heliopolis tended to develop along more subtle lines. Since there is no proof that this process was induced by Memphite influence, one would rather think that the transmission of ideas took place in a Heliopolis-to-Memphis direction. That would entail that the Memphite creation myth was formed of, or enriched by, elements adopted from anstract Heliopolitan doctrines.”

continued status as creator god, his creative power is recontextualised as that of Ptah, as are other key players in the theogony:

There came into being through the heart, there came into being through the tongue, the form of Atum: for supreme is Ptah who gives [life] to [all the gods] and their *kas*, through this heart, through this tongue, in which Horus came into being, in which Thoth came into being, as Ptah.⁷

“Heart” refers to mind in this depiction, and “tongue” refers to speech. This is quite striking, for it indicates that Egyptian philosophical thought was crossing a profound threshold in proposing that its own thought-processes be examined as a microcosm for divinity itself; while they did not reject the previous body-oriented model (which focused upon the procreative functions), they sought to establish a more exalted, indeed philosophical, theogonic process based upon the powers of thought and utterance, and it must be remembered that the earlier Heliopolitan system, had posited the hypostatic existence of *Sia* (“Utterance”), and *Hu* (“Perception”), two gods created by Atum in any case. In an essentially rhetorical and political context, the key thing to keep in mind is exactly who “they” were. Speculative thought resided within the priesthood, and there is therefore a distinct message of self-empowerment in a theogony based upon the sacred and creative word, as opposed to blood-ties. There is a significance to this text that goes beyond seeming to prefigure creation by the Word in John’s Gospel: the text, as it goes on to demonstrate presents Creation as a paradigm of human subjectivity:

Thus the Ennead was born, so that the eyes could see, the ears hear, the nose breath air, (and) so they could all ascend to the heart. He is the one who causes all full knowledge to be attained. It is the tongue which enunciates that which the heart thinks, and thus all of the gods were born and his Ennead was fulfilled.⁸

It is this process “that gives value to everything” as the text states some thirteen lines further on.⁹ The critical point here is that creation, although it exists in some sort of primordial state, is not actually effected until the concept attains the reality of

⁷ Hieroglyphic transcription from Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest,” plate II, columns 53-54.

⁸ Hieroglyphic transcription from James Henry Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest”, plate II, column 56. Compare with Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 43:

“The eyes’ seeing, the ears’ hearing, the nose’s
breathing of air send up to the heart,
and *it* is what causes every conclusion to emerge;
it is the tongue that repeats what the heart plans.
So were all the gods born,
Atum and his Ennead as well...”

⁹ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, “which facilitates everything,” 43.

speech.¹⁰ The god “wording” reality was not seen as having effected creation *ex nihilo*, instead, as Morenz describes it, “the creator seizes the powers latent in the primeval material and incorporates them into his own being”.¹¹

Higher knowledge in the Egyptian Memphite view pertains to an appreciation of the logos-oriented creation of the theogony by the Primal Source. The Memphite Theology demonstrates this focus:

It is through what the heart thinks and the tongue commands that every divine decree came into being. Thus were the male *kas* made and the female *kas* set in place, and they who made all provisions and offerings through this word.¹²

The Gnostic *Tripartite Tractate* demonstrates precisely the same view of the original generation of the male and female aeons:

In the same manner as the *Logos*, he begot them, (they) subsisting spermatically along with those who had not yet been brought into existence by him. The Father, therefore, initially thinking of them – not only that they might exist for him, but that they might exist for themselves as well, that they might then exist in his thought in the substance of Idea(*Ennoea*) and that they might exist for themselves too – sows Idea(*Ennoea*) like a seed of [knowledge] so that they might conceive of what exists for them. (60.34-61.9)¹³

One is given a some insight into Egyptian Gnostic theologising in the tractate *On the Origin of the World* where the Memphite Theology, in conjunction with the Hermopolitan, is rationalised to explain the creation of the lower demiurgic realm:

After this, the archon thought within his nature and created by means of the word an androgyne. (101.9-11)¹⁴

Seven appeared out of the Chaos as androgynous beings. (101.24)¹⁵

The Primal Creator Ialdabaoth, since he possessed great authorities, created heavens for each of his offspring by means of verbal expression, beautiful, as dwelling places, (and) for each heaven great glories seven times excellent. Thrones and mansions and temples, and also chariots and virgin spirits (extending) up to an invisible one – together with their glories, each one possesses these in his heaven, as in an army, the power of the gods, lords, angels and archangels in countless thousands (created) that they may serve. An

¹⁰ An Egyptian concept that is also clarified in Hermetic thought. See Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 31; also the Hermetic tractate IV, 2. 97, 5-6: “when conceived by the intellect, intellection is pronounced by the word.”

¹¹ Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, 172.

¹² Hieroglyphic transcription from James Henry Breasted, “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest”, plate II, column 56-57.

¹³ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 206, 208.

¹⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol XXI, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

inquiry into these matters can be found, clearly (defined), in *The First Logos of Orais*. (102.11-25)¹⁶

This text is important, both for its demonstration of Egyptian theological antecedents, as well as its affirmation of Gnostic inter-textuality. No less than eight citations of other works are made in the larger work, and a number of them can be conclusively connected with the magical papyri as has been demonstrated in Chapter 5. The same principle of verbal creation and seven Chaos-gods appear and one is therefore not surprised to find a number of laudatory references to Egypt in this tractate, including “the water hydri in Egypt”, the Phoenix, and Apis bulls. This passage concludes: “It was only in Egypt that these great signs appeared – nowhere else – as an indication that it is like God’s Paradise” (122.16-123.1)¹⁷: The consideration of what prompted the Egyptian concern with noetic reciprocity as I would term it, and this medium, effected between god and creation, is clarified by the presence of *ma’at*. The sense of cosmic and political order, of morality, and even etiquette, it has been suggested,¹⁸ prefigures the Greek concept of δικη.¹⁹ In the same sense that *ma’at* is portrayed as a creative principle begotten by Atum, she nonetheless delimits, and in some ways precedes, the very possibilities for Atum’s act of creation.²⁰ *Ma’at* as a personal goddess and principle is therefore somewhat of an anomaly in the entire Heliopolitan pantheon, for as a creative principle she also operates as a synecdoche for the entire cosmology; that is, she herself is both the justification and principle of completion, therefore the very basis of Being underlying all hypostatic enactments, including the appearance of Atum himself. *Ma’at*, who was eternal and indestructible, was “the embodiment of Egyptian optimism”.²¹

This cosmological reciprocity arose out of socio-historical conditions, including the relationship between the king and his subjects as evidenced by the decline of the Old Kingdom bifurcated afterlife as a kingly prerogative, but more

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80. See Böhlig, *Mysterion und Wahrheit*, 145-48.

¹⁸ Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 77.

¹⁹ I would note in passing that *ma’at* as goddess in this regard, finds her later parallel in the metaphoric concept of Parmenides who has the Goddess of Truth proclaim that, “Justice does not loosen her fetters to let Being be born or destroyed, but holds them fast,” Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, 97. It is interesting that the monism of Parmenides proceeds out of a concern with a central eternal state of Being comparable to the Egyptian Nun, and that his “Goddess of Truth” appears as his own hypostatic derivation therefrom, akin to the Egyptian concept/goddess of *ma’at*.

²⁰ Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 78: “In order to express anything of the fullness which was contained in the Egyptian *Ma’at*, the Greek language had to have recourse to terms such as θεμις (“right”, “order”), μοιρα (“fate”, “portion,”), σωφροσυνη (“discretion”, “self-restraint”, “moderation”), and αρετη (“virtue”, “nobility,”) [which I prefer to translate as “prowess,” or “excellence”: “virtue” was a later sense of the word]. The “fullness” of which Tobin speaks found its way in Gnostic thought into their concept of the *Pleroma*. This embodied the same sense of necessity as in *ma’at*, however this engendered good and evil in the world.

²¹ Tobin, *Theological Principles*, 80.

particularly the political relationship between the King and the priesthoods. I have stressed the apparent intent of the Memphite system to mitigate but not radically alter the Heliopolitan. In this sense, the king's royal pedigree would have remained critically important but not, in itself, decisive. For the procreative power of Atum has attained a verbal stature in Ptah, and the pharaoh, as exemplar and executor of the divine will on earth, must in this context speak first, procreate after as it were. In effect, the legitimacy of the king is vouchsafed by his speech, and the prerogatives of thought and speech are shared by all.²²

It is my contention that the emanationist view of creation through *verbal expression* is quintessentially Egyptian in origin, although it was undoubtedly affected by diverse ancient influences by Roman times. The teachings of Basileides in Alexandria points us in this direction:

Whence, says he, came the light? From nothing. For, says he, it is not written where (it came) from, but only (that it came) from the voice of him that spoke.²³

Hippolytus of Rome's attack on Basileides, along with Irenaeus, indicates that this Gnostic teacher advanced a Memphite-theology based theogony. This can be historically connected with extant Egyptian religious texts at the time of Basileides, in the form of a Demotic text from the Suchos temples in the Fayyum which dates to the second century C.E.:

To him belongs the Power of Word from divine word(s) to make great [].²⁴

As well, from the cartonnage of a mummy in the time of Augustus we have an example of the Memphite theology in demotic (Pap. Berlin 13603).²⁵

The apperceptive thrust of the Memphite theogony suggests a modern philosophical concern with subjectivism in a few critical regards.²⁶ For our purposes

²² Admittedly we are on tenuous grounds, yet it is a consistent conclusion to be drawn from a system which was surely taken this seriously. We are touching upon the subject of pharaonic literacy, that royalty in this system would have been schooled by the priests in the cosmogonic "language of power," in a sort of dialectical proving-ground for all who would rule by the word. The essential point is that in the Memphite view, utterance, as well as perhaps family birthright, would have been the true test of kingly suzerainty over the priesthood. It is the very principle of intellection present in the Memphite system which must needs confer this thinking independence upon such a sophisticated group of priests. Ptah, the "Divine Artificer" is, in this sense, a metaphor for the demiurgic endeavours of these religious philosophers, an imago of their own speculative genius.

²³ Hippolytus, *Ref.* VII 20, 22.3. Trans. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 65.

²⁴ DPD 6614.6 from E.A.E. Reymond, ed., *From the Contents of the Libraries of the Suchos Temples in the Fayyum*, part II, *Ancient Egyptian Hermetic Writings* (Wien: Verlag Brüder Hollinek, 1977), 145.

²⁵ W. Erichsen-S. Schott, *Fragmente memphitischer Theologie in demotischer Schrift* (Abb. Des Geistes u. Sozialwiss. KL. Der Akad in Mainz (1954), no. 7.

²⁶ Via the Greek Sophistic movement I might add, in particular the famous axiom of Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all that is, that it is, and all that is not, that it is not." The

of course it attains a distinct resonance with all of the emanationist systems we have looked at. The establishment of the Egyptian Memphite theology as the precursor for aspects of Hellenistic emanationist thought is critical, for it supplies the historical grounds necessary to understand common emphases evident in theurgic, philosophical, and Gnostic applications. The Egyptians did not consider everything to be physical in nature; as this text makes clear, they distinguished between sensible and intelligible existence, and between physical and spiritual natures.²⁷ In particular the watery abyss of Nun in Egyptian thought is intimately bound up in the creative process, and one is justified in speaking of Tefnut and Nut as “watery” feminine hypostases in the lower order. The principle of Chaos is at the heart of all Egyptian cosmologies and it finds its way into Platonic and Gnostic expression.²⁸

It is also of interest that the Heliopolitan pro-creative theogony was subsumed by the Memphite, but not rejected. We can see the same theogonic tension between a *sexual* and a *verbal* mode of emanation in almost all forms of Hellenistic Gnosis. In some Gnostic systems, the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, *The Thought of Norea*, and *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* for example, the emphasis is upon utterance although there is a distinctly sexual feel to these works, quite apart from the fact that all employ first-person female personas. In most Valentinian works the emphasis is upon aeonial sexual pairing although the role of the “Logos” is also powerfully featured. In contrast with Valentinus, Basileides favoured creation by the Word as we have seen, and so the split is quite apparent between these two Gnostic teachers. The fact that they were contemporaries in Alexandria indicates that this was a current issue. This can be traced back further to the previous century to Simon Magus whose concept of the Primal Source is very much akin to the Chaldean and Middle Platonic. The Simonian “Boundless Power” draws forth Thought from itself and she (Thought) exists in

Egyptians distinguished between being and not-being, between  (ntt) that which is, and  (iwt), that which is not.

²⁷ See Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 12: “That the Egyptians did in fact identify this power of the heart with what we should call cosmic intelligence is once more confirmed by Jamblichus, stating that when the nous revealed itself as ‘the power which with care and skillfully brought all things to perfect completion, then its Egyptian name was in fact Ptah,’ [De *Mysteriis* 7-264, 4, VIII,3, 196-197]. Jamblichus’ statement is confirmed by Proclus, who on the authority of Porphyrius relates that the Egyptian Hephaistos, i.e. Ptah, was considered the manifestation of *technikos nous*, obviously a direct reference to his Egyptian epithet ‘Lord of craftsmanship.’“

²⁸ John Dillon, “The Descent of the Soul in Middle Platonic and Gnostic Theory,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 1, *The School of Valentinus*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), 357-64, does not note the Egyptian antecedents, but ably describes the negative feminine role: “The solution resorted to in Platonism, and generally in Gnosticism as well, is the postulation of a female principle, either generated by or somehow arising beside the primal entity (which is invariably male). this is a principle of negativity, boundlessness and lack, and provokes the generation of the multiplicity of creation,” (357). The same ambiguity about Nun’s relationship with the creator Atum is to be found in Valentinian expressions; as the “formless” Nun seems to be the consort of Atum, so the “voiceless” *Sige* (silence) is the somewhat clandestine syzygaic partner of the Valentinian Progenitor.

hermaphroditic fashion as she likewise contains Power within herself.²⁹ The Memphite focus upon utterance releasing the creative thought is apparent here, and of course the sexual aspects of the *gnosis* of Simon Magus need hardly be emphasised.

In pursuing these considerations it is apparent that the Chaldean system and Middle Platonism both side with the Memphite cosmology. Apart from a distinct disinclination to detail hosts of descending aeons in male-female pairs, however, their systems find many striking similarities with Gnostic thought in general, and of course with respect to those Gnostic systems which are more Memphitic, the task is really to draw out substantial differences. It remains a safe generalisation to say that, systemic similarities aside, the Middle Platonists were not all that interested in theurgy per se.³⁰ However, Chaldean and Gnostic applications are coterminous in their cataloguing of sacred formulae with which to *manipulate* higher powers. I shall offer only one example of a Gnostic text which clearly shows theurgic applications.

Marsanes (NHC X,1 27.12-18) engages in a lengthy description of the divine power of vowel and consonant sounds: “Form by form, they constitute the nomenclature of the gods and the angels, not because they are mixed with each other according to every form, but only because they have a good function”.³¹ These, “are commanded to submit... and as they are changed they submit to the hidden gods by means of beat and pitch and silence and impulse”.³² The author of this tractate wishes to impart knowledge about “the generation of the names”(35.6), and “the word of the hypostasis”(36.21). The cosmos is headed by the “Unbegotten One” beneath which operates the female Barbelo in the same manner as the Chaldean Hekate. As well, the “sense-perceptible world” is held in contradistinction to a higher knowledge possessed by Barbelo. It is the clear emphasis upon using sacred sounds to manipulate higher powers which puts this Gnostic text in complete accord with the Chaldean. In conclusion it should be noted that there is also a less enhanced Gnostic theurgy at work within the Gnostic movement as a whole, and this pertains to the simple possession of passwords that will allow the soul to ascend past the archons following physical death.³³ These details are of course quintessentially Egyptian, as found towards the end of the Saite period in particular, when the Book of the Dead was regularised as has been mentioned. In the Late Period an increasing number of magical incantations are used against inimical divinities; this is exceptional in terms of the number and intensity, however it but perpetuates ancient Egyptian views and is not in itself a new development. In discussing the Book of the Dead, in this case a

²⁹ Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 6.18: “For it is from this power that the unique thought came forth and became two. And he also was one; for having her within him he was alone, but not, however, first despite pre-existing, but appearing to himself from himself he became second.” Trans. Catherine Osborne, *Rethinking Greek Philosophy*, 251.

³⁰ However one can assume that they felt a distinct sympathy for this mode of speculation given the extensive evidence we possess.

³¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV, 296, 298.

³² *Ibid.*, 29.20 & 30.11.

³³ See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. W.W. Harvey (Ridgewood, New Jersey, 1965), Book I, Chap. XXI.5.

partial Demotic version dating to the time of Nero in 63 C.E.,³⁴ Kákosy makes this point: “In general it can be ascertained, that the first centuries of Roman rule brought no essential variations in other-worldly beliefs in Egypt... in the Egyptian literature on death, the journey through the underworld is no simple heavenly voyage: the texts concern themselves with the arrival of the soul in the Underworld”.³⁵ Alongside this magical continuum there is a more sophisticated perspective on Gnosis developing in these times, certainly less mechanistic, one which views this *experience* as one of inner transformation. Once transformed, the soul of the aspirant inexorably moves upwards and there is no need for the deployment of arcane formulae or passwords.

It therefore follows that the above Gnostic philosophical terminus is a natural progression from the recontextualisation of Heliopolitan nepotistic/sexual theogonic power-dynamics, into a truer paradigm of human subjectivity. For the subsequent development of the Memphite “word” theogony is in accord with the traditional Egyptian soteriological emphasis upon the “magical”: sacred passwords and the like. Human *consciousness*, in mirroring the divine dynamic, is able to empower its own spiritual destiny by understanding this creative relationship between inner and outer. This suggests the modern philosophical concern with subjectivism in a few critical regards. Consider the following definition of Existential Philosophy:

[It] determines the worth of knowledge not in relation to truth but according to its biological value contained in the pure data of consciousness when unaffected by the emotions, volitions, and social prejudices. Both the source and the elements of knowledge are sensations as they “exist” in our consciousness. There is no difference between the external and internal world, as there is no natural phenomenon which could not be examined psychologically; it all has its “existence” in states of the mind.³⁶

One is reminded in particular of Heidegger’s notion of the “Open” wherein *things* are in a state of continuously arriving to be met by our projections. The result is “reality”.³⁷

Needless to say, the Egyptians were not concerned with systematising their insight, although we can once again look to the Greek philosophers for the intermediary stages of the development of this insight.³⁸ The Egyptians were raising the perceptual issue of reciprocity between subject and object, ostensibly within the

³⁴ Frantisek Lexa, *Das demotische Totenbuch der Pariser Nationalbibliothek* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1910).

³⁵ Kákosy, “Gnosis und Ägyptische Religion,” 242.

³⁶ Dagobert. D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New Jersey: Littlefield Adams & Co., 1962), 102-103.

³⁷ See G.N. Nicholson, *Seeing and Reading* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1984).

³⁸ The later thought of Xenophanes of Colophon, a teacher of the monist Parmenides, provides a clear parallel to the earlier Memphite view: “It is the whole of God that sees, the whole that thinks, the whole that hears. Without effort he sets everything in motion by the thought of his mind.” Trans. Wheelwright, *The Presocratics*, 32.

mind of a god, and can well be called the “philosophical harbingers of the Pre-Socratics.”³⁹

The Gnostic *Trimorphic Protennoia* manifests a word-empowered cosmology which demonstrates this focus upon the inner and outer:

We alone [are separate] from the manifest world since we are [saved by the] hidden [wisdom] [in our] hearts [by means of] the ineffable and immeasurable [Voice]. And the one who is hidden within us pays the tribute of his fruit to the Water of Life. Then the Son who is complete in all respects, that is, the Word which originated through this Voice which preceded it in the heights, (and) who possesses within himself the name which is a Light, he revealed the imperishable things and all of the unknown things were made known. And those things that are difficult to *interpret* and secret, he revealed.... (36.33-37.11)⁴⁰

The Greek loan word *hermeneia*, which means “interpretation” or “power of speech”, from which *hermeneutic* derives, ties in well with the sense of the “power of words” to “give utterance”, etc. consonant with the Memphite theology expressed in this work. Archaic Gnosis, as we have defined it, is more traditionally Egyptian in its recourse to the written word, the sacred texts that must be at hand in order to effect salvation. The Salt Papyrus, already cited, is thus on par with the inter-textuality of *On the Origin of the World*. A premier example of Archaic Gnosis, alongside the *Pistis Sophia*, is *The Books of Jeu*. The Gnostic aspirant here emulates the divine voice which gives rise to the emanation process:

But I have called upon the name of my Father, to ensure that he should move the true god so that he will emanate... This is the first voice which he gave (voice to): he stirred his emanations until they emanated. (50.13-18 & 52.9-10)⁴¹

Human identification with divine entities including various transformations is a hallmark of Egyptian religious experience. Coffin Text 335 commences with the identification of the deceased with Atum, the Sun-god, Nun, and Osiris:

There comes into being a speech by me, Atum. I was (once) alone; I was Re at his first appearances, when he arose from the horizon, I am the Great One, the self-created. *Who is the Great One, the self-created? He is the water of the Abyss.*

Who created his names, Lord of the Ennead, who will not be repelled from the gods. *Who is he? He is Atum who is in his sun. ...The supervisor of what exists. Who is he? He is Osiris.*

... I have got rid of my wrongdoing, I have dispelled my evil, I have removed the falseness which was on me.

³⁹ Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King*, 158.

⁴⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 404, 406. Emphasis added.

⁴¹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XIII, 26, 30.

... I restored the Eye after it had been injured. (CT Spell IV 335, lines 184-231.)⁴²

The sense here is of a conflation of gods that focus down upon the soul of a man, imbuing him with their numinous powers, and aiding him in the struggle against evil. *The Gospel of the Egyptians* presents a very similar picture:

For this Adamas is a Light which shone from the Light, for he is the Eye of the Light. For he is the First Man: because of him all things are, to him all things are, and without him they are as nothing, [he being] the Parent who came forth, inaccessible and unknowable. He came down from above for the eradication of the Defect.

Then the great divine self-begotten Word and the incorruptible man Adamas became a mixture which is man. And man came into being through a word. (NHC IV, 61.8-22)⁴³

In both texts, humankind is identified with the divine power of speech, and with a fusion of various divine figures that shall aid in the struggle with evil. Both texts go on to entreat numerous other divine figures to perform soteriological functions in the theogony. In Spell 335, the salvation of the soul after death through its mirroring of the theogonic process; in *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, the furthering of the theogonic process as mirrored in the First Man. The divine power of speech in this process, the Eye of Re, and the fusion of human and divine in both texts, vouchsafe the quintessentially Egyptian pedigree of *The Gospel of the Egyptians*. As well, in both versions of *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, the verb *shope* appears at various junctures, as in **ΔΑΔΜΑC ΕΑΥΩΠΗC ΖΝ ΟΥΓΩΡΕ** (NHC IV,2 61.20)⁴⁴, and the idea of transformation can be etymologically linked in these two texts, for *shope* comes from *hpr*⁴⁵, used in the opening lines of Spell 335: *hpr mdw nnk tm wnn.i w' kwi*.⁴⁶

Hellenistic Gnosis tends towards the more radically subjectivistic, as undoubtedly influenced by Sophistic, Skeptical, and Euhemerisian relativisms to be found in Alexandria. The word in this context is more purely individuating, free from nomos-oriented religiosity and textual hierarchy. Unto the Gnostic alone, literally “the one who knows” is the true power of transforming *gnosis* free from the encumbrances of world-generated *episteme*. In this sense *The Thunder Perfect Mind* represents the supreme literary attempt to generate this subjectivist stance.

The Thunder: Perfect Mind is a difficult work to place historically. Among the collection of Gnostic tractates found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945, this work is unique in a number of regards. While the work is certainly Gnostic in many ways, its distinct allusiveness does not allow it to be linked with any particular Gnostic system; rather it seems to embody a wider appeal which stems from its basis in the Isis/Sophia

⁴² Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 262-63.

⁴³ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IV, 93, 95.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴⁵ Cerný, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, 249.

⁴⁶ Walter Federn, “The ‘Transformations’ in the Coffin Texts – A New Approach,” *JNES* 19 (1960): 241-57.

traditions prevalent in Egypt from 300 B.C.E. to 300 C.E. The use of a female first-person narrative is rare enough in ancient texts, the fact that this tradition existed in Ptolemaic Alexandria three-hundred years prior to the rise of Egyptian Gnostic sects, presents us with a strong case for historical connectedness. The text above all alludes to the Gnostic Sophia myth, and draws out the paradoxical unity of Sophia, manifested in her two aspects after her descent into the lower material realm. The higher Sophia embodies the return to the Pleroma, while the lower Sophia represents the carnal passage in life towards the reascent in Gnostic terms. In effect the paradigm of good and evil existing in Sophia, very powerfully conveyed by the use of oxymorons (“the master-trope of mysticism”), paradox, and parallelisms, is held up as an existential mirror for the human condition: “I am merciful, and I am cruel” (NHC VI 15.15-16).⁴⁷

I propose to offer the following analysis of the text based upon Kenneth Burke’s work on meta-rhetoric. This is a complicated issue, and not one fully explicated by Burke himself. Burke sees pure persuasion as an a priori presence in humankind motivating all discourse, an archetype that endlessly discloses:

Apparently the farthest one can go, in matters of rhetoric, is to the question of “pure persuasion”. But since that would bring us to the borders of metaphysics, or perhaps better “meta-rhetoric”, we should try as much as possible to keep particular examples in mind.⁴⁸

Meta-rhetoric, I maintain, is more properly the focus within human sentience, and is to be differentiated from pure persuasion in that the latter is common to all life-forms, perhaps best characterised as Schopenhauer’s Will in terms of its blind, battling, fecundity. If rhetoric is the “art of persuasion”, then meta-rhetoric must reflexively persuade an inner view of its own persuasiveness: in this sense it is specifically limited to human activities. Meta-rhetoric, as the ultimate humanist rhetoric of individualism, is a synthesis of poetic, philosophical, and psycho-analytical modes of discourse, manifestly a “rhetoric of confession” as it must derive from individual reflexion, a philosophy of rhetoric as it must subsume all discourse. This fusion of poetic, philosophical, and psycho-analytical endeavours, operating within the essentially anarchic, and antinomian realm of the radical subject, must attempt to extend Intelligibility into the realm of the non-rational:

Pure persuasion should be much more intensively purposive... it would be a “pure” purpose, a kind of purpose which, as judged by the rhetoric of advantage, is no purpose at all, or which might often look like sheer frustration of purpose. For its purpose is like that of solving a puzzle, where the puzzle-solver deliberately takes on a burden in order to throw it off, but if he succeeds, so far as the tests of material profit are concerned he is no further ahead than before he began, since he has advanced not relatively, but “in the absolute”... Yet, though what we mean by pure persuasion in the absolute sense exists

⁴⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 240.

⁴⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 267.

nowhere, it can be present as a motivational ingredient in any rhetoric, no matter how intensely advantage-seeking such rhetoric may be.⁴⁹

I maintain that the entire *Thunder: Perfect Mind* presents a radical theology of the Word, one that is meta-rhetorical in its purposes in the sense that it attempts to persuade a vision of its own persuasiveness. In this work a female speaker addresses an unknown group of people, possibly Greeks and Egyptians, or barbarians (i.e. non-Greek speaking peoples), as the text suggests. The confessional rhetoric of this address is powerfully amplified through the continuous use of the anaphoric “I am...” which is possibly meant to mirror, or even satirise, the “ego eime” (“I am”) pronouncements in John’s gospel, although this is uncertain. What is of great interest is that these confessional “I am...” formulas usually result in paradoxical rather than definitive statements. The paradoxes are not only intellectual but also take the form of emotional states, quite often focusing their tension upon language itself.

The work is clearly philosophical and mystical, using language as a poetic vehicle for these ends. The use of anaphora, parallelism, and metaphor, establishes the work as poetic, while the use of paradox, oxymoron, and specific philosophical terms gives the work a contemplative, philosophical bent. These two modes of discourse are fused throughout; three examples will illustrate this:

For I am the first and the last:

I am the one who is honoured and the one who is scorned (13.16-17)⁵⁰

For I am the Gnosis and the ignorance

I am reticence and loquaciousness (14.26-28)⁵¹

For I am the Sophia of the Greeks and the Gnosis of barbarians.

I am the judgement of the Greeks and of the barbarians (16.3-6)⁵²

The following perplexing statement, it seems to me, indicates a philosophical focus upon two critical terms: “Those who exist together in my being are ignorant of me; and those who exist in my substance are the ones who know me”. *Being* and *substance* must be seen to represent two antithetical natures within the speaker herself, and this is confirmed in the earlier statement, “I am the Gnosis and the Ignorance” These terms, which are Greek loan-words in the Coptic text, reinforces a strong allusion to philosophical issues.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 269, 270.

⁵⁰ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 234.

⁵¹ Ibid., 238.

⁵² Ibid., 240.

⁵³ Although this is not necessarily true for *all* Greek loan words in Coptic. However, it is clear in this case that *being* and *substance* have to be considered part of a quintessential philosophical vernacular.

We can identify a number of passages that are clearly focused upon rhetorical concerns, upon the issue of a reflexive use of language and meaning. These are as follows:

I am the silence that cannot be apprehended
and the idea that is often remembered.
I am the sound of the manifold voice,
and the word of many aspects.
I am the story: (I am) my name (14.9-15)⁵⁴

Those who deny me, confess me,
and those who confess me deny me.
Those who speak truth of me, lie about me,
and those who lied about me, tell the truth about me.
Those who understand me, be ignorant of me.
And those who do not know me, let them know me.
For I am the Gnosis and the ignorance
I am reticence and loquaciousness (14.18-28)⁵⁵

I am... the security in insecurity (15.25-27)⁵⁶

I am the Gnosis of my quest... the power of the powers in my Gnosis, with the
angels,... ...they who have been sent by my word (18.11-16)⁵⁷

I am the utterance attainable to everyone
and the speech which cannot be grasped.
I am a mute who does not speak,
and great is my multitude of words.
Hear me in weakness, and be instructed by me in
strength.
I am she who cries out and I am cast forth upon the face
of the earth.
It is I who prepares the bread and my mind inside.
I am the Gnosis of my name.
I am the one who cries out, and it is I who listens (19.20-34)⁵⁸

Hear me you auditors,
and learn from my words those who know me.
I am the hearing that is attainable to everything,
I am the speech which cannot be grasped.

⁵⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 234.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 248, 250.

I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of the letter
and the manifestation of the division (20.26-35)⁵⁹

There is a play between silence and speech, between “muteness” and a “multitude of words” which is resolved towards the end of the text as the utterer and listener – the one who is silent and the one who speaks – are proclaimed as the speaker herself: “I am the one who cries out, and it is I who listens”. As well, a tension between *sound* and *name* is generated: the *sound* is “the utterance attainable to everyone”, whereas the *name* is “the speech which cannot be grasped”. This name is the speaker herself as manifest in all language: “I am the sign of the letter and the manifestation of the division”; and she proclaims herself as existing beyond the paradoxical circularity of language: “I am... the speech which cannot be grasped... I am the Gnosis of my name”.

Gnosis has a different function in various passages which need not be detailed. The critical line, “I am the Gnosis of my quest” signifies that the speaker is not an *end* but a *means* that she herself is engaged in pursuing. In connection with the very evocative emphasis upon language and paradox found throughout the text, this suggests the reflexiveness of persuasiveness seeking to explicate its own nature.

The speaker refers to her role in a number of paradoxical statements: “whore”, “wife”, “virgin”, “bride”, “mother”, “barren woman” – the social roles of individual women who necessarily manifest the speaker’s archetype. This she confirms with her reference to “the spirit of women existing within me”.

The following passages are redolent with sexual double-entendre:

Out of shame accept me unto yourselves shamelessly;
and out of shamelessness and shame,
indict the parts of my being in yourselves,
and come into myself, those who (thus) know me,
and those who know the parts of my being,
and establish the great with the small first creatures (17.15-24)⁶⁰

I am she who is weak and am made whole in a voluptuous place (15.27-29)⁶¹

However, she also states that, along with the “whore-holy one” dichotomy, “I am lust in outward appearance and abstinence exists within me” (19.18-20)⁶². As the work moves to transcend all dichotomy we can see that a higher sexuality is being depicted in the two passages given above. The concept of *non serviam* is presented as part of the speaker’s nature, hence her statement that, “I am sinless and the root of sin comes from within me” (19.15-17)⁶³, in line with the above can be rephrased as, “I am the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 250, 252.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 244.

⁶¹ Ibid., 240.

⁶² Ibid., 248.

⁶³ Ibid., 248.

sin in sinlessness”. This is made clearer in the peroration of the text wherein the speaker awaits those who go through so-called “libertinisms and condemned passions” (21.23-24)⁶⁴. The “delightful forms which exist in numerous sins” (21.21-22)⁶⁵, deconstructs the whole notion of “sin”. The qualities of antinomianism, which I have posited as existing in meta-rhetoric, are also evident in the “negative” side of a number of oxymorons used to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the speaker; for example, “shameless, “anarchy”, “godless”, “foreigner”, “unrestraint”, “sin”, and “lust” are proclaimed by her as being part of her disposition. It might be said here that there is an ethical realm of sexuality, but that there is also a higher amoral equivalent.

This work clearly demonstrates its concern with paradox and language. It is also evident that the work self-consciously strives to transcend all dichotomy, and this is accomplished not by looking at dichotomy as an external reality, but in viewing it as existing *within* the duplicities of language, and therefore *within* the speaker herself who presents herself, in effect, as Rhetoric incarnate. The relentless insertion of paradoxical statements is obviously designed to make something “unexpected” happen in the reader.⁶⁶ This *something* might be said to be the elicitation of an uncanny identification with the speaker who is “the word of many aspects”. Behind the ironic awareness of her own persuasiveness, behind the blandishments of rhetorical seduction with its wilfully alembicated welter of paradoxical terms, lies the enigma of a rhetorical personality⁶⁷ – this alone vaults Intelligibility onto the meta-rhetorical level; as such, the purpose underlying the antimonies of these verbal posturings uses the archetype of pure persuasion as a means, not as an end or obsession in itself – an ethical tautness in this confession saves it from such a fall. In the Burkean sense the work is not theological, but logological, in its focus:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 252.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 252.

⁶⁶ A number of oxymoronic pairs of qualities can be listed. These are used in the text following “I am...”:

first/last	whore/holy one
Gnosis/Ignorance	reticence/loquaciousness
shameless/modest	assurance/fear
war/peace	poverty/wealth
merciful/cruel	foolish/wise
hated/loved	Life/Death
Law/Anarchy	scattered/collected
godless/god (“fearing”)	praised/despised
foreigner/citizen	substance/without substance
restraint/unrestraint	harmony/dissolution
sin/sinless	lust/abstinence
the one who cries out/the one who listens	

⁶⁷ Patricia Cox Miller, “In Praise of Nonsense,” in *Classic Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed., A.H. Armstrong (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1986), 482: “Like Plotinus, Perfect Mind knows that her thundering riddles are the echoes of her reality in words, and it is those words that give her mystery a place in which to dwell in human consciousness... She identifies herself not only with the paradoxical *images* of language but with *language itself*. Perhaps the ultimate revelation is that this goddess is the very process of speaking that she uses to characterise herself.

If we defined “theology” as “words about god”, then by “logology” we should mean “words about words”.⁶⁸

Burke commences his work on religious rhetoric with this observation and it seems to me that *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* attempts to transcend theology in this manner. The emphasis upon the divine word emanating and creating reality finds its paradigm within human conscious articulation, indeed the ancient Memphite view is most aptly expressed (unknowingly one suspects) by Burke in his insistence upon the centrality of rhetoric, and the logological role of the word in religion:

Instead of looking upon “God” as the title of titles in which all is summed up, one could look at all subclasses as materially “emanating” or “radiating” from this “spiritual source”. And thus, just as religion could be viewed as central, with all specialized fields such as law, politics, ethics, poetry, art, etc. “Breaking off” from it and gradually becoming “autonomous” disciplines, so there is a technical sense in which all specialization can be treated as radiating from a Logological center.⁶⁹

The realm of the “logological”, of “meta-rhetoric”, drawing upon Kenneth Burke’s thought, seems to me to represent the end-point of Egyptian Memphite Theology as transformed within Hellenistic Gnosis. In this sense, the sacred word moved beyond the temple precincts to revisionist magicians, to Greek philosophers, to eventually become desacralised in ironic word-plays and gnomic paradox.⁷⁰ What was an original insight which saw human mental processes mirroring the divine theogonic eventually found its acute expression in the Gnostic individual. This individual, as the *Thunder Perfect Mind* demonstrates, delved into the divine “wording” paradigm within, with the expectation that this would offer a direct glimpse and path to the fullness of the divine realm above. This process, I maintain, commenced with the usurpation of the traditional nepotistic-based religious politics, to a more acutely text-empowered religiosity – as a reflection of the Word-generated theogony above. What was once perhaps more the prerogative of the king and upper royalty alone now extended down through the priesthoods in their possession of sacred texts. The end result of this was the literal absconding of “magical” texts in the Late Period, where priestly entrepreneurs found a ready market for their palliative persuasive power. Archaic Gnosis was to spring from these roots, manifesting its own

⁶⁸ Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁰ I have not had occasion to refer to *The Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2) in this dissertation; the tractate is christocentric-gnostic, more likely a peripheral recipient of Egyptian Gnosis, and has been so exegetically mistreated, that I have found it to be of marginal utility. However, we note the overlap of paradox between *The Thunder* and *The Gospel of Thomas*, as in the instructions of Jesus to his pneumatic elect: “When you make the two one and the interior as the outside and the outside as the interior and the above as the below, and when you shall make the male and the female a single one, so that the male is not male (nor) the female female... you shall go to heaven.” (Logion 22). Coptic text from *NHS*, vol. XX: *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2-7, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 62.

version of “meta-rhetoric”, one tendentiously mysterious in its focus upon the numinous power of sacred sounds.

“Rhetoric” is used in this discussion in the sense that in Egyptian thought there was always perceived to be a need to *persuade* on the part of the individual soul following death. Whether it be “negative confessions” appeals to Nun, or passwords, influencing a passage through inimical realms through the use of language remains a shared Egyptian and Gnostic attribute, one as ubiquitous as the emanationist substructure of their thought itself. Metarhetoric stands as the final phase of the individual’s need to persuade salvation beyond death.

Archaic Gnosis followed embodies the traditional nuances of this dynamic in being unable and unwilling to forgo the ancient social patterns of hierarchic religiosity vouchsafing the safe passage of the soul. This *gnosis* replaced old sacred text with new, forging a link with the past through magical papyri, temple inscriptions and temple libraries. The Word as the *praxis* of Archaic Gnosis placed its adherents upon the right-wing of the political spectrum, where their aspirations would have been characterised as supremely religionist, sectarian, and nationalist. The magical papyri, for example, at times evidence a claim to Heliopolitan legitimacy; while these need not be taken literally of course, such pronouncements indicate the continued importance of Heliopolis to this religious sensibility:

An excerpt of the enchantments from the holy book called Hermes, found in Heliopolis in the innermost shrine of the temple, written in Egyptian letters and translated into Greek.⁷¹

The Hermetica is itself an exemplar of Archaic Gnosis; *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, found at Nag Hammadi, exhibits the Egyptian conservative recourse to archaic textuality, to the proper employment of the word. The text ends with the following instructions from spiritual master to acolyte:

O my son, write this book at the temple of Diospolis in hieroglyphic characters...

O my son, it is proper to write this book on steles of turquoise, in hieroglyphic characters.... (NHC VI,6.61.18)⁷²

In contradistinction to this, Hellenistic Gnosis, prompted by the myriad strands of metaphysical thought gathered in places like Alexandria, finally came to consider the individual alone as possessing the divine spark of knowledge which would allow an ascent to the Pleroma. This *gnosis* is synchronic, as opposed to the historic or diachronic dispositions of conventional religion, for its effort at persuasiveness relies only upon its own inner resources, its own inner archetype of light returning to Light.

One would suppose that a “pure” form of this view of Gnosis would forsake the written word entirely; if so, it must therefore remain a synthetic model for the simple reason that these adherents would have been disinclined to leave us any written evidence. However, the *Thunder Perfect Mind*, as well as the thought of Basileides for example, demonstrate that at least some of these Gnostics attempted to apply a very sophisticated, even “deconstructionist” approach to language in an effort to get around its very diachronic limitations. Edward Said noted “an unmistakable

⁷¹ PGM CXXII.1; Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 316.

⁷² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol.XI, 366 & 367

aura of power about the philologist”⁷³ and to the extent that there were prominent Gnostic groups in Alexandria and Memphis in Egypt, or further afield in such similar cross-roads cities as Antioch, Edessa, and the rival library in Pergamum, there can be no doubt that their discourse operated in the Burkean “dramatistic context” that a political/religious realm of practical effects was moved in the wake of such comparativist activities. As “philology” in its inception connoted a final rejection of the divine origins of language, we can see an early forerunner of this literary criticism in the literary activities of the Museon in Alexandria, in its multilinguistic collation of ancient religious Truths, and in the universalism of the preceding Ptolemaic epoch which fostered this pluralism. The de-historicising Word of Hellenistic Gnosis was seen to be a numinous pearl of insight, one prompted by the original irritant “dirt” of historical process, and thereby formed by language-borne contending Truth claims, but ultimately transcendent in its left-wing utopian aspirations of a “return to fullness.” To pick up the desacralised word and use it in this cause was undoubtedly the greatest challenge faced by these early deconstructionists. In ostensibly forsaking the political possibilities of sectarianism one might say they took up the last option open to them and became a literary genre. *The Thunder Perfect Mind* is, in my view, the one extant Gnostic work which can be placed alongside the patristic accounts of Basileides by way of demonstrating a very high level of rhetorical sophistication. In these few passages we see a cosmic-critical perception brought into the political arena, one which self-consciously drives the discourse itself:

I am the one whose image is great in Egypt and the one who has no image among the barbarians. I am the one who has been hated and loved in every place I am the one called Life whom you called Death. I am the one called Law whom you called Anarchy. (16.7-15)⁷⁴

I am peace and war comes to be because of me. And I am a foreigner and a citizen. (18.23-26)⁷⁵

Hear me you auditors, and learn from my words those who know me. I am the hearing that is attainable to everything, I am the speech which cannot be grasped. I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name. I am the sign of the letter and the manifestation of the division. (20.26-35)⁷⁶

⁷³ Said, *Orientalism*, 132

⁷⁴ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 240, 242.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 250, 252.

*Chapter Fifteen: The return to dt-supernal time from *nhh*-earthly time in the Egyptian Gnostic Afterlife*

At this point I attempt to answer a question was raised earlier, one concerning the universalisation of Egyptian gods and goddesses into Hellenistic hypostases. While we can see Nun, the Heh-gods, Hathor, Tefnut, and Isis, a demiurgic Re, a redeemed and recalcitrant Seth for example, present in Gnostic thought, it is significant that this continuation of central Egyptian divine figures strips them of their traditional identification: why? In answering this we must once again look to the socio-historical context that gave rise to these religious developments, in particular the sense of religious crisis that lay upon Egypt in Graeco-Roman times. If “Ma’at has fled to a higher supernal realm”, if the physical world has been desacralised, then this dualism of fallen world and Higher spiritual source would require a soteriology of eventual ascent. Douglas Parrott, one of the few scholars in Gnostic Studies to look at this problem, has expressed this very well:

Another development is the transformation of a theology rooted in Egyptian historical myth into one of universal, transcendent realities. The names of the deities, which marked them as Egyptian, are gone, replaced by those of a more universal character. There is no reference to the snake Kematef or his son. No reference to Thebes, the Nile journey, the cities visited on the way, or the return to Thebes and burial at Medinet Habu. It is as though the realm of history itself – that is, the realm of particular events, times and places – has lost its interest, and attention has turned to events beyond time.¹

In this chapter I hope to show that it is not that the Gnostics in Egypt turned to events “beyond time” in the strict sense, rather they focused upon a higher archetype of Time and universalised, or hypostasised, the traditional identities of their divinities in the process. For “events beyond time” is an oxymoron, as there can only be one event beyond time, that of a beginningless, endless stasis. This state was seen to generate its own latent impulse towards differentiation, well-appreciated by Egyptian theologians as the dt eternal, the boundless and inert qualities of Nun. Theogonic extension and finally historical event arose from this latent eternal state. The failure, indeed the demonisation, of the *nhh* in Egyptian theological terms, the literal overthrow of the divine power of Re made manifest in historical rule through the pharaoh, underlies the entire rise of Gnosis in Egypt.

The division into *nhh*-time and dt-time is accepted by enough Egyptologists for us to no longer doubt that it was often intended. Zabkar’s point that the terms are often used interchangeably is well-taken² – the words, afterall, were used in close proximity and so there inevitably arose an inclination to use them as synonyms; however the fact remains that there are *two* original conceptions for eternity and are

¹ Douglas M. Parrott, “Gnosticism and Egyptian Religion,” *NT* 29 (1987): 89-90.

² Louis V. Zabkar, “Some Observations on T.G. Allen’s Edition of The Book of the Dead,” *JNES* 24 (1965): 77.

used in different ways, even if it is not a consistent and general distinction. A schema will demonstrate the positions of various Egyptologists on this issue:

	<i>nhh</i>	<i>dt</i>
J.P. Allen ³	eternal recurrence	eternal sameness
L.V. Zabkar ⁴	something completed	(to be) attained
A. Bakir ⁵	infinity before world	temporal world ends
E. Drioton ⁶	infinity before world	temporal world ends
L. Kákosy ⁷	infinity ahead	static eternity past
A. Gardiner ⁸	eternity in future	eternity in the past
E. Otto ⁹	future in years	future everlastingness
G. Thausing ¹⁰	eternity (life-time)	eternity (death-space)
E. Hornung ¹¹	eternity (Being)	eternity (Nonbeing)
K. Sethe ¹²	eternally sought (<i>nhy</i>)	eternally attained (?)
J. Assmann ¹³	order/recurrence	chaos/duration

The general consensus is that time as *nhh* has an end as it is bound up with the cyclic phenomenology of this world; time as *dt* on the other hand denotes the stasis of Nonbeing, the changeless and formless primordial state – though “pregnant” – which is the backdrop for the dynamic *nhh*. It would seem that eternity was considered to be Nun in its most archetypal manifestation, using such suggestive qualifiers as “inert” or “hidden” to imply the impending theogonic development of the ennead.

³ Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, for CT Spell 80, 21.

⁴ “Some Observations on T.G. Allen’s Edition of The Book of the Dead,” 77-83.

⁵ Abd-el-Mohsen Bakir, “*Nhh* and *dt* reconsidered,” *JEA* 39 (1953): 110-11; see however his re-appraisal in “A further re-appraisal of the terms: *Nhh* and *Dt*,” *JEA* 60 (1974): 252-54, in which he clarifies *nhh* and *dt* as being representative of a dynamic life associated with an everlasting rotation of ‘days’ and ‘nights’: *nhh* with its sun disk as determinative represents daylight and the creation of the world, whereas *dt* with its land determinative is associated with darkness, the netherworld, and the physical and corporeal span.

⁶ From Zabkar, “Some Observations on T.G. Allen’s Edition of The Book of the Dead.” 77.

⁷ L. Kákosy, “Zu einer Etymologie von Philä: die ‘Insel der Zeit’,” *Acta Antiqua* 16 (1968): 47.

⁸ Alan H. Gardiner, “Hymns to Amon from a Leiden Papyrus,” *ZÄS* 42 (1905): 12-42.

⁹ “Altägyptische Zeitvorstellungen und Zeit begriffe,” in *Die Welt als Geschichte* 14 (1954): 135-48.

¹⁰ Gertrude Thausing, “Die Ausdrücke für ‘Ewig’ im Ägyptischen,” *MIFAO* 66 (1934): 38.

¹¹ Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 171.

¹² *Pyramiden-Texte*, II, 241.

¹³ Assman, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im alten Ägypten*, 45.

In addition to the above we have W. Westendorf's theory that *nhh* and *dt* should be viewed as categorising notions:¹⁴

<i>nhh</i>	<i>dt</i>
masculine	feminine
(father/son/husband)	(mother/daughter/wife)
phallic	uterine
dynamic	static
day/sunlight	night/darkness
order	chaos
conscious	unconscious
Re/Horus/living king	Osiris/king's mummy
<i>ba</i> -soul	corpse

Jan Assmann's study¹⁵ offers a particularly effective philosophical appreciation of the Egyptian distinction here. The Egyptian word for time '*h*'w pertains to the idea of a lifetime as the existential yardstick by which it is measured – the period of time between birth and death. The opposite idea to '*h*'w, as Assmann points out, is that of immortality *on this side* (*Diesseits*), as *nhh*, pertaining to the king, the state, the forces of nature, “the perpetuity of discontinuity, the unities of countable aspects of time”. Time and life in this view cannot be divided. *Dt* represents an underlying, or overarching, archetype *on the other side* (*Jenseits*), one which eternally endures in a state of static unchangableness, complete and immutable, generating what Assmann describes as “the unlimited nature of the continuous aspects of time”. The modern literary-critical theorist Paul de Man has noted the difference between symbol and allegory as essentially one of diachronicity vs. the synchronic. The allegory relies upon the “void of temporal difference” wherein the story is historically unfolded, whereas the symbol is synecdochic (embodying all within itself), and aims at evoking immediate sympathies or affinities.¹⁶ One might say that the *nhh*-eternal, at work in the endless play of allegorical signification, aims at representing *the story* in human existential terms, whereas the *dt*-eternal is the very archetype of time, immutable and ineffable, attainable perhaps through *insight* or *gnosis* sparked on the symbolical level of representation.

It has been observed that, “primeval time may be described as the time before duality had arisen in the land”.¹⁷ Atum, whose name is imbued with the notion of “everything” and “nothing” from the word *tm*, begins the process of differentiation with the creation of Shu and Tefnut. The result is the appearance of duality, including eternity split into *dt* and *nhh*. G. Englund notes that the Heliopolitan system is essentially *nhh* in its desire “first and foremost to show the dynamics of the

¹⁴ Wolfhart Westendorf, “Zweitheit, Dreiheit, und Einheit in der altägyptischen Theologie,” *ZÄS* 100 (1974): 136-41.

¹⁵ Assman, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im Alten Ägypten*, 11-14.

¹⁶ Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leory Searle (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press, 1986), 209-10.

¹⁷ te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, 27

transforming process and how the process leads to a dynamic state of energy, Re”.¹⁸ In all phases, however, the dynamic *nhh* and passive *dt* must be present. In particular, Englund notes that the Ennead as a whole functions as a *dt*-element for the final outcome, Re, the representative of *nhh*. In all of this the *nhh* side is stressed through the sexual/phallic creation myth.

In the Memphite system the stress is upon the *dt* aspect: “Bandaged and with bound limbs Ptah is a typical representative of the passive and stationary *dt*-side”¹⁹ and is depicted as being pregnant with creation. In this larger sense the two theologies are complementary, in part perhaps explaining why the Memphite-Shabbaka text did not reject the Heliopolitan system but presented it in balance with the new understanding.

Nhh and *dt* appear in Late Period texts where the distinction continues. Some examples:

1) The Leyden Magical Papyrus (Demotic, dated *ca.* 225 C.E.)

Ho! speak to me Thes, Tenor, the father of eternity (*nhh*)²⁰

Hail to him! Osiris, King of the Underworld... he who is under the *nubs* tree in Meror, who is on the mountain of Poranos, who is on my house to eternity (*nhh*)²¹

Pomo who is called the mighty bull, the great god that is in the *Uzat*, that came forth from the four [boundaries?] of eternity (*dt*)²²

Thy [serpent is a serpent?] of eternity (*dt*)²³

2) Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae

You (Isis) are the divine mother of Horus, The Mighty Bull who protects Egypt, Lord of the Nome, forever (*dt*)²⁴

The Lord and ruler of Eternity (*dt*)²⁵

May he (Ptolemy) gloriously appear as the KULE upon the throne of Horus, eternally (*dt*) like Re²⁶

¹⁸ Englund, “Gods as a Frame of Reference,” 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ F. Ll. Griffith and Herbert Thompson eds., *The Leyden Papyrus*, (1904; New York: Dover Publications, 1974), 61.

²¹ Ibid., 135.

²² Ibid., 67.

²³ Ibid., 69. It seems to me that the first two citations concern themselves with demiurgic figures, hence their *nhh* association, whereas the final two examples are clearly identified with NUN and so the *dt* chaotic/archetypal qualifier is perhaps chosen.

²⁴ Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae*, 21-22.

²⁵ Ibid., 30.

²⁶ Ibid., 58-59.

Forever for your Ka, everlastingly (dt)²⁷
His Majesty is Horus upon the throne of the Child, forever (*nhh*) and ever (dt).
Protect the son of Re, Ptolemy, forever (dt)²⁸

Gnostic Texts, and Coptic texts in general invariably use *sha enech* or some Greek loan word as dt seems to have disappeared.²⁹ However, the distinction remained, and the Gnostics were anti *nhh*-time as it was viewed to be a false demiurgic “eternity” as opposed to the dt female aeon Sophia. Consider the following description by Irenaeus of the Valentinian view of demiurgic time:

When the Demiurge further wanted to imitate also the boundless, eternal, infinite and timeless nature of the upper Ogdoad (the original eight Aeons in the Pleroma), but could not express their immutable eternity, being as he was the fruit of defect, he embodied their eternity in time, epochs, and great numbers of years, under the delusion that by the quantity of times he could represent their infinity. Thus truth escaped him and followed the lie. Therefore his world shall pass away when the times are fulfilled. (*Adv. Haer.* I.17.2)³⁰

Here we have a clear distinction drawn between a false *nhh* eternity – one usually bound up with demiurgic hubris in not admitting to the higher powers of eternity, and associated in Hellenistic times with the vicissitudes of Fate – and a distilled dt eternity commonly associated with female Wisdom figures in Gnostic thought. These are derived from various Isis, Tefnut, Hathor and Maat religious appreciations, in this case more specifically derived from the Heh-gods. One is at first puzzled by this, for the Heh-gods literally contain *nhh*-eternity in their names as a comparison between Heh  and *nhh*  illustrate; however, the Heh-gods are seen to combine the eternities of both dt and *nhh*, occupying a realm midway between heaven and earth.³¹

The above passage by Irenaeus suggests a view of time put forward by Plato in the *Timaeus*; however, the *nhh/dt* bipolar view of time predates Plato by thousands of years, and Plato can be seen to have appropriated a concept that was very widespread among Egyptian priestly circles in his early visits to Egypt.³²

²⁷ Ibid., 80.

²⁸ Ibid., 80-81.

²⁹ I have been unable to trace its development in the *Wörterbuch*, in Cerný, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, or Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*.

³⁰ *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, 342-43.

³¹ Barta, “Die Bedeutung der Personifikation Huh im Unterscheid zu den Personifikation Hah und Nun,” 7.

³² Jan Assmann, in *Stein und Zeit: Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1991) describes this theology of time: “That is the sun-theology in Egypt, grounded in the temple in Heliopolis, the same temple from which the tradition followed Plato, himself initiated there into Egyptian wisdom. With no other ancient Egyptian theology are we as well-informed as with these, which are found in their thousands of deposits, above all hymns, but also tractates, cosmographical writings of the sun’s

The *nhh/dt* split shows up in Hermetic texts, as in the *Poimandres*, the most Gnostic of all, wherein the teacher imparts the traditional view of *nhh* and *dt*, of mortal time and immortal time:

That is why man, unlike all the living things on earth, is twofold: mortal because of the body, immortal because of the essential Man. For he who is immortal and has authority over all things experiences mortality, being subject to fate. He who is up above the Harmony (of the spheres) has become a slave inside the Harmony.³³

The Hermetic *Asclepius*, one version of which surfaced in the Nag Hammadi corpus, also demonstrates this division and need not be delved into here.³⁴

We have examined the role of Horus in Egyptian myth, and his heuristic appropriation within Gnostic systems as the limit or boundary between the Pleroma and the lower world. An inscription at Dendara describes his position in terms of fusing the higher *dt* realm with the lower *nhh* in the epithet, “he who unites together *nhh*-eternity and *dt*-eternity”.³⁵ Likewise, an inscription from Edfu depicts the same fusion: “*nhh*-eternity is in his right eye, *dt*-eternity is in his left eye”.³⁶

The Gnostic embodiment of *nhh* is to be found in their conception of *aeons* (the modern Latin spelling from the Greek *aion*) which manifest discrete periods of Pleromic or theogonic epochs. The Pleroma itself is *dt*-eternal and is therefore “all things at once”, often referred to as “the aeon of aeons” in various tractates, as in *The Trimorphic Protennoia* for example: “and the Aeon of Aeons looked upon the Aeons he gave birth to” (38.26-27).³⁷ *The Gospel of the Egyptians* depicts a typical Atum-figure at the head of the gods who generates a triad from out of himself. The Coptic is included here as my translation differs substantially from the Leiden, Brill edition from whence the Coptic text is taken:³⁸

passage, heaven and underworld books, dead and magical texts. When we base our research on these rich materials, they afford us in every instance a conceivable and solid basis; as well, in confronting these texts we must keep in mind that they do not originate with the knowledge of the Egyptian “man on the street”, but with the knowledge of the ‘Weltbild-Spezialisten’, the priests”(47).

³³ *Corp. Herm.* I.15, trans. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, vol. 1, 331.

³⁴ See Iverson, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, 34 in which the *Asclepius* is discussed in terms of the *nhh-dt* division.

³⁵ Otto, *Gott und Mensch*, 92 (LD Text II 211).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93 (V48).

³⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 408.

³⁸ *Nag Hammadi Codices III, 2 and IV, 2: The Gospel of the Egyptians*, trans. Böhlig and Wisse, 53, 55. Their translation: “...the eternal light of the eternities, which has come forth, of the ineffable and unmarked and unproclaimable Father, the aeon of the aeons, he who begets himself, and he who comes forth from himself, and the alien one, the uninterpretable power of the ineffable Father. Three powers come forth from him....” does not appear to be cognizant of the relative present .

ΠΟΥ[ΘΕΙ]Ν ΕΤΑΥΡΩΘΡΠ ΝΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΩΔ[ΕΝΕΖ] ΝΤΕ ΝΙΕΝΕΖ ΝΤΕ ΠΙΩΤ
 [ΝΝ]ΑΤΩΔΧΕ ΠΜΟΥ ΔΥΩ Ν[ΝΑΤ]† ΩΩΛΞ ΕΡΟΥ ΔΥΩ ΝΝΑΤ[ΤΑ]ΩΕ
 ΘΕΙΩ ΠΜΟΥ ΠΕΩΝ Ν[ΤΕ] ΝΕΩΝ ΠΙΧΠΟ ΕΒΟΛ ΠΜΟΥ [ΜΑΥΔ]ΔΥ ΔΥΩ
 ΠΠΙΡΕ ΕΒΟΛ [ΠΜΟΥ] ΜΑΥΔΔΥ ΔΥΩ ΠΝ ΠΙ[ΔΑ]ΛΟΓΕΝΗC †60Μ
 ΝΝΑΤΡΖΕΡ[Μ]ΗΝΕΥΕ ΠΜΟC ΝΤΕ ΠΙΩΤ [ΝΝ]ΑΤΩΔΧΕ ΠΜΟΥ ΔΥΕΙ
 [ΕΒ]ΟΛ ΠΜΟΥ ΝΕΙ ΩΟΜΤΕ Ν60Μ

The Light which he first made which comes forth as (the) Eternity of the Eternities of the ineffable, unbounded, unproclaimable Parent, the Aeon of the Aeons who begets himself, who shines forth from himself alone: the Foreigner, the uninterpretable power of the ineffable Parent. Three powers come forth from him... (NHC IV,2 50.11-24)³⁹

In this important passage a parallelism exists between the Eternity of Eternities and Aeon of Aeons that must be seen in terms of the *dt* and *nhh* distinction. The *dt* realm is *jenseits*, synecdochic and synchronic, immutable and ineffable – more to the point relying upon a rhetoric of the apophatic to convey the above un-qualities. As we have noted elsewhere, the self-generating figure of Atum depicted above, verges towards the *dt* in Nun in displaying all these apophatic qualities, and his very name means “fullness”, *pleroma* being perhaps the most common concept in Gnostic thought after *gnosis*. Atum is also intimately involved in the ensuing divine family tree and can be seen to be the creative power of Nun and is thus *nhh*-demiurgic. The Coptic verb ΠΕΙΠΕ, “shining” is quite suggestive of Re appearing out of the watery abyss, and “eternities”, plural, depicts the durative nature of the Gnostic aeons.

The symbol of the uroboros found in Gnostic thought goes back at least to Coffin Texts, specifically that of Merenptah.⁴⁰ This emblem is bound up with concrete cyclical processes: day and night, coming and going, east and west, yesterday and tomorrow, all perpetually cycling in life’s experience. In this sense time and life cannot be separated.⁴¹ Egyptian hypostatic representations of *nhh*-time are to be seen in days as the one – two – and twelve formulations of the Sun-cults; as the month in the moon cults; and for the year, the goddess Sothis. Beyond this is the 25-year Apis period, the 30-year Sedfest period, and the 1460-year Sothis-period. These are all essentially *nhh* cycles of order and recurrence and they reveal in the later periods of Egyptian thought their implicit tendency towards eschatology. The Sothis-period of 1460 years a central feature in Manichaean thought as we have seen in Chapter 9. Perhaps the most vivid Gnostic eschatology to incorporate this feature is to be found in *The Concept of Our Great Power*:

Then their time which was given to them to possess power, (that) which was calculated for them, (is) fourteen hundred and sixty eight years. If the fire has (then) consumed them all, and if it does not find anything else to burn, then it

³⁹ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IV, 53, 55.

⁴⁰ Jan Assmann, *MDÄIK*. 28.1 (1972), 47-73.

⁴¹ Assman, *Zeit und Ewigket im alten Ägypten*, 34.

shall destroy itself [.....] Then the firmaments [shall slide] down to the Depth (NOYN). (NHC VI, 4 46.25-47.6)⁴²

The word for “time” above, is from the Greek χρόνος and it is to be noted that Chronos was an underworld deity worshipped in Alexandria in association with Aion. The notion of the aeon having its powers *numbered* suggests this connection. The *Trimorphic Protennoia* contains an interesting passage in which the female speaker defines the temporal nature of the lower aeon that humankind finds itself within:

And I shall tell them of the coming end of the Aeon, and I shall edify them (concerning) the beginning of the Aeon to come, the one which does not possess change (but) which will alter our countenance through itself, that we become pure. Within these Aeons, from which I revealed myself in the Thought of the resemblance of my(f) maleness, I preserve those who are worthy within the Thought of my unchanging Aeon. For I shall tell you a Mystery of this Aeon in particular, and I shall inform you of the Energies within it. The Birth calls [to the Birth:] hour begets hour, [day creates] day, month creates month, Time turns, following Time. This particular Aeon was accomplished in this manner, and it was numbered, (being found) small, for it was a finger that omitted a finger, and a (chain) link which is added to by means of a link. When the Great Powers understood that the time of fulfillment was manifest as in the labour pains of the pregnant woman (which) brought (her to) the entrance of the door, in this way the Destruction approached. All together the Elements trembled and the foundations of the Underworld and the ceilings of Chaos shook and a great fire glowed in their midst and the rocks and the earth shook like reeds blown in the wind. (42.18-43.12)⁴³

The god Aion of Alexandria, ostensibly born of the “Virgin” Kore, manifested the birth of Horus/Harpocrates from Isis, or Re from Neith. The central figure of Isis is more clearly seen here (thanks to Plutarch and Apuleius) as “firstborn of the ages” and “queen of time”.⁴⁴ Chronos and Aion were apparently worshipped separately in Alexandria and elsewhere, and the demiurgic attributes of Chronos are apparent in his syncretistic association with the underworld.⁴⁵ Aion, on the other hand, has been connected with the *Heh*-gods⁴⁶ and certainly, the following inscription from a pedestal in Eleusis, depicts a strong sense of *dt*-eternity:

⁴² Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 318, 320.

⁴³ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 416, 418.

⁴⁴ Raffaele Pettazzoni, “Aion – (Kronos) Chronos in Egypt,” in *Essays on the History of Religion*, ed. H.J. Rose (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), 174.

⁴⁵ Pettazzoni, “Aion – (Kronos) Chronos in Egypt,” 179. This association occurred through identification of Anubis with Cerberus with Chronos (through the *triceps* of Sarapis).

⁴⁶ Henri Brugsch, *Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter* (1891; reprint, Leipzig: Leipzig Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1969), 132-40; also Richard Reitzenstein in *Gött. Nachr.* 1904, 317.

Plotinus' philosophical explorations of time and eternity. The following passage from the *Enneads* is imbued with the ancient Egyptian view of *nhh* and *dt*:

We must take ourselves back to the disposition which we said existed in eternity, to that quiet life, all a single whole, still unbounded, altogether without declination, resting in and directed towards eternity. Time did not yet exist, not at any rate for the beings of that world; we shall produce time by means of the form and nature of what comes after (*Ennead* III.11, 1-7).⁵³

But since there was a restlessly active nature which wanted to control itself and be on its own, and chose to seek for more than its present state, this moved, and time moved with it; and so, always moving on to the "next" and the "after", and what is not the same, but one thing after another, we made a long stretch of our journey and constructed time as an image of eternity (*Ennead* III.11, 14-19).⁵⁴

Plotinus' description of the higher eternity, with its "unbounded" nature, "without declination" fits well with the Gnostic view of the Pleroma; likewise, the lower *nhh* realm is quintessentially demiurgic, with a will that is "restless", desiring "to control itself and be on its own". This very particular view of time and eternity espoused by Plotinus and the Egyptian Gnostics is not, therefore, to be traced back to Plato. Nor is Plato drawing exclusively from earlier Greek philosophers, Anaximander for example⁵⁵; rather, the source is the ancient Egyptian view of *nhh* and *dt*. By the Late Period, under the influence of dualist and apocalyptic undercurrents, the traditional, cyclic, "coursing to eternity" of Egyptian thought had been transformed within Gnostic thought into a soteriological imperative, possible only through *gnosis*.

⁵³ *Plotinus III: Enneads III. 1-9*, trans. A.H. Armstrong (1967; reprint, Loeb Classical Library, 1980), 337.

⁵⁴ *Plotinus III*, 339.

⁵⁵ Peter Manchester, "The Religious Experience of Time and Eternity," 401.

Conclusion

The socio-historical model advanced in this study is more than an adjunct to textual exegesis; it is a necessary component of any attempt to explain the deep-seated Egyptian presence in Gnostic thought. For it is the ancient emanationist tree which bears the aeonial fruit, and the widespread popular appeal of the Isis and Osiris story, unbroken from Old Kingdom until well into Roman times, manifests this same mythological resource that Hellenistic religious thought was to draw from. With its emphasis upon the apophatic source, its self-generation of male and female polarities, its primal triad, and subsequent hypostases forming ogdoads, enneads and the like, the Egyptian theogonic family predates Greek thought by millennia, and is not in itself Persian, Jewish, or remotely Christian. Arising from this foundation is an entire range of compelling evidence for specific Egyptian mythological features carried on into Gnostic thought: the youngest and wisest goddess wishing to “know” the Parent for example, the flight of the goddess to a desolate realm, the Heliopolitan ogdoad showing up almost verbatim, the unfolding explorations of the Memphite word, or Nun appearing where he should upon the edge of theogonic order. Yet even if we lacked these specific supports, the mind-set or *attitude*, would demarcate the pervasive Egyptian rubric. I have therefore tried to answer the question: by what type of person, and by what means, were these themes carried through into Gnostic thought?

Gnostic textuality in Egypt rests upon the foundations of Egyptian religious thought. I have shown that Coptic cannot be considered to be a Christian phenomenon in its conception, and that the reality of spoken Egyptian in Alexandria, with its liberal use of Greek loan words, arises out of the complex social reality of bilingual Graeco-Egyptians and Egypto-Greeks 100 B.C.E.-300 C.E.. “Bilingual” does not just suggest the model of two races with a select group of literati, on either side of the divide, who eventually learn the other’s language; rather, it pertains, in Ptolemaic and Roman Alexandria and Memphis in particular, to a host of social classes that were born and raised within the mythological shadow of two cultures. It bespeaks the synthesis that a child with a Greek father and Egyptian mother must achieve as one of his or her earliest cultural accomplishments. This result is apparent in the first century B.C.E. among classes that, while literate, could hardly be considered the literati; how much more so must be the influence among those who became the philosophers and priests in this turbulent age? Theirs was the daunting task of assimilating Greek and Egyptian thought, Jewish, Persian, and Christian, in a world in a state of dramatic flux. The Egypto-Greeks in Alexandria and Memphis certainly considered themselves to be Egyptian, and it requires no great imaginative leap to posit, again even without the early textual examples for pre-Christian Coptic that we possess, the formulation of a written mode of the current Egyptian vernacular using the Greek alphabet.

I have not decisively proven this to be the case for the obvious reason that we do not possess a cache of Coptic documents that can be definitely dated to this early period. It is extremely difficult to pursue *any* particular theme in this period because of a massive loss of documentation. However, the larger point about bilinguality is central and well-established. The potent effect here is that it opens the process of Gnostic theologising to the deep well-springs of Egyptian religious thought which surrounded the philosopher-priest in Egypt at every turn; conversely, it opened Egyptian sensibilities to Greek ratiocination and heterodoxy with respect to a varied and vast array of sacred texts now available in Greek. This said, however, Egypto-

Greek syncretistic endeavours in Egypt remained very much grounded in ancient Egyptian theological precepts and this is an indirect result of the large-scale editorialising efforts of priests in the Ptolemaic temples. Without the inscriptural renaissance of Ptolemaic, made possible by the building projects of the Ptolemies, Egyptology would be vastly impoverished in its understanding of Egyptian thought; likewise, the impact of a still-vibrant Egyptian theology upon the new dualist creeds would have been far less pronounced without the continued activities of these priesthoods. It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt to delimit redactional patterns in Ptolemaic inscriptional evidence by way of demonstrating a specific and revisionary Ptolemaic religious view.¹ However, even a cursory survey of Ptolemaic shows its revolutionary aspects in terms of form and content.² Within the temples this picture of a simple reinscribing of the sacred texts in brushed-up Middle Egyptian must be seen to be far more complicated than that; we must also emphasise that the Ptolemies were not intending to simply appease “Egyptians” with this – they were responding to the seminal influence of the Egypto-Greek/Graeco-Egyptian literati and politicians in Alexandria and Memphis. From these religious foundations, directly and indirectly, Gnosis arose in Egypt.

Yet another foundation for Gnostic thought in Egypt pertains to the widespread rise of dualist thought in the ancient Near East and here, as with the above concern about Gnostic textuality, the magical papyri are critical. These texts bear witness to Egyptian sensibilities undergoing a radical transformation in mood, one that amounts to a recontextualisation of the deep-seated Egyptian understanding of Ma’at. The king was always seen as the symbolic and literal executor of Ma’at in Egyptian history, a benign demiurgic sustainer of Egypt’s divine role in the larger cosmogonic setting. With the eradication of this rule through foreign subjugation some Egyptian theologians were forced to develop theodicies, the very wellspring of Egyptian Gnostic motivation. In this, they turned to the ancient understanding of disorder, of the “inimical gods” forever threatening their land and the afterlife of the soul.

It is well established that extensive libraries of Egyptian religious texts were available for study in this time period, some quite possibly translated and kept in the Ptolemaic libraries in Alexandria, the majority carefully guarded in the individual temple complexes where they served as the hieratic font for the ongoing transcription into hieroglyphic, and a reference for proper temple observances.³ The assumption of

¹ Heike Sternberg, *Mythische Motive und Mythenbildung in den Ägyptischen Tempeln und Papyri der Griechisch-Römischen Zeit*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, IV. Reihe: Ägypten (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1985), gives an excellent overview of the employment of mythological elements in Edfu, Esna, and Kom Ombo.

² See L. Kákosy, “Temples and Funerary Beliefs in the Graeco-Roman Epoch”, in *L’Égyptologie en 1979* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1982), 117-27.

³ In discussing civil or sacerdotal custodianship of the sort of material that Manetho used in the writing of his *Aegyptiaca*, Redford (*Pharaonic King-Lists*, 214) opts for the temple libraries: “Clearly it could not, in times when Greeks ruled Egypt, have been the former, since according to the reliable tradition it was the civil authority itself that ‘commissioned’ Manetho to write his work.” While one can certainly agree that Ptolemaic civil libraries in Manetho’s day must have had a minimal amount of Egyptian religious texts at their disposal, I think this situation changed radically in the centuries that followed. Given the legendary

power by the ethnarch Petubastis (120-75 B.C.E.), High-Priest in Memphis, at a time when Greeks were entering the Egyptian priesthood, surely marks the pivotal point for the development of proto-Gnostic thought in Egypt. At a time just prior, or during, the period to which we can ascribe with some certainty the formation of an Egyptian Gnostic text, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, the phenomenon of bilingual Egyptian priests is perfectly emblematised in this extremely important spiritual leader for the nation, son-in-law of Euergetes II. What policies and examples did this remarkable figure set for the philosophers and priests of his day? Alas, this must remain speculative, but at the very least we can be sure he was sympathetic to the Egypto-Greek priests in his care, to their need to synthesise theological elements from the two cultures, for such was his own unavoidable mandate and interest. To Greek and Egyptian alike, Petubastis, on the one hand, represented the Greek mind and heart at one in the Great Hall of Egyptian religion; on the other, his was an image of Egyptian religiosity offering up Ma'at with the full weight and authority of Hellenistic political power. This man stands as an important figure in any discussion about Graeco-Egyptian religious "syncretisms", for he himself fused both races, both religious views, as well as Church and State. We are not surprised to note the Vienna stela recording his funeral as a state occasion: "in his train there marched the dukes of Egypt, members of the Egyptian priesthood, and various bodies representing the nation" (82.1.11).⁴

Eugnostos the Blessed evidences a distinct Heliopolitan-derived emanationist system; this, along with its lack of archaic attributes suggests a lower Egyptian provenance, and it need hardly be stressed that Heliopolis was a very short distance across the Nile and downstream from Memphis. This text demonstrates precisely the sort of synthesis we would expect as a result of Graeco Egyptian interaction following upon the heels of Petubastis' tenure.

We must be acutely aware of the limitations of our sources. Most of the magical and Gnostic texts that we have form a discrete window into this world, located in the late fourth century C.E., and confined to the Thebaid hinterland. With Gnostic thought in particular, one is struck by the disparity between the Nag Hammadi corpus and patristic accounts of the Alexandrian teachers and their disciples. It is compelling in this regard to see that these late-period Gnostic texts in the main support the overall thesis herein advanced. To be sure, some of these texts can be dated much earlier than their time of burial, and others can be assigned provisional locations in Egypt; however, a number of interpretative problems prevent us from really understanding who collected these texts and why, and most importantly what redactive processes went into their final formulation. The salient problem here is that, with a few notable exceptions, the tractates buried in the Gebel al Tarif in general do not manifest the high level of Hellenistic Gnosis which peaked in Alexandria over two centuries earlier. We have no reason to doubt the general evidence of Patristic evidence in this regard which could not help but admire the rhetorical skills of Valentinus while attempting to refute him, or the seminal influence and sophistication of Basileides as found in the polemics of Hippolytus and Irenaeus. Yet we do not have one tractate which can be conclusively linked to any of the major Gnostic figures that we know of in that city. It is ironic indeed that we owe much to

acquisitiveness of the Lagids with respect to their library in Alexandria, Manetho can be considered to be a forerunner of their later efforts to channel and preserve the flow of arcane writings into synthesis and translation in Alexandria, including an indeterminate amount of texts from their native land.

⁴Reymond, "Alexandria and Memphis," 12.

the patristic writers for having any glimpses at all of textual Alexandria in the first few centuries. And so the first task undertaken was an attempt to establish the social milieu of Gnosis in Egypt. A second essential labour demonstrated the textual foundations in earlier phases of Egyptian religious history for the rise of Gnosis in late antiquity. It remains to be asked how modern literary-critical theory can aid us in our understanding of the literary output of the Egyptian Gnostics.

A main concern I have developed herein devolves from Edward Said's views on "orientalism" and I am targeting the impact this discursive dynamic has had in the fields of Christian Origins and Classical Studies in particular, two disciplines which exert a decisive influence upon the rather anaemic field of "Gnostic Studies". These two subsets of the orientalist approach, insofar as they can be seen to exist in these fields, are identified by their discursive consistencies, and many of Said's larger indictments ring true. The orient, for the orientalist, displays a disdain for mental discipline, philosophical concepts, and rational interpretation. Its very language is seen to be inferior, and its literary output is not to be taken all that seriously. The orient needs to be rescued (by the orientalist) from its alienating *otherness*, its strangeness, stagnation, and obscurity.⁵ The full significance of oriental "syncretisms" is discarded in a series of reductions and transformations which entrench the pre-eminence of occidental religious and philosophical modes of thought over oriental: "history, in such a union", as Said notes, "is radically attenuated if not banished".⁶ What takes over is a rhetorical momentum generated within the discourse itself, a self-referentiality that deflects non-orientalist, or simply unorthodox perspectives as a matter of course. What poses as *science* is in fact a *discourse* and, as Said observes, this system of knowledge is "less a place than a *topos*", a textual set of references, characteristics, that originate in a quotation, a citation from someone's work on the orient, etc.⁷

My identification of Christian Origins and Classical Studies as the main obfuscators in this regard, gives rise to a literary-critical concern raised by Foucault: "the author function". All of the hegemonic concerns of orientalist bias are at play here, for Foucault turns the optic around and notes that the author is simply "not there" but is a function of the characteristics of our discourse, of necessity operating

⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 177. I would note in passing the recent and surprisingly lengthy work, *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index*, ed. Craig A Evans, Robert L. Webb, and Richard A Wiebe (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993) which generates an impression of strong biblical connections throughout the Gnostic corpus. However, upon closer examination one notices that the methodology employed is self-admittedly loose. In terms of influence between scripture and specific passages from the Nag Hammadi corpus, the authors speak of a two-tiered form of appraisal based upon "reasonable probability," or "possibility": "The forms of influence between the texts may be quite diverse. When citing a particular scriptural text we are not necessarily indicating that a Nag Hammadi author or redactor was making deliberate allusion to it. For example, the influence on the mind of the writer may have been only subconscious" (xix). While the editors admit the possibility of mediation through other traditions or text, redactors, or translators, I would point out an obvious problem with an approach that is not concerned with the possibility of reverse influence, that Biblical scripture itself might be drawn from earlier Gnostic texts.

within the play of signs with which we empower it.⁸ The more general concerns of orientalism can thus be focused onto one sharp literary-critical point and the wedge can be effectively driven in here: if the whole notion of authorship is in large measure spurious, or is at least a construct internally generated by scholarly opinion without effective recourse to social history, what is left with respect to the “Gnostic phenomenon”?

I do not wish to push Foucault’s criticism beyond a certain point, for while the agenda of orientalism often operate against a backdrop of authorial fictiveness (and I would maintain that allowing an author to remain a cipher itself powerfully contributes to authorial fictiveness), I have attempted to create a psychological and political profile of the Gnostic author, especially with respect to the Gnostic deconstructive approach to language, but also in terms of a didactic conservatism linked with the Egyptian priestly classes, as we have seen. In short, I refer rhetoric back to its practical effects, in particular the environment within which it was originally generated. The social and political reality of the Gnostic rhetor must be ascertained if we are to understand Gnostic rhetoric. As George Steiner puts it:

An informed, avid awareness of the history of the relevant language, of the transforming energies of feeling which make of syntax a record of social being, is indispensable. One must master the temporal and local setting of one’s text, the moorings which attach even the most idiosyncratic of poetic expressions to the surrounding idiom. Familiarity with an author, the kind of restive intimacy which demands knowledge of all his work, of the best and the botched, of *juvenilia* and *opus posthumum*, will facilitate understanding at any given point.⁹

I speak of “a psychological and political profile” of the Gnostic author as we have no clear links between text and author in the Gnostic array, with the exception of Mani, although in the context of Egypt this, too, is problematic. Of necessity we must settle for a generalised bipolar Gnostic imago, one that perpetuates Egyptian religiosity in the contrary modes of Archaic and Hellenistic Gnosis. We have situated the Gnostics in terms of the social history of the country they lived and died in. We must concur with Foucault and note that the fire that drives rhetoric is essentially *sexual* and *political* or, to echo Kenneth Burke: “rhetoric is *what things will do to us and for us*”.¹⁰ Whether one is writing a novel or “spinning out” the idea for a bomb, there is no difference in principle: “each is but tracking down and carrying out the resources of his terminology”.¹¹ I would therefore ask what the Gnostic author trying to do with language in a political light. For Antonio Gramsci, *hors de combat* following incarceration at the hands of fascism, pragmatism equals the political, and the political will strives towards consensus and hegemony, either through liberating leadership, or repressive coercion. The text is political, embedded in the larger array

⁸ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. D.F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).

⁹ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 25.

¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 22.

¹¹ Kenneth Burke, “Pragmatism,” in *Communication: Concepts and Perspectives*, ed. Lee Thayer (Washington, D.C.: Spartan Books, 1967), 331.

of political texts, and it either tantalises the individual's will to be free, or it signals the first tentacles of the new ideology within which s/he is condemned to be subjugated. It is *all* political, even allowing for the most vigorous emphasis upon individuality, for the individual qua individual exists only in relation to others:

That ethical "improvement" is purely individual is an illusion and an error: the synthesis of the elements constituting individuality is "individual", but it cannot be realised and developed without an activity directed outward, modifying external relations both with nature and, in varying degrees, with other men... For this reason one can say that man is essentially "political" since it is through the activity of transforming and consciously directing other men that man realises his "humanity", his "human nature".¹²

An Alexandrian Gnostic, at least following Diocletian's edict against the Manichaeans in 297 C.E., and a century later with the decree of Theodosius against *anything* autochthonic, would have appreciated the Gramscian perspective on hegemony, and the above stance on individualism is tacitly contained in the Gnostic myth of Anthropos. The "hegemonic" and political will obvious in Archaic Gnosis is to be also found in the reflexive indirections of Hellenistic Gnosis. Reduced to the most basic rhetorical level, both exhibit a need to persuade, and one might say that those Gnostic tractates that manifest a spirit of revolt against traditional forms of religious knowledge were written by a disinherited class of intellectuals in an occupied country. I draw in Gramsci to illustrate a similarity in their respective historical conditions, more essentially to underline a consequent perspective upon knowledge that both employ. Theirs is not specifically a revolt against traditional knowledge per se, rather it is an implacable critique of the authority, or hegemony, that presumes to empower knowledge in particular ways. It is this realisation that prompts reevaluation:

The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact.¹³

I have raised the problems that are to be associated with this pragmatic "referring back" of discourse to its historical situatedness, for while the motivations of the heresiological polemicist are clear enough given the sort of textual red flags the Gnostics were waving, not enough has been said about Gnostic polemical intent in a political and social context. Burke's essentially deconstructive approach to *the actual meaning of words* is tempered by his focus upon what language *does*, and this constant reversion to the pragmatic realm falls in line with the concerns of Said and Foucault about the sexual and political heat of history, endlessly generating texts. As early as the second century C.E. this was the perceived distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, a clash of attitudes very particular to this time and place. Archaic Gnosis manifests a larger Egyptian "intransigence" stoked by a repressive foreign regime; Hellenistic Gnosis, in addition, suggests an Alexandrian poetic disdain for the authoritarian discourse of Church and State: it is the clash of a fluidly mythopoeic and

¹² Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 360.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 365-66.

intuitive Graeco-Egyptian hybrid religiosity, with “the stern, masculine, laconic tenor of Roman culture”¹⁴.

We can give these voices back to the author through enucleation of the hermetic Greek world of Gnosis that scholarship has erected, and thus understand the plethora of Egyptian influences that are shot through the phenomenon of Gnosis. This moves us yet closer to apprehending what sort of person the Egyptian Gnostic actually was. This architectonic, most especially as it devolves upon this construct of what Foucault termed the “author function” in the dynamics of discourse, is a critical issue to address. While Said’s critique is effective, especially as it targets the more grotesque abuses of textual (mis)appropriation, one cannot pretend that a pure discourse completely free from orientalising assumptions is possible. This is too much the hysterically pluralist agenda now current, where all criticism and debate over the *worth* of differences is effectively stifled by the Newspeak of politically correct inclusivism. As Bloom puts it: “Interpretation is implicitly hierarchical, and cannot proceed without a usurpation of authority”.¹⁵ We are at least aware, therefore, of our own limitations. I see the Gnostic phenomenon in Egypt as being essentially oriental, as pagan, specifically Egyptian with respect to many of its deepest precepts. I see it both as an avant-garde literary genre fostered by the oriental yearning to be free from historical bondage; yet also advancing tendentious orthodoxies in the purest sense of the word. It is no coincidence that this side of the Gnostic equation was the most successful in advancing its phantasmagorical cosmologies: Manichaeism carried the Oriental banner of Gnosis forward in open conflict across the entire Mediterranean basin and was successful far beyond the means or desires of its more reflexive Gnostic cousins.

“Oriental” is not an exclusive term, no more so than is the appellation “Hellenistic” in this time-period. The discrete pictures of occidental Greek and Roman, and oriental Egyptian, Syrian, and Persian, have traditionally formed the outer panels of a textual triptych, one which can be seen to be forever tending inwards, and back outwards, from the larger syncretistic collage in the centre. The textual infrastructures mirror the social as I have tried to show, themselves offering up a picture of blurred distinctions. To insist upon sharpening up the lines here and there is to miss the point of the entire canvas, drifting instead to the more familiar polarities. The basis of Christian orthodoxy in the second century following the passing of a non-fulfilled apocalypticism embody precisely this reactionary and reverse movement to the polarised occident from the central religious heterodox spirit of the times. The writings of Celsus (*ca.* 178 C.E.), one of the very few anti-Christian “pagan” philosophical sources to have survived the book burnings of early Roman

¹⁴ Steiner, *After Babel*, 84. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, rev. ed., trans. and eds., Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (1933; reprint, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 230, who himself powerfully critiques the scholastic orthodox-heresy split assigned to this time period, cannot resist presenting the Rome-Alexandria split in traditional orientalist garb: “Rome possessed the most tightly-knit, perhaps the only more or less reliable anti-heretical majority, because it was furthest removed from the oriental danger zone and in addition was by nature and custom least inclined or able to yield to seemingly fantastic oriental ways of thinking and oriental emotions that becloud clear thought. The sober sense of the Roman was not the proper seed-bed for Syrian or Egyptian syncretism.”

¹⁵ Harold Bloom. *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 43.

Christianity (this due to the fact that his writings were embedded in Origen), excoriates, lampoons, and ultimately logically refutes Christian thought in his masterwork *On the True Doctrine*. Celsus speaks for the entire heterodoxy of the pagan world in his reaction to Christian ideology:

Why should we not worship gods? I mean, if it is accepted that all of nature – everything in the world – operates according to the will of God and that nothing works contrary to his purposes, then it must also be accepted that the angels, the demons, heroes – everything in the universe – are subject to the will of the great God who rules over all ... The notion that one cannot serve many masters is the sort of thing one would expect of the race of Christians – an eccentric position, but one perhaps predictable of a people who have cut themselves off from the rest of civilisation.¹⁶

It need hardly be stressed that without the existence of an exclusivist orthodoxy there can be no heresy. Some 2000 pages of “Gnostic” manuscript have come down to us thus far. More interesting than the obsessive work done on a small group of selected texts by a small group of specialists in a few fields, is the exclusion of the majority and indifference to a *Sitz* that has been left a virtual void. Said’s larger point is that we allow ourselves to be silent about the actual historical and social world (of the Oriental) that we have appropriated. Textuality has been surgically removed from the circumstances that engendered it in the first instance, and so we have a Foucaultian “structure of punishment” erected about those authors that have been made to inhabit the orientalist panopticon. They are observed and transformed, disciplined and reorganised, by the applied scholarly dynamic of consensus. Insofar as their Egyptian voice is not being allowed to speak to us, we are presented with an alarmingly fictive author function in Gnostic thought, one that is self-disciplining to follow Foucault’s model.

This is interesting, because the implicit Hellenistic Gnostic deconstructionist stance towards language was itself arrayed against hierarchy, canonicity, the notion of complete textual authority placed upon the unimpeachable word – precisely the “political” contentiousness apparent in modern literary-critical theory, especially among the poststructuralists. How many traditionalist English professors now don the hat of Irenaeus and damn the young Gnostic “deconstructionists” in their midst? This has everything to do with a perceived tearing up of the hallowed and respectful approach to texts, in favour of a pneumatic artistic integrity wherein Tradition and his Rules – the perennial “shh!” librarian – is kicked out the door and the texts mythopoeically reappropriated. Of all the religious groups to have had their true characteristics blanched by the orientalising author-function, the Gnostics are the most unlikely to remain quiescent. They appear to have understood exceedingly well the profound ethical and practical motivations that shape mythopoeic and ideological enterprises.

“Reappropriation” on the Gnostic side of the equation can be seen to be a euphemism for a radical and antithetical inversion. Bloom’s notion of “misprision” denotes an apparent contempt and failure to appreciate the value of something; in legal terms it is the spirit of wilful felony or treason.¹⁷ As this spirit can be seen to

¹⁶ Hoffman, *Celsus, On the True Doctrine*, 15.

¹⁷ Harold Bloom, “Lying Against Time: Gnosis, Poetry, Criticism,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol 1, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), 57-72.

imbue a religious or philosophical stance, we note that it has its roots in skeptical thought. If proposition A is put forward, it is necessary that its antithesis, B, also be put forward to allow for a suspension of judgement, to allow one to remain a true *seeker*, which is the correct etymological root of *skepsis*. If Hegel is currently “in” and Schopenhauer “out”, then Gnostic misprision will demand that the reverse become the case in the Gnostic “shadow” department. If *How Green was my Valley* is on the literature curriculum and de Sade’s *One Hundred Days of Sodom* is off (not just off, but *ruled* to be off), then it must be brought in.¹⁸ Gnostic reversal required that proposition B be fully and mythopoeically explored, and so if the snake is evil in the orthodox view then the Gnostic myth will have the snake as a salvific figure; if Jahweh is the Supreme Deity in the Old Testament, then in the Gnostic view he is but an arrogant, boastful, and capricious Demiurge. As Jonas puts it:

Instead of taking over the value-system of the traditional myth, it [Gnostic thought] proves the deeper “knowledge” by reversing the roles of good and evil, sublime and base, blest and accursed, found in the original. It tries, not to demonstrate agreement, but to shock by blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established, and preferably also the most revered, elements of tradition. The rebellious tone of this type of allegory cannot be missed, and it therefore is one of the expressions of the revolutionary position which Gnosticism occupies in late classical culture.¹⁹

The revolutionary/political attributes of Hellenistic Gnosis indicate a willing involvement in historical process, albeit indirectly, from a certain lofty remove, for Gnostic misprision can be seen to be a polemical throwing down of the glove, the act of a literary *provocateur*. In this it was much more exasperating to their opponents to engage in a guerrilla-war replete with undercover “Christian-Gnostics” and textual Trojan-horses. As opposed to setting up a counter-dogma, a clear drawing of battle-lines and battle plans in the grandiose Manichaean manner, the Gnostics enfiladed, raided textual “supply dumps” and formed a fifth column within the midst of orthodoxy. The Gnostics refused the role of “early Church theologians”; witness the departure from Rome of Valentinus who perhaps belatedly came to realise, only after journeying to the heart of orthodoxy, the perspicacity of his opponents in recognising the underlying oriental alienness of his theogony and, as a consequence, the full implications of political hierarchy. The Gnostics also refused the well-respected authority of philosophical discourse and thus maintained a boundary between themselves and occidental thought. This mythopoeic rim remains difficult to penetrate, for the root cause of this last evolution of Egyptian traditional thought, burning its brightest against the darkness of a Roman night, lies in their utter disenchantment with historical process itself. The theogonic foundations of their theologies, Egyptian both in breadth and depth as I have tried to show, also display a certain kinship with their conservative textual forbears that goes beyond all such theological specifics and is to be seen in terms of their text-obsessiveness. The Egyptian glyphs on the great Ptolemaic temples of the time display all of the didactic authoritarianism one might expect with respect to a world-view quintessentially “hegemonic”. In contrast to this the Hellenistic Gnostics were rogue intellectuals,

¹⁸ A view espoused by Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), a misprisionism perhaps not unconnected to the acknowledged influences of Harold Bloom.

¹⁹ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 92.

virtual Bakunins of the time whose socialist utopia was the ideal of ideals: a *pleroma* located supernally. And yet even the most radical mythopoeic thinker, wedded to the heterodox renaissance of Alexandrian pluralism, was still obliged to operate within the mythos, within the practical realm. We make a grave mistake ourselves in idealising the so-called anti-historicism of Hellenistic Gnosis, for these tractates operated politically, in spite of all disclaimers, and a sympathetic view of their message had distinct, doubtless anticipated, political consequences. One could hardly seek to find a more suitable backdrop for this movement than the troublesome and anarchic intellectual centre of Alexandria under Roman rule. Even so, the Gnostic dilemma with respect to language and time is excruciating, for language is mendaciously “archontic” and the irony is that even a revolution to deconstruct the hegemonic must use hegemonic means, even presupposing that the goal will be that last historical-moment when the political process finally enters the *pleroma* of hegemony-free existence, presumably the non-historical – the *dt* eternal attained through the travails of *nhh* existence. With Gnostic thought we are presented with the fusion of incompatibles – a metaphysical idealism whose hands are inevitably dirtied with the individual will to power in earthly terms.

Explicit to the Gnostic temperament was the view of history as tyranny, yet in contradistinction to the radical Manichaean message, the unfolding of the lower realm, and hence the Gnostic role therein, was seen to be theogonically *necessary*. This, too, is quintessentially Egyptian, in effect requiring a repositioning of Horus: the transposed and hypostasised Egyptian kingship becomes the great supernal boundary of Gnostic thought. Beneath this Egypt now endured the dark flood of historical oppression, mirroring the even deeper abyss of NOYN below. Schopenhauer saw the *Will*, a curious Nun-like ground of all being, as the originator of everything that is, also noting that this amoral impulse, this “endless blind striving” was only self-consciously aware in humankind. And so it is here that Gramsci’s distinction comes to the fore: it is *all* hegemonic, but there was seen to be a liberating upward drive of individualistic humanism, forever the accomplishment of the few with “antithetical knowledge” (Gramsci’s intellectuals were the Gnostic pneumatics), for the rest the downward fall of ideology darkened by deep ethical failures, mired in the entropic grasp of history, the emulous *Heimarmene*.

The oppressive textual weight of the downward Gramscian drive is symbolised in the time of the Gnostics by the edicts issued against them by the Roman state, and the subsequent burning of the libraries in Alexandria by Christian mobs led by the infamous archbishop Theophilus *ca.* 400 C.E. The burning of these untold thousands of priceless documents at this time represents a disaster of the first order for the human mind, the repercussions of which are doubtless still with us. The Alexandrine renaissance began and ended with the libraries; in this the Egyptian preoccupation with the Word, theogonically melded to the heterodox nature of Hellenistic Gnosis at large, ended at the exact time the temples were shut down. Moreover, beyond the phenomena of Hellenistic Gnosis in Egypt there existed the supporting medium of Graeco-Roman heterodoxy now entering its own textual *Götterdämmerung*. This “pluralism of the mind”, like an electrical current, coursed between the posts of various libraries charged with an assemblage of documents numbering hundreds of thousands of works. The vast majority of these priceless scrolls went up in flames by the end of the fourth century:

Unverified assertions that this or that library was consumed by fire often refer to successive conflagrations at a single site. This is true of both Alexandria and Antioch—where the Museum, we are told, went up in flames under Tiberius and

again under Jovian. Traditions of this kind were confirmed by the melancholic experiences of war waged by Christianity against the old culture and its sanctuaries: which meant, against the libraries... Surveying this series of foundations, refoundations and disasters, we follow a thread that links together the various, and mostly vain, efforts of the Hellenistic-Roman world to preserve its books. Alexandria is the starting point and the prototype; its fate marks the advent of catastrophe, and is echoed in Pergamum, Antioch, Rome, Athens.²⁰

Gnostic thought in Egypt appeared at the very end of an incredibly vast period of independent religious expression. In no other civilisation is this concern with the word quite so apparent as in the ancient Egyptian. The destruction of temple and library, more effectively the criminalising of those who would work within those precincts, demarcates an abrupt end to a period of fusion begun some seven-hundred years earlier by the Ptolemies.

I now reach the point where I might take my hermeneutic concerns to the task at hand: how does one *read* these inscriptions that confront one everywhere in Egypt, on almost every clear surface of an Egyptian temple, forming the most compelling fusion of a linguistic and structural architectonic ever attained by the human mind? surely any hermeneutic developed here can be applied to Egyptian Gnostic texts? The Egyptian Gnostics appeared within a medium that was obsessed with the literary, even before the formation of the philological crucible of Alexandria. There are two responses to these questions and it raises the issue of linguistic theory, specifically whether translation between different languages is possible. One pole would deem this enterprise to be futile, at least in terms of accomplishing a real textual cognisance that bears upon the intended and achieved rhetorical results peculiar to the time and place of the text: “what passes for translation is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude, just tolerable when the two relevant cultures are cognate, but altogether spurious when remote tongues and far-removed sensibilities are in question”.²¹ The other posits the underlying universality of human speech, attainable in spite of surface differences: “translation is realisable precisely because those deep-seated universals, genetic, historical, social, from which all grammars derive can be located and recognised as operative in every human idiom, however singular or bizarre its superficial forms”.²² I have obviously tended more towards the latter; however, it must be said that the limitations on our situating specific authors and texts and the social-history that generated them, the appalling lack of evidence out of Alexandria, must inevitably leave us in an interpretative gray zone. One can widen the optic indefinitely, incorporating a vast socio-historical and textual basis for one’s hermeneutic so as to attain various contrasts, but at some point closure is required; in this case it is the overall thesis that the proponents of Graeco-Roman Gnosis were heirs to the text-obsessed epiphany of Egyptian religiosity. However, this epiphany, in the sense of a moment resonant with higher human meaning, also turned upon its own basis for textual authority.

We again raise the importance and difficulty involved in developing a hermeneutic for a group of writers who were often ironically disposed towards

²⁰ Canfora, *The Vanished Library*, 191-92, 196.

²¹ Steiner, *After Babel*, 74.

²² *Ibid.*, 73.

language itself. It is clear that the Gnostics appreciated the linguistic reflection of the cosmos into a lower demiurgic realm of *false stories* and a higher realm of true insight. These were drawn out directly from the ancient Egyptian understanding of the split nature of eternity, as we have seen. We shall never directly hear from those Gnostics who felt that the linguistic medium was entirely mendacious for obvious reasons. However, the large amount of textual evidence that we possess demonstrates that the Gnostics were prepared to use the medium of the word in spite of the problems associated with it. There is no mistaking the irony in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* when the female speaker launches into an extended first-person barrage of oxymoronic deconstructivisms; e.g. “I am the goddess and the whore... I am merciful and cruel... it is I who speaks and I who listens”, etc. We are entering here into an area of “literature” that embodies a fusion of philosophical and poetic modes of thought, what Harold Bloom calls “poetic metaphysics”. Bloom’s definition of the “strong poet” fixes itself upon the Gnostic as exemplar of “one who will not tolerate words that intervene between himself and the Word”.²³ “Words”, small w, are incipiently mendacious, bound up as they are in the phenomenological flux of demiurgic time. If the Gnostic rhetor was obliged to pick up the demiurgic pen s/he would deconstruct and invert textual authority by way of compensation, and would attempt, as Bataille puts it, to express a “sovereign value”, even one compromised by words, in the understanding of evil.:

Literature is either the essential or nothing. I believe that the Evil--an acute form of Evil--which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a ‘hypermorality’. Literature is *communication*. Communication requires loyalty. A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil, which is the basis of intense communication. Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so.²⁴

There are many philosophical consequences and nuances to be drawn out from Gnostic thought, not the least of which is their indirect outlining of phenomenological concerns. The “act of experience” in which the historical is apprehended gives the Gnostic pause, clearly anticipating Husserl’s attempt to reach “a really pure self-experience and purely psychical data”.²⁵ For the Gnostic, the phenomenal world was an admixture of demiurgic a priori intentionality, and perceiving Anthropos. Against all philosophies of objectivity, the Gnostic, along with Husserl, holds up the possibility of an antithetical self that cannot be contained by historical process. The antithetical spirit is to be found in Phenomenology’s abiding focus upon a hidden transcendent subjectivity:

The transcendent subjectivity, which for want of language we can only call again, “I myself”, “we ourselves” cannot be found under the attitude of psychological or natural science, being no part at all of the objective world, but that subjective conscious life itself, wherein the world and all its content is

²³ Harold Bloom, “Poetry, Repression, Revisionism,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leory Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 335.

²⁴ Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (1957; reprint, New York: Urizen Books, 1973), from the preface.

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, “Phenomenology,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, 659.

made for “us”, for “me”. We that are, indeed, men, spiritually and bodily, existing in the world, are, therefore, “appearances” unto ourselves, parcel of what “we” have constituted, pieces of the significance “we” have made. The “I” and “we” which we apprehend, presuppose a hidden “I” and “we” to whom they are “present”.²⁶

Gnostic phenomenology arose from their critique of a demonised historical process, whereas Husserl’s concerns are with the conundrum of a transcendent subjective intentionality underwriting “reality”. These differences, however, frame a methodology that is startlingly contiguous. Both views, whether “religiously” or “philosophically” inspired, implicitly attack the equanimity with which we accept what is supposedly objective beyond ourselves. That said, Phenomenology is bedevilled by its attempts to define a science based upon an enhanced subjectivism that would seem to murkily devour its own presuppositions. For Hellenistic Gnosis, having attained a state of super-absorption with respect to ancient Egyptian theogonic models, Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric, its *gnosis* must transcend all such pedagogical plateaux. Their conundrum arose from the unavoidable establishment of their own textual authority, even with an avowed aim of overthrowing all such hegemonies. That the language, the sacred sounds of *gnosis*, can accomplish this in the midst of archontic hegemony, is ultimately an ahistorical, non-textual mystery, spoken here by the female Gnostic godhead in the *Trimorphic Protенnoia*:

I spoke--I--with the Archons and Authorities, for I went beneath their language and told the Mysteries to my own, a Hidden Mystery (through which) the fetters and sleep of Eternity were dissolved. (NHC XIII, 1 41.24-29)²⁷

This is a new level of rhetoric far removed from the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, supposedly written by Anaximenes in the fourth or third century B.C.E.²⁸, for it affects disdain for the sort of utilitarian sophistic of traditional argumentation, presuming to rise above the amoral drives of pure persuasion to the hyper-morality of *gnosis*. Gnosis is the radical and mystical shattering of an all-encompassing textuality. Derrida was therefore rather “anti-Gnostic”, perhaps disingenuously perverse, with *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, as was the Sophist Gorgias in the sense that the motive and aim of these thinkers was to “deconstruct” Philosophy itself, not to philosophise. Perhaps, more pragmatically, one can reduce it to a novel attempt to attain stature through rebellion as opposed to conventional procedure. Hellenistic Gnosis, as a literary phenomenon, is to be chronologically situated between the two literary *enfants terrible*²⁹, and such likewise contrary players in the Gnostic movement in Egypt would have subverted the orthodoxy of Archaic Gnosis as readily as they did Rome-sponsored Christianity. Yet deconstruction is essentially reconstruction, as the possibility of a rigorous nihilism in epistemic terms cannot be taken seriously as an end in itself. Gnostic subversion was a means to an end, and it defines their perceived

²⁶ Ibid., 662.

²⁷ Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XXVIII, 414.

²⁸ W.R. Roberts, *Demetrius on Style* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1902), 11.

²⁹ And Derrida certainly acknowledged his debt to the Sophistic movement.

alienness in this sense, as well, perhaps, as a need on their part to be seen as alien. Their obscurity, mythopoeic extravagance, and historical affronts to Roman rule, both political and ecclesial, were deliberate, the very message, at least in part, of the same rhetorical medium which generated *The Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, or the Hermetic *Asclepius*. Behind such revolutionary posturings, however, are the traditional Egyptian aspirations for the salvation of the soul, and we cannot but believe that the Gnostic perpetuation and revivification of the ancient oriental emanationist theogonies were genuinely held to. The Gnostics in Egypt were, after all, heirs to a millennia of religious thought focused, like no other before or since, upon a word-empowered afterlife. Egyptian Gnostic thought could not help but build upon and embellish the textual foundations of this antiquity: schooled in Egyptian wisdom and having learnt such wisdom from them, they bore this sort of fruit.

Appendix A

A Survey of Gnostic Primary Sources, non-Christian and Christian, as cited by Gnostic Studies

	<i>GS</i> ¹	<i>PCG</i> ²	<i>ASG</i> ³	<i>NHG</i> ⁴	<i>IF</i> ⁵	<i>OG</i> ⁶
1. Gnostic Non-Christian:						
On the Origin of the World [30]	0	1	17	14	5	33
Eugnostos [20]	0	4	7	8	1	12
The Para. of Shem [49]	0	5	8	2	2	9
The 3 Steles of Seth [9]	9	0	10	9	2	3
Zostrianos [132 (-)]	19	0	17	15	10	5
Thought of Norea [3]	0	0	7	1	5	1
Marsanes [68]	0	0	3	6	1	2
Exegesis on the Soul [10]	0	1	3	10	21	7
Apocalypse of Adam [21]	12	15	9	37	2	22
Allogenes [24]	7	0	9	11	0	3
2. Gnostic w/ Marginal Christian Glosses:						
Books of Jeu [94]	0	0	3	6	0	3
Pistis Sophia [356]	0	0	11	3	3	12
Untitled text [62]	0	0	0	3	0	0
Hypostasis of the Archons [11]	11	1	17	83	59	20
Tripartite Tractate [87]	0	0	29	7	19	7
Gospel of the Egyptians [29]	19	0	29	21	8	9
2nd Treatise of Great Seth [21]	9	0	4	1	3	2
Valentinian Exp. [27]	0	0	1	1	3	4
Trimorphic Protennoia [15]	14	5	8	56	8	5
	0	0	0	0	0	0
3. Gnostic with Enhanced Christian Elements:						
Gospel of Truth [27]	14	0	23	112	2	13
Apocryphon of John [32]	28	3	78	75	53	41
Sophia of Jesus Christ [29]	0	3	14	14	5	9
Melchizidek [27]	0	0	4	5	1	2
4. Gnostic Christocentric:						
Gospel of Thomas [19]	23	7	5	56	10	32
Gospel of Philip [35]	28	0	14	3	54	18

¹ Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Indicators are number of pages devoted to work, either in commentary or actual translation.

² Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983). Indicators are number of pages devoted to work, either in commentary or actual translation.

³ Pétrement, *A Separate God*. Indicators are number of pages devoted to work.

⁴ Nag Hammadi, *Gnosticism, & Early Christianity*, eds. C.W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986). Indicators are number of lines per text listing in the index.

⁵ King, ed., *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. Indicators are number of citations in work.

⁶ Bianchi, *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile, 1966*. Indicators are number of page citations.

Book of Thom. the Contender [7]	9	0	2	5	1	2
Dialogue of the Saviour [27 (-)]	0	0	0	9	7	3
Apocryphon of James [16]	0	0	9	18	1	2
1st/2nd Apoc. of James [39]	0	0	6	3	3	9
Apoc. of Peter [14]	0	0	1	9	0	2
Gospel of Mary [12]	0	0	1	4	8	5

This chart is intended to generally indicate hermeneutic patterns with respect to the way in which Gnostic texts are called upon in exegesis. The above demonstrates the weight of emphasis here or there in terms of numbers, but has nothing to say about the quality of those references.

Category 1 contains those texts that are clearly non-Christian, while Category 2 contains texts that, at best, display marginal Christian glosses. Taken together, these two categories present us with the main textual evidence that we have for non-Christian Gnostic thought. Category 3 lists texts with a more pronounced Christian frame-story although it should be noted that a work's earliest manifestation can still be considered by many scholars to have been non-Christian, as with the *Apocryphon of John* or *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* for example. Category 4, in contradistinction to all of the above, shows no emanationist content, but rather focuses upon the figure of Jesus and the Christian content appears to have been part of the original composition. The number of pages for each tractate is listed in square brackets after the title. A minus sign indicates a fair number of lacunae in the text.

The six titles are all recent representative major works within Gnostic Studies, and all approach the phenomenon of Gnostic thought in an "overview" fashion; i.e. advancing broad theories as to the nature and appearance of Gnostic thought in general; as such, reference to the full breadth of Gnostic texts is *de jure*. While the first three works are single-authored, the remaining three involve multiple submissions for a total of 100 separate contributions used in this survey overall. The numbers differ in exact meaning from column to column but may be generally taken to indicate the number of main references to a specific tractate within a given work. The exact numbers are therefore not to be compared from column to column for any sort of meaningful result; rather, the ratio within each column is combined with the others to obtain the following:

Total number of references to Categories 1 & 2	929
Categories 3 & 4	856

The two groups are thus on par; however, there is a disparity in the pages of original manuscript represented by the two groups.

Total number of pages of original manuscript in Categories 1 & 2	1068
Categories 3 & 4	284

The overall propensity to refer to Categories 3 & 4 in defining Gnostic thought – i.e. the “Gnostic-Christian texts” – is therefore adjusted to 4 to 1 with the number of original pages of Gnostic manuscripts taken into consideration.

In addition to this, five tractates are drawn upon inordinately in relation to all others shown. Prioritised according to their popularity, with numbers of references given in square brackets, they are as follows:

1. The Apocryphon of John [278]
2. The Hypostasis of the Archons [191]
3. The Gospel of Truth [164]
4. The Gospel of Thomas [133]
5. The Gospel of Philip [117]

All other tractates on the chart above have a “score” (number of references) of less than 100.⁷

Total references to the top 5 = 883

Total references to the remaining 26 tractates on chart = 914

There is also a disparity in the number of pages of original manuscript that generate the above results:

Total number of pages of original manuscript in “top 5” = 124

Total number of pages of original manuscript in remaining 26 = 1228

Factoring in both ratios the overall conclusion can be expressed as follows: on a page by page basis, the “top 5” Gnostic texts are 9.4 times more likely to be used in textual exegesis than the remaining 26 tractates herein examined.⁸ In being presented with a case for Gnostic thought in general, the first statistical result above also suggests that in your average “overview” Gnostic Studies work on “Gnosticism”, the Gnostic-Christian textual citations will outnumber the non- or slightly Gnostic-Christian (according to the distinctions developed here) 4 to 1. I am not aware of a hermeneutic study that has yet drawn attention to this phenomenon of “canonicity” and Christian Origins-directed interpretative bias at play in Gnostic Studies.

The lack of interest in Group 1 is especially instructive, as are the paucity of references to the *Untitled Text* (the fact that no concerted attempt to give the text a descriptive name is itself an indication of its marginalised status). This work, and the *Tripartite Tractate*, itself receiving scant coverage, together number 200 pages of

⁷The next five are as follows: *The Apocalypse of Adam* [97]; *The Trimorphic Protennoia* [96]; *The Gospel of the Egyptians* [79]; *On the Origin of the World* [70]; *Zostrianos* [66]

⁸My own experience bears this out. In the first years that I studied Coptic I worked with a Gnostic Studies scholar. The Gnostic texts we worked on were *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Truth*, and *The Gospel of Philip*.

well-preserved original manuscript, and of a philosophical quality head and shoulders above all other extant Gnostic texts. With the *Books of Jeu* and the *Pistis Sophia* added we have a total of over 722 pages in four texts that Layton and Yamauchi for example do not mention, even in passing. In the present study I have found all of the above to be of critical import.

Layton's book *The Gnostic Scriptures* turns an astonishing blind eye to this array; indeed, for a book broadly entitled "The Gnostic Scriptures", this study is remarkable for its lack of heterodoxy in the selection of Gnostic texts. From the outset Layton does not adequately explain the reasoning behind his selection process with respect to the various Gnostic works which *might* be considered Valentinian for one (this itself understood to be a major interpretative problem by most scholars in the field) or, on the other hand, those Gnostic writings which are decidedly non-Christian (a much easier task). Far from elucidating why such texts have been selected or omitted, the non-specialist reader is not advised that such excluded texts even exist. In the preface Layton mentions that, "a number of works sometimes labelled 'gnostic,' though only in a vague and looser sense, have been deliberately omitted"⁹, and he explains the selection of Valentinian texts as follows: "It is not feasible in a book such as this to make a complete survey of the Valentinian school in its Eastern and Western branches, since much of the evidence consists of fragments or excerpts whose significance is best conveyed by a detailed discussion of the original Greek"¹⁰. However, the exclusion and lack of mention of the *Tripartite Tractate*, for instance, is most peculiar as it exists in Coptic not Greek, and is neither a fragment (it is the longest tractate in the Nag Hammadi corpus), nor can it conceivably be called "vaguely" or "loosely" gnostic. A basic point to keep in mind with Layton's model is that his theories are based upon only four out of twelve possible Valentinian tractates¹¹; his larger conclusions about Gnostic thought in general are based upon

⁹ *The Gnostic Scriptures*, xi.

¹⁰ *The Gnostic Scriptures*, xv.

¹¹ The following eight tractates display the strongest Valentinian presence, while the final four are somewhat less defensible. The Roman numeral references are to the codex number in the Nag Hammadi library and the asterisked citations are those used by Layton:

The Prayer of the Apostle Paul (I,1)*

The Gospel of Truth ((I,3/XIII,2)*)

The Treatise of the Resurrection (I,4)*

The Tripartite Tractate (I,5)

The Gospel of Philip (II,3)*

The Interpretation of Knowledge (XI,1)

A Valentinian Exposition (XI,2)

The Untitled Text (Bruce Codex)

The First and Second Apocalypse of James (V,3-4)

only 13 out of 31 of the main texts examined here – in any other field this sort of methodology would be suspect. Layton is closely associated with the work done on *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* and has made major contributions therein.

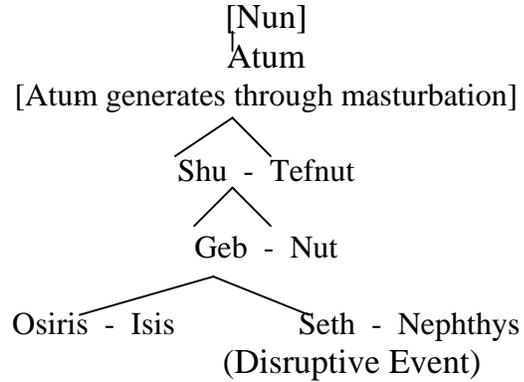
Yamauchi manifests an even narrower textual approach to an exceedingly complex textual and socio-historical issue. In going after “pre-Christian Gnosticism” one might expect at least a treatment of all the texts in Category 1; instead we have a controversial thesis derived from an amazingly sparse selection of available texts. The socio-historical picture which one would expect to be developed in a discussion as to whether this group precedes that, is non-existent.

Pétrément’s work, like Yamauchi, is concerned with disproving the scholarly consensus that Gnostic thought preceded Christian, although she does not settle for his rather vague picture of simultaneity for the two religious developments, instead opting for the unlikely thesis of complete Christian precedence. In pursuing this *idée fixe* Pétrément displays a more generous distribution of references than Layton or Yamauchi, not, however, departing from the overall pattern of a propensity to use Christian-Gnostic sources and a complete lack of interest in Egypt.

The three remaining works on Gnosticism and early Christianity, Gnostic origins, and the study of the Feminine in Gnostic thought are far better than the first three enterprises--undoubtedly a result of their multi-authorship--however all still reinforce the tendency to use texts in Categories 3 and 4 over 1 and 2, and in highlighting a perceived “Christian-Gnostic” canon over the bulk of Gnostic manuscripts. The Messina conference is to be commended for presenting a more balanced array of source material than is usually the case to this day, almost thirty years later, and in supplying a detailed index of text citations, a rarity in the field. As well, this work at least acknowledged the “problem” of Egypt in defining Gnostic thought, devoting 2 articles, out of a total of 54, to the issue of Egyptian Gnosticism. The other five representative works are entirely devoid of any analysis of an Egyptian presence in Gnostic thought, nor do they advance a viable socio-historical model of any kind for that matter.

Appendix B *A Genealogy of Egyptian Emanationist Thought*

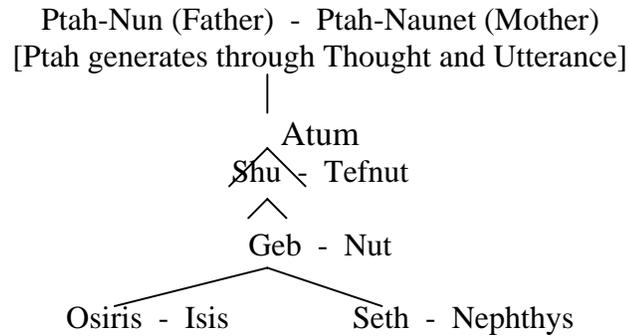
1. The Heliopolitan Ennead (ca. 2780 B.C.E.)



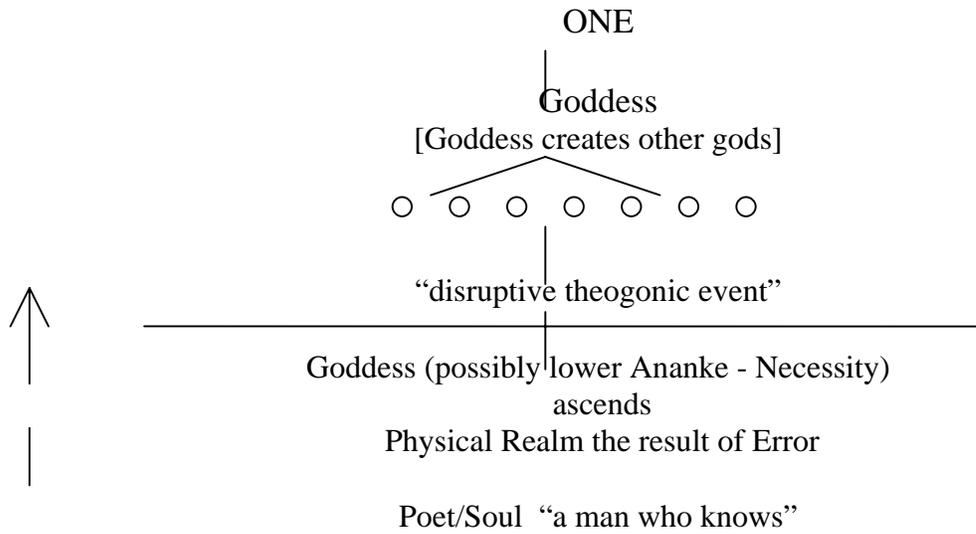
2. The Hermopolitan Ogdoad (ca. 2250 B.C.E.)

Nun-Naunet	Huh-Hauhet	Kuk-Kauket	Amun-Amaunet
(watery abyss)	(formlessness) (darkness)		(hiddenness)

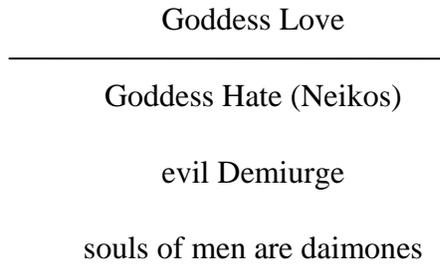
3. The Memphite Theology (ca. 2040 - 750 B.C.E.)



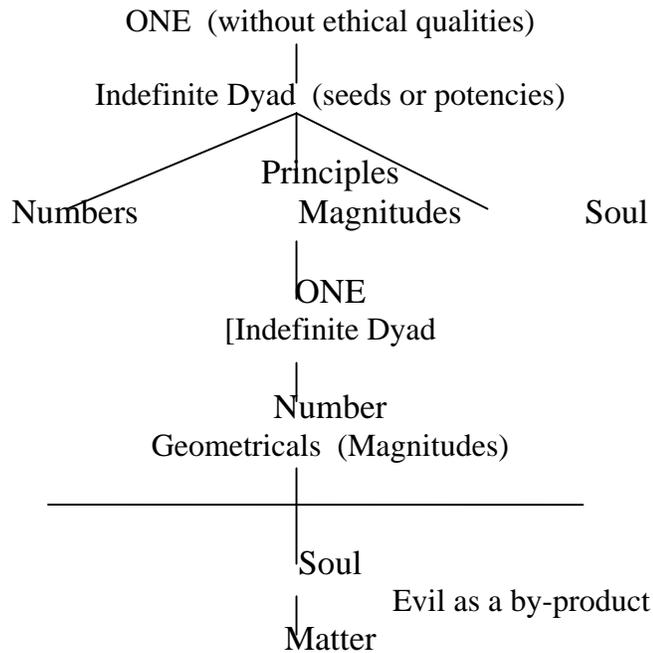
4. Parmenides (ca. 6th c. B.C.E.)



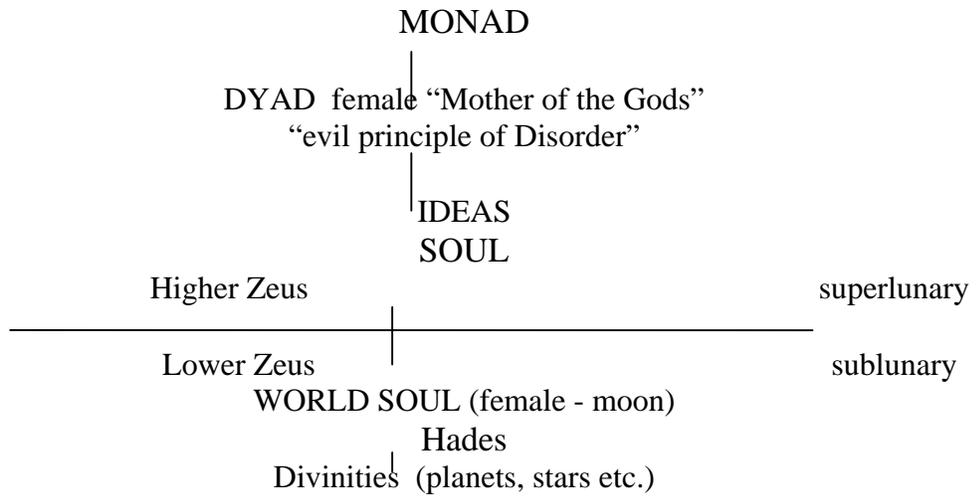
5. Empedocles (ca. 6th c. B.C.E.)



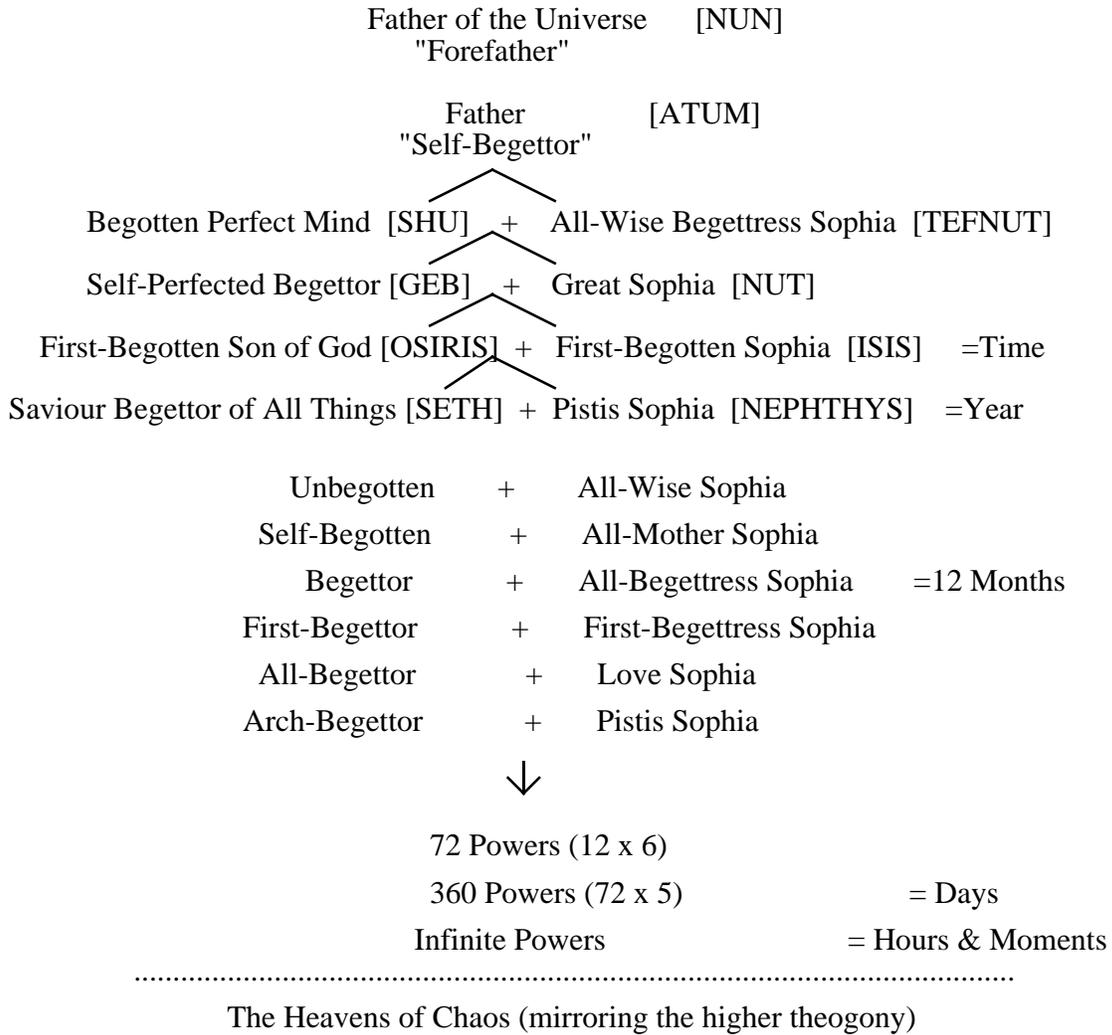
6. Speusippus (ca. 407-339 B.C.E.)

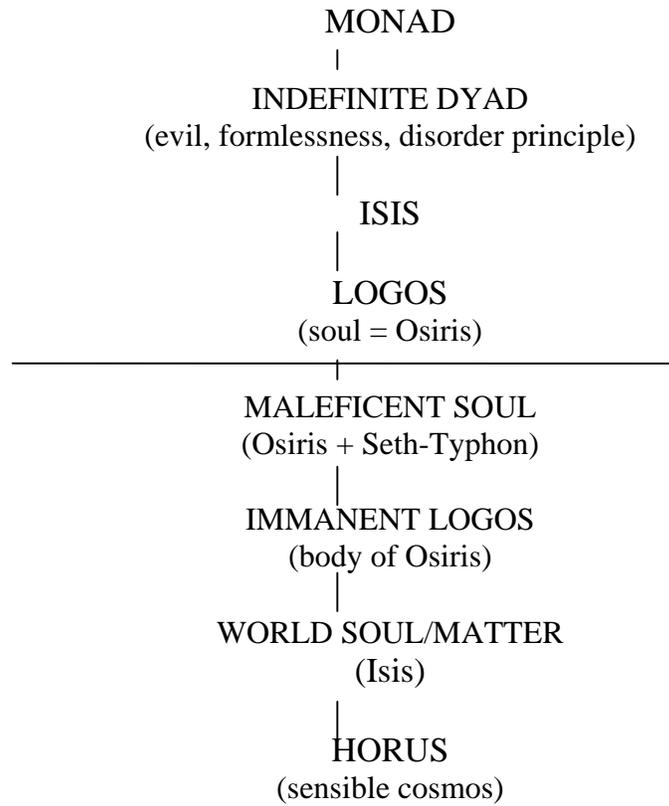


7. Xenocrates (396 - 314 B.C.E.; Ammonius ca. 40 C.E. is similar)

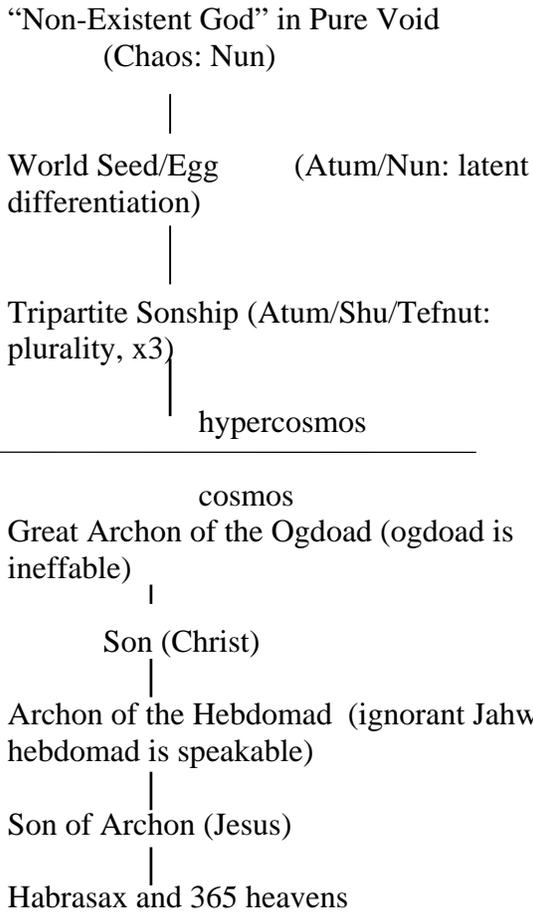


8. Eugnostos (ca. 50 B.C.E.)

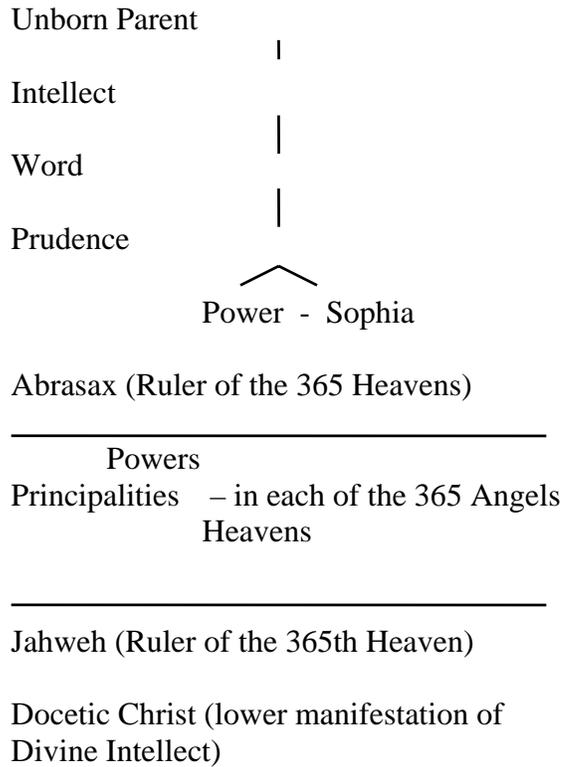


9. Plutarch (ca. 85 C.E.)

10. Basileides according to Hippolytus (ca. 130 C.E.)

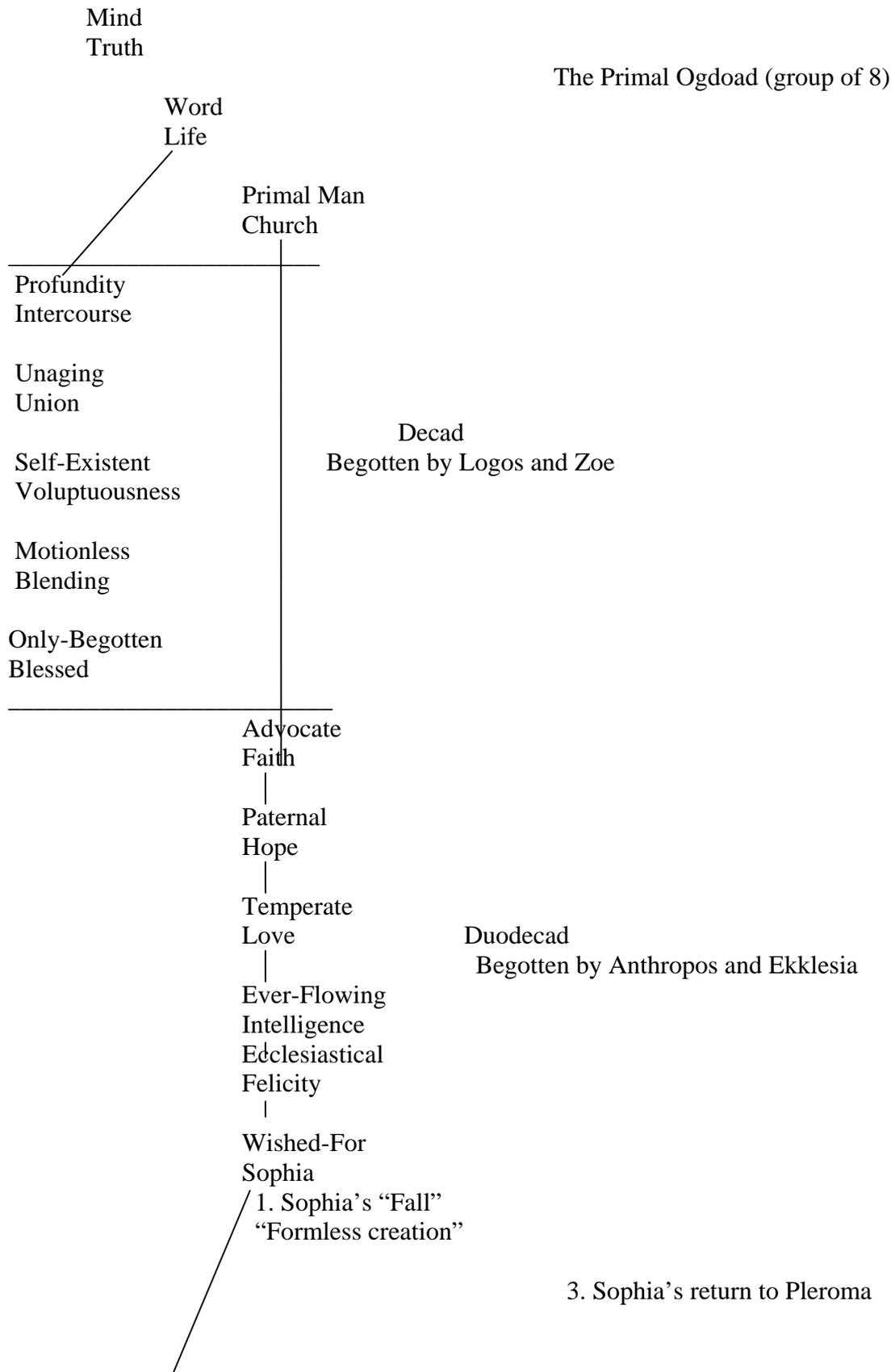


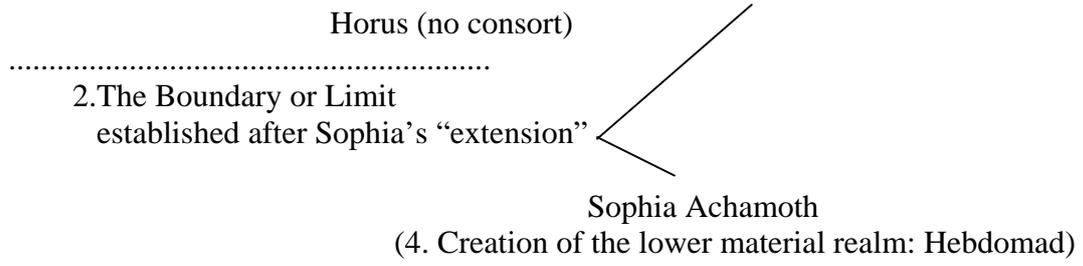
11. Basileides According to Irenaeus and Epiphanius (ca. 130 C.E.)



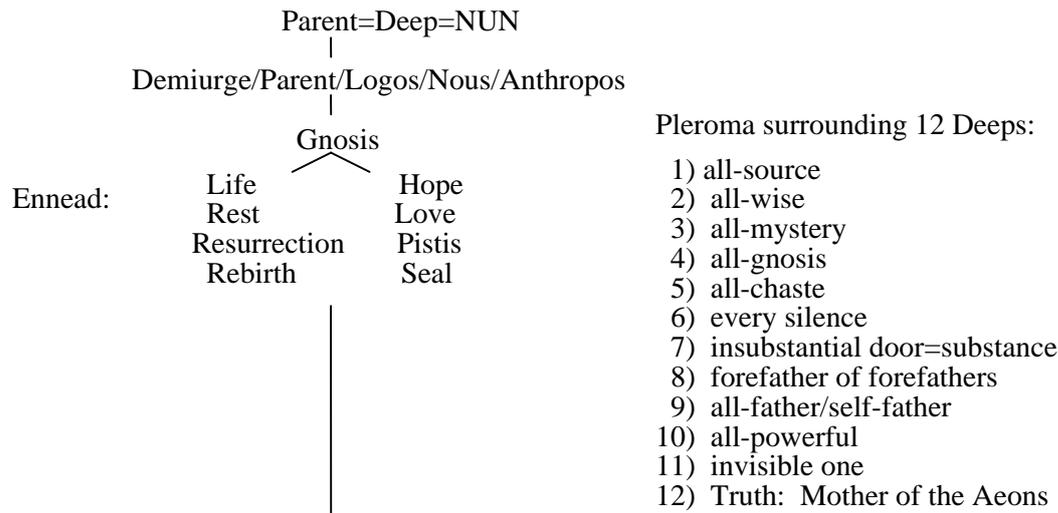
12. The Valentinian Theogony According to Irenaeus and Tertullian (ca. 130 C.E.)

Depth (Bythus)/First Beginning/Perfect Aeon
 Silence/Grace/Idea





13. The Untitled text



Demiurge/Forethought:

4 Monads & 4 Gates, each with:

6 helpers/24 myriad powers/9 enneads/10 decads/12 dodecads/5 pentads

1 Overseer w/ three aspects:

- 1) unbegotten
- 2) true
- 3) unutterable

Aphrêdon + 12 beneficent ones

Forefather

Adam of the Light

Perfect Mind

DEEP

- 3 Parenthoods: 1) Covered One/Hidden God
 2) 5 Trees/Only-begotten Logos
 3) Silence/Source

IMMEASURABLE DEEP

- 3 Greatnesses: 1) Still One
 2) Unknowable One + 365 Parenthoods = year
 3) Infinite One

+ Sonship/Christ/Verifier

DEEP OF SETHEUS w/ 12 Parenthoods:

- 1) indivisible 2) incomprehensible 3) unknowable 4) silence
 5) still 6) all-father 7) all-mystery 8) rest & resurrection 9) covered
 10) thrice-male 11) triple-powered 12) truth

Separation of Existent from Non-Existent
 (Existent = Eternal; Non-Existent = Matter)

Lord of Glory Separates Matter into Two Lands:

Land of Death and Darkness Land of Life and Light

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