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Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings

A preliminary survey
of the Nag Hammadi find

W. C. van Unnik

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A preliminary survey of the Nag-Hammadi find

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PREFACE

SOME fourteen years ago there came to light, near Nag-Hammadi in Upper Egypt, a large library consisting of Gnostic manuscripts in the Coptic language. This discovery, which is on a par with that of the 'Dead Sea Scrolls', is bound to arouse a steadily growing interest, as more and more of the treasures it contains become known in the original text and in translation.

Five years ago Dr F. L. Cross, the Lady Margaret Professor at Oxford, made a conspectus in English available for the first time. It took the form of a translation of three articles by Professor H. C. Puech, Professor G. Quispel and myself. Since then, in 1958 and 1959, Dr McLeod Wilson, Professor Hans Jonas and Professor R. M. Grant have all contributed pertinent studies of Gnosis and Gnosticism, in which they have taken the Nag-Hammadi find into account. In Germany, a penetrating study by Professor Puech appeared in the third edition of Hennecke and Schneemelcher's *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, along with a number of shorter articles (see p. 94).

In addition to this strictly academic treatment of the subject in books and learned journals, there is room for an introduction of a more popular character, which will make clear for the layman what the discovery really signifies, and through which the general reader can form an impression of some, at any rate, of the principal writings now brought to light. It was thus at the request of Messrs. van Keulen, a firm of Dutch publishers at The Hague, that in 1958 I wrote the book which now appears in its English dress.

I deem it both an honour and a privilege that the editors and publishers of *Studies in Biblical Theology* wish to include this book in the series. It is also my pleasure to thank the translator, the Rev. H. H. Hoskins, for the excellent way in which he has carried out his task. Finally, I must not omit, in this English edition, to mention the name of my friend and colleague, Dr G. Quispel, Professor of Early Church History in the State University of Utrecht, who has played such a great part in making these texts accessible. Although he is in no way accountable for the opinions expressed in this little book, it is nonetheless an outcome of our friendship and our work together through the years.

W. C. VAN UNNIK

Bilthoven
18 *November*, 1959

I

THE STORY OF THE FIND AT NAG-HAMMADI

FIFTY years ago the famous German New Testament scholar, Adolf Deissmann, brought out his book, *Licht vom Osten.*[1] The source of the light which he thus shed on the pages of the New Testament was an assortment of inscriptions and papyri, whose significance for the language and thought-forms of the New Testament he uncovered in an astounding way. In masterly fashion, he induced these unprepossessing bits of stone and fragments of letters to speak.

When Deissmann wrote, it was still comparatively recently that the first major finds of papyri in Egypt had been made. In the half century following, the science of papyrology has made tremendous strides. The dry soil of Egypt, which Nature has made eminently suitable for preserving ancient documents that in a different climate quickly disintegrate, has continually been yielding up its treasures. 'Treasures' indeed are those unimpressive little bits of papyrus, often full of holes, to the scholars who often with the utmost difficulty unlock their meaning.

It is impossible in brief compass to describe how our knowledge of antiquity, particularly in the centuries between 300 BC and AD 600, has been modified, deepened and enriched by the steady stream of discoveries in Egypt. That is the very period in which the coming of Jesus Christ was drawing near, in which he walked the earth, in which his Gospel was launched upon the world. Though Egypt is seldom mentioned in the New Testament, and though, remarkably enough, very little information indeed about the development of Christianity in the land of the Nile prior to AD 175 is available even today, yet the material found in Egypt has already contributed in singular measure to a fuller knowledge of the world of the earliest Christian communities.

The history of politics, economics, science and religion under the Ptolemies and the Roman Emperors has in the last seventy

[1]ET, *Light from the Ancient East*, 1910, 2nd ed., 1927.

years become known in a wealth of detail, which no one previously could have dreamt of. Through its authentic documents this culture appears to us in both its large and its trivial aspects. Of course, these new finds raise new questions again; but the fruits of what has been brought to light are quite outstanding. Here are heard not merely the voices of the *élite*, of those who created a 'literature': here too are the halting tones of simple men. No other country of ancient times affords us so much material. Naturally, it is not permissible to take conditions in Egypt and apply them without more ado to countries such as Syria and Asia Minor in that same period, where much less has been preserved. Still, the data preserved in Egypt as often as not shed an astonishing light on other regions. Not only New Testament philology, but also our knowledge of primitive Christianity in all its aspects—its canon of Scripture, its public worship, its preaching and its manner of life—has been able to profit, I am glad to say, by the finds in Egypt.

There are pieces of books, letters or rolls, often badly damaged, which have been preserved in this way. Again and again one is filled with admiration for the endless patience with which such fragments are conserved and made accessible. What survived is often little enough: a torn letter, a stray leaf of a book, retrieved sometimes from a pile of refuse or from among the shrouds of mummies. The astonishing abundance of this material, which has not long been made public even now, is for ever springing surprises, great and small, and still the end is not in sight.

What kind of surprises one can be in for became evident ten years ago, when the French scholar Doresse, assisted by the late Togo Mina, Director of the Coptic Museum in Cairo (d. 1949), and by the Paris professor, Dr H. C. Puech, published the first account of a manuscript in a very good state of preservation and written in the Coptic language (i.e. the language of ancient Egypt in Greek capital letters). A year later came more news and summary reports, indicating that the first manuscript had formed part only of a much larger collection. A whole library of thirteen manuscripts, comprising about a thousand large leaves, of which nearly eight hundred were in a pretty sound condition, had come to light. Some of these manuscripts were preserved in finely worked leather covers. The contents consisted of forty-nine

documents, either still completely intact or only partly so. Further examination showed that they were not all in the same hand, and that different writers had contributed even to the same manuscript. In the language too there were recognizable differences: several of the various Coptic dialects appeared to have been used. Fortunately, the titles of most of the books were clearly legible. From the inventory which Doresse compiled at the time, and which served as a basis for the more recent surveys of Puech, it is now possible to conclude that the greater part, namely forty-four, of these writings had been either not known about at all or known merely by name. Thanks to those titles, which were handed down by Epiphanius (*c.* AD 360) in particular, but were very little valued in earlier times, it was possible to make further progress towards establishing the provenance of the documents. What these manuscripts revealed was not the literary heritage of a single author, but of one or more groups. Their origin did not lie in the Coptic church, either; for they were works translated from the Greek, and deriving from the world of Gnosticism. Gnosticism: about that world, swallowed up by the march of history and still in great part an unresolved enigma, we shall speak more precisely in the next chapter; but first let us follow in broad outline the story of the discovery itself.

The first phase has been described by Doresse, with the burning enthusiasm of one who has 'lived' it all for himself and in a most thrilling fashion, in his recently published work, *Les livres secrets des gnostiques d'Egypte*. Strangely enough, about the later phase in which Professor Quispel of Utrecht has played a decisive role, Doresse has nothing to say; but Quispel has given an account of this no less exciting story in his section of *The Jung Codex*.[1] Anyone who, like the present writer, has had the privilege of seeing a little of what goes on behind the scenes, realizes that even these two reports together do not tell the whole tale. Some future historian in this field of learning is almost certain to find in this story plenty of material for a fascinating book. For the way to deciphering these manuscripts and laying open what they contain has been a thorny path to tread: and when one day soon the texts come within our grasp, published and translated, one might do well to remember that the greater the difficulties encountered,

[1]ET, F. L. Cross, 1955, pp. 40 ff.

the greater must be the credit for having unlocked their secrets. In particular, there have been a number of changes in the political field which have played some part in this business and prevented access to these treasures in a manner scarcely serviceable to the cause of scholarship.

It appears upon investigation that the soil of Egypt gave up its long cherished secret in 1945 or 1946. In all likelihood the circumstances were as follows. Whilst digging on the site of a church—there is also some talk of the remains of an ancient monastery—at a spot some sixty or seventy miles north of Luxor with its famous monuments, and close by the village of Nag-Hammadi, a group of fellahin found an urn. They wrenched it open; and out tumbled a number of manuscripts. This was not so very surprising, seeing that in the ancient world urns, being fireproof, often did service as repositories. It seems that a few pages have been burned, but the greater part was fortunately spared; and although split up into various pieces, it has not thereby suffered irreparable damage. The simple peasants, who of course could not know what was in their possession, settled the business out of hand for a trifling sum. In one way or another, the whole purchase arrived in Cairo, though in three parts, not as a single whole. That was in 1948–9.

The first part was a manuscript of which it proved possible to give a preliminary description as early as 1948; among other things it contained the *Apocryphon of John*. Thus it excited immediate interest; for something at least, however vague, was known about this document (see p. 13). It was acquired by the Coptic Museum. The second part also consisted of one manuscript, not entirely complete: it was owned by an antiquary who loaned it for inspection, but on a later occasion saw a chance to get it out of Egypt. This manuscript will require our attention again presently. The third—and far and away the largest—group was brought together, it would seem, in stages and was made available for research. Kept at first at the French Institute of Archaeology, it later found asylum at the Coptic Museum, inside a sealed coffer. There followed lengthy negotiations over the price to be paid for this valuable collection. Eventually there was a long drawn-out action, spread over several years, concerning the rights of ownership.

Meanwhile, considerable changes in the political field took place in Egypt after 1949. King Farouk's rule had to give way to the officers' revolution under Neguib, who again was later thrust aside by the present President, Nasser. These changes at the top had their counterpart at more modest levels. Thus it was that at every turn negotiations were started and then broken off again, and fresh contacts had to be made. One consequence of the new government's strongly nationalistic bent was that on the Egyptian side there was suspicion of 'Western'—in particular, of French—interference. When the position became more or less stabilized, plenty of co-operation was forthcoming from the former Director of Egyptian Antiquities, Dr Mustafa Amer and from Togo Mina's successor as Director of the Coptic Museum, Dr Pahor Labib. Add to all these changes the fact that in the East the tempo of negotiation and business dealings is very much slower than in Europe and America, and it is easy to see why it was not until the autumn of 1956 that the legal action came to an end, and it proved possible to set up a committee charged with the job of scrutinizing these precious manuscripts.

That so much progress was made is thanks once again to the degree of perseverance shown by Professor Quispel; and it must be pointed out as a serious deficiency that Doresse in his book passed over this in silence. Since his dissertation Quispel had extended his work to include an examination of the doctrines of the major Gnostics. He heard that the second codex, mentioned above, had been retrieved from Egypt: and this opened up the possibility of making that manuscript at any rate available to the world of learning. After a good deal of sleuth-work, he managed to track down its whereabouts, and also to establish the probable origin of these texts among the associates of the early heretic, Valentinus.

However, there were still plenty of difficulties to be overcome before there could be any question of a purchase. The high price demanded by the owner was not immediately to hand. The manuscript was offered for sale in America but there they were not prepared to pay the sum required. At last, in May 1952, the purchase was made, after a Swiss Maecenas had come to the rescue. Because the world-famous psychiatrist Jung has shown so much sympathetic interest in Gnosticism and the Institute in Zurich,

named after him, had so vigorously supported Quispel's schemes, this manuscript was christened the Jung Codex. It was agreed under the terms of sale that this purchase should not be made known publicly for eighteen months.

That time was spent by Professors Quispel and Puech in thoroughly examining the manuscript. Unfortunately, their examination revealed that a large part was missing from the final section, the content of which seemed likely to prove of especial importance to the history of dogmatics—(but I am happy to add that the rest of the material has in large measure been recovered in the Egyptian collection). Both scholars gave an extremely detailed description of the contents in *Vigiliae Christianae*, and this was followed in 1956 with a *de luxe* edition of the *Gospel of Truth*.

The fact that one of the most important manuscripts had thus been brought within the reach of scholarship, whilst the fate of the remainder was still uncertain, could scarcely fail to stimulate intense interest in this library from Nag-Hammadi. Another result was that on the Dutch side an approach was made in high places to the Egyptian authorities to get the whole collection opened up with greater expedition. That proved to be possible, as I have already explained. Furthermore, it has been agreed to transfer the Jung Codex at some future date to the Coptic Museum in Cairo so that the whole Nag-Hammadi collection (and with it that of Chenoboskion, named after an early Christian centre in the vicinity) will be all together in one place. This particularly deserves putting on record, because so many important collections of this sort have been torn apart at the whim of history.

A number of eminent Egyptians, assisted by European experts in the Coptic language and Gnosticism, such as Professors Puech, Quispel, Doresse and the Coptic scholar, Dr Walter Till, formerly of Manchester University, have now made themselves responsible for editing and translating. Dr Labib has already brought out a part in Cairo, with photographs of interesting sections, and work is being done on the photographic reproduction of the remaining codices. In October 1956, just before the Suez Canal imbroglio, the editorial committee met for its first session, although not all the editors were present. Thus there is good reason to hope that in the not too distant future the texts will become generally accessible.

In this connexion it is still worth mentioning that besides the *Gospel of Truth* two other documents from this collection have been published in recent years, though not directly from the Nag-Hammadi texts. In 1955 there appeared, through the good offices of Walter Till, *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502.[1] This was a publication which had long been eagerly awaited. As early as 1896, the distinguished scholar Carl Schmidt had given some account of this papyrus: and in 1907 he claimed, on the basis of one of the writings it preserved, to have succeeded in identifying one source of Irenaeus's great work against the heretics. It can be imagined therefore, in view of the large gaps in our inheritance of the sources of Gnosticism (see Chapter 2), how much eagerness there was to learn of the contents of this Berlin manuscript in their entirety; but through various mischances it has taken nearly sixty years to bring this about! The delay in publication has turned out to be a blessing in disguise to this extent, that the Nag-Hammadi material proved to contain parallel texts. We intend to deal more thoroughly with the *Apocryphon of John* in Chapter 6. As for the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, which formed part of the Berlin papyrus, the second and previously unknown manuscript contains not only a parallel text, but another version which differs in many respects and does not present Christ as the central speaker. Naturally, this raises a question, interesting and—so far as the development of Gnosticism is concerned—of considerable moment, as to what these versions respectively may owe to each other. At the moment, it is not possible to say anything more specific on that score. The Berlin publication must be considered in rather more detail, if only because it puts the text of several Nag-Hammadi documents in the picture for us; even though they have not yet been published, Till has been able to consult them for his edition.

In view of the size and importance of this find, which we shall discuss later on, it was understandable that what was reported of it should rouse keen attention, both among students of religion and of the early Church and among those impelled by a general interest in new discoveries. One can understand the impatience with which so many have been asking when the texts are to be made available; for one likes to see for oneself, and not have to

[1]Texte und Untersuchungen 60.

depend on the opinion of others. However, judging by the look of the situation at present, there is no need whatever to fear that the story of the Berlin Papyrus 8502 will repeat itself, even if there is still a long way to go before the full significance of this find can be estimated and the results properly digested.

It is quite evident from this cursory account of events during the past few years what obstacles had to be overcome before a start could be made with the task of scholarly, methodical examination. One must bear in mind that the concepts in these texts, handed down in the Coptic tongue, are often extremely obscure. Translation offers many difficulties. It is useful to remember in this connexion the experience of one of the finest of contemporary Coptic scholars, Dr Till: 'Each time I have worked over the texts —and I have done so often during the last twelve years—again and again fresh emendations have seemed necessary; and so it will go on.'[1] Sometimes the translator wonders whether the Coptic writer has himself properly understood what he was writing down. It is certain that most, if not all, of the texts discovered have Greek antecedents, and this does not make correct interpretation any the easier. Furthermore, experience generally of translating problematical texts from the ancient world has taught us that only through intensive work on the part of many scholars can results of value be achieved: and so far as these documents are concerned—even those already published—there has as yet been very little interchange of scholarly opinion.

In the case of many constituent parts of this library it is also safe to assume that a correct interpretation will only become possible when the material can be seen as a whole. Those who are busy working on the library are quite right therefore to insist that the information they give—and their conclusions from it—must not be taken as definitive, but rather as subject to revision in the future, as the progress of research dictates.

It is therefore impossible to avoid asking whether the time is yet ripe for a general and comprehensive survey; and the answer, so far as I can see, is plainly in the negative. Hasty and far-reaching conclusions are best left well alone. Over the years, there has been so much wild speculation in the field of Gnostic studies—at least in my judgment—and so many hypotheses have been elevated to

[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

the status of 'facts' simply through constant repetition, that the only sensible course now is to abandon that kind of approach as promptly as may be. That is why in writing this book I have consciously observed a degree of reticence, and left on one side a great deal of what appears to be problematical. Indeed, if the presages are to be trusted, not even in the future will it be possible to write comprehensively about the Nag-Hammadi library *in isolation*. What we actually have here is a compilation of documents, held together, admittedly, by a strong interconnecting link, but deriving from sharply distinguishable groups. Only in relation to what we know about these groups from other sources can we reasonably expect fruitful and indeed magnificent results from this extensive and momentous discovery.

II

THE CHARACTER OF THE FIND

In the first chapter I discussed the Nag-Hammadi find in general terms. It is now time to take a closer look at the contents of the collection. The most recent surveys come from Puech (in the *Encyclopédie Française*) and Doresse; their accounts of it agree, although they number the manuscripts differently. The list which now follows gives Puech's arrangement and numeration; but Doresse's numbering is added in brackets. The codices contain the following items:

I (I)
Apocryphon of John
The Sacred Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (or: the *Gospel of the Egyptians*)
Epistle of the Blessed Eugnostus
The Wisdom of Jesus
The Dialogue of the Saviour

II (XIII)
Revelation (*Apocryphon*) *of James* (Jung Codex)
Gospel of Truth
Epistle to Rheginus concerning the Resurrection
Treatise without a title, provisionally called by those working on the MS: *Treatise upon the Three Natures*

III (X)
Apocryphon of John
Gospel of Thomas
Gospel of Philip
The Hypostasis of the Archons
Anonymous Revelation, dedicated to Pistis-Sophia
The exegesis concerning the Soul
The Book of Thomas; secret words spoken by the Saviour to Judas Thomas and sealed by Matthias

IV (IX)
The Threefold Discourse of the Threefold Protennoia
Sacred Book written by the Father
Revelation in the form of an epistle

V	(VII)	*Paraphrase of Shem* (*Second Treatise of the Great Seth*)
		Revelation of Peter
		Teachings of Silvanus
		Revelation of Dositheus, or *The Three Pillars of Seth*
VI	(VIII)	*The Exposition of Gnosis*
		The Most High Allogenes (Stranger)
		Revelation of Messos
VII	(III)	*Epistle of the Blessed Eugnostus*
		Revelation of Paul
		Revelation of James
		Another *Revelation of James*
		Revelation of Adam to his son, Seth
VIII	(II)	*Apocryphon of John*
		The Sacred Book of the Great Invisible Spirit
IX	(IV)	Revelation (without title)
		Discourse on the truth of Zoroaster (?)
		Epistle of Peter to Philip
X	(V)	*Revelation, attributed to the Great Seth*
		Epistle concerning the Father of the Universe and Adam, the first Man
		Treatise in epistolary form
		Treatise (without title) against the Scribes and Pharisees concerning the Baptism of John
XI	(VI)	*Acts of Peter*
		Authentic Address of Hermes to Tat
		The Thoughts of the Great Power
		Hermetic treatise (without title)
		Sethian Revelation (without title)
		Hermetic treatise (without title: at the end, a prayer already known from a Greek papyrus and Latin translation)
		Hermetic treatise (in the main identical with a part of the Latin 'Asclepius', wrongly attributed to Apuleius)
XII	(XII)	Fragments of a treatise on the cosmos
XIII	(XI)	A compilation, including *inter alia* discussion of various moral questions and of the influence of *daemons* on the soul

As anyone can see, it is a motley array of bizarre titles! A conspicuous feature is the absence of any books of a historical character. Nowhere is any account given of the origin and history of the group to which these works belong. It may, of course, prove possible eventually to reconstruct the historical background by correlating the various works; but unfortunately nothing explicit of this kind is provided. The absence of any manuscripts of biblical books might be thought even more disconcerting. Did the original owner possess none? Did he put no value on them at all; or did he know them well, but think it unnecessary to store them away? As some of the titles indicate, one certainly has documents here claiming connexions with apostles or claiming to include revelations of the Lord Jesus. There are plenty of these, but they are all apocryphal (and, so far as one can make out, there is nothing corresponding to them among the works which Hennecke and James brought together in their well-known collections of the New Testament apocrypha). One might also call it remarkable that 'Hermetic treatises' are to be found here; for they are of non-Christian origin. It has been recognized for centuries past that there existed under the Roman Empire an extensive literature of secret knowledge (alchemy, astrology, teachings of the mystery-cults), which was attributed to the Greek god, Hermes.[1]

There is as yet no complete agreement as to the time or period during which these manuscripts were composed. They are in various hands and date probably from the second half of the fourth century or from the beginning of the fifth. The compilation contains a number of doublets: for example, of the *Apocryphon of John,* two texts of which give an expanded version of the text found in manuscript I. But not everything that appears to be the same is so in fact: the title, *Revelation of James,* occurs three times, but these three writings have nothing to do with one another. It is quite certain that almost all the works mentioned here were not written in Coptic but are translations from the Greek. As will appear in Chapter 5, fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas* are extant in Greek. Comparative study of the *Apocryphon of John* in the Berlin and Cairo manuscripts has revealed differences which Till has explained as differing translations of the Greek text.

[1]On this see A. J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste,* I–IV, Paris, 1949–54.

As to the circles from which this collection derives, we can be perfectly clear about that: they were Gnostic. I shall discuss the meaning of that term more precisely later on. Here I will only remark that Epiphanius (who was Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, during the second half of the fourth century), tells how, whilst still a young man, he came into contact with Gnostics during a journey through Egypt. They had employed women of ravishing beauty to try and ensnare him in their pernicious doctrines, and under pretence of 'saving' him had wanted to seduce him from the faith. These people formed no separate group, but were members of the Church—professedly, at any rate; for their highly irregular doctrines were maintained in secret.[1] As a result of information which Epiphanius gave to the local bishop their equivocal behaviour was brought to light.

Since we are dealing here with translations, it follows that the writings themselves are older than the form in which they have reached us. This is confirmed by other circumstances. The neo-Platonic philosopher, Porphyry, in his biography of his mentor, Plotinus (who lived in the first half of the third century and died in 270), relates how Plotinus disputed with Gnostics who possessed 'revelations of Zoroaster, Zostrianus, Nicotheus, Allogenes and Mesos'.[2] Is it not a striking fact that several of these titles are to be found in our library? In his second Ennead Plotinus made a fierce attack on the Gnostics. That would give us a date round about AD 230; but of course the documents must be older than that. Now one has to be careful sometimes about these titles; one cannot automatically conclude that when the names are identical the content will be the same. For instance, some of the Church Fathers, among them Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus (*c.* AD 200), make mention of a *Gospel of the Egyptians*, but the passages they quote from it do not occur in the work which bears that title in our collection. Epiphanius quotes from a *Gospel of Philip*, used by the Gnostics; but this quotation nowhere appears in the Nag-Hammadi book of that name.[3]

However, it is safe to say that a number of these new texts date from the second century. Carl Schmidt claimed to have recovered

[1]Epiphanius, *Haer.* 26.17.
[2]Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 16.
[3]Epiphanius, *Haer.* 26.13.

in the *Apocryphon of John* one source of Irenaeus's great work *Against Heresies*. It must in that case have been already in existence before AD 180, when the Bishop of Lyons wrote his work (see p. 71). The *Gospel of Truth* was in my opinion composed about AD 140 (see pp. 61 ff. below). Irenaeus knew that his opponents had at their disposal a large corpus of apocryphal writings: and this was referred to again later on by Epiphanius.[1] The latter gives—sometimes in a very confused form—all sorts of names and bits of information which again and again remind one of writings in the Nag-Hammadi library. It cannot be said that they *all* derive from the second century, but it is certainly true for a proportion. Could some be older even than that? Coming across the name of Dositheus in one of the titles, one might well think so; for this name was known to the Church Fathers as that of one of the earliest leaders among the Gnostics, though beyond that the accounts they give of this figure are fairly vague. Still, it would suggest an origin in the first century. However, quite a lot of people are known to have borne this name, and Doresse's publication makes it clear that we can deduce nothing from the content regarding the ultimate source. Might there not even be pre-Christian writings involved here, which Christian Gnostics have 'adapted'? Doresse believes so, although in one instance Till[2] disputes his opinion. As I said before, this collection presents us with the *Apocryphon of John* in an elaborated form and a simple one, side by side; and there one has a striking illustration of the continuing evolution which took place within the Gnostic tradition. Later works of this kind are equally interesting in that they enable us to trace the internal development of these groups.

The reader may have been struck already by the fact that in several titles there occurs the name of Seth, who according to Gen. 4 was a son of Adam, born after the murder of Abel by Cain. As one grows familiar with the content of these and other writings, one discovers in them a strong predilection for this Old Testament figure, who is regarded as the progenitor of the true children of God. Indeed we now know from several of the Church Fathers that there was in existence a Sethian sect, included within the larger Gnostic movement. The Nag-Hammadi compilation

[1] Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 20.1; Epiphanius, *Haer.* 26.8, 12.
[2] *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

appears to have originated in this quarter; but the owner (or owners) could not have been very discriminating. Anything which seemed to them 'edifying', even if it pertained to another sect, such as the Valentinians (see pp. 61 ff.), was welcome. But now an obtrusive and thorny problem confronts us: a good many of the ideas which one comes across in these Sethian writings occur also in the expositions and systems of other Gnostic sects, of those described in the works of Irenaeus and Epiphanius, for example. Puech has pointed out that the *Apocryphon of John* and *Allogenes* turn up again at the close of the eighth century in association with the Syrian author, Theodorus of Koni, and that this connects them with such sects as the Audiani. This is territory where it is not always quite easy to draw exact lines of demarcation; the boundaries overlapped.

Although it is not possible therefore to label everything categorically, one thing is beyond dispute: that all these groups, sects and schools belonged to one great religious tradition which it is customary to designate by the term Gnosis, or Gnosticism.

What are we to understand by that word, Gnosis? It is a Greek word which literally means 'knowledge'. In itself this tells us little enough unless we know what the nature of that knowledge is. There are a number of texts which make it clear what this 'knowing' refers to. In one of the Hermetic treatises it says: 'God then does not ignore man, but acknowledges him to the full, and wills to be acknowledged by him. And this alone, even the knowledge of God, is man's salvation; this is the ascent to Olympus.'[1] Now here we have, obviously, a non-Christian text. In what follows we are told how the soul is not, at the outset, separated from its self in the body, but as the years come and go, the passions get the upper hand and a state of forgetfulness or oblivion ensues. Then the soul has no part in what is beautiful or sublime. Forgetfulness means depravity; but this forgetfulness must be conquered through 'knowledge', and the soul fulfil its destiny in the return to God. One finds the same thing expressed rather differently in the ideas of the Naassenes. According to Hippolytus, these believe that '(the) knowledge of the original Man is the beginning of being able to know God, as they put it in this manner: the beginning of perfection is the knowledge of Man, and the knowledge of

[1] *Corpus Hermeticum* X 15, W. Scott's translation (Oxford, 1924).

God is the absolute perfection.' An instruction of the Valentinian school describes this knowledge as the *key* to the questions, who we were, what we have become; where we were, whereinto we are cast; whither we are hastening, from what we are delivered; what generation is, and what regeneration is.[1] When later on we come to deal with the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Apocryphon of John,* we shall see how these schemes are there elaborated. Variations there are, of many kinds; but the great question which Gnosticism poses is that which concerns itself with the origin and overcoming of evil. In figurative and often fantastic language, Gnosticism wrestles for an understanding of the world and the self. The chief points which receive repeated consideration are as follows:

(*a*) The true, perfect God is unknown: he is not the Creator of this world of imperfection.

(*b*) This imperfect world is produced by an imperfect God.

(*c*) The true and essential being of Man belongs to and with the perfect God, but through some unaccountable mischance finds itself situated in this imperfect world and subjected to the powers of this world.

(*d*) Through knowledge of himself and through awareness of his separation from God, the Absolute Perfection, Man must be set free from the tyranny of evil and return to the world of the true God.

Now that we have reduced the issue to its simplest possible form and have seen what this 'knowledge' implies, it must at once be pointed out that we are not going to find such a simple and basic form anywhere in fact. Various methods and all sorts of expedients have been employed to explain in particular detail how this world's Creator comes to exist, by what process Man has come into being, and so forth. Many of the early Christian authors had already encountered Gnosticism in so many distinct manifestations that they would speak of it—after the snake of Greek mythology—as a many-headed hydra; and whoever nowadays sets about investigating this momentous spiritual movement needs to keep a cool head; for the sheer number of speculations and the bizarre patterns which they usually assume are enough to make anyone feel dizzy!

[1]Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta e Theodoto* 78.2; Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V 6.6.

The importance of Gnosticism rests on the fact that it was a movement of the spirit in search of the answer, which it claimed indeed to have found, to one of those questions which perpetually excite mankind; and it is important not only because the question is momentous in itself, but because the movement's influence spread far and wide. Quispel has quite justifiably called it a world religion.

Christianity came in contact with this world religion at a very early stage; but precisely how that came about is still an obscure question. The Church historian, Eusebius (*c.* 325), summarizes a statement of Hegesippus (middle of the second century) to the effect that after the death of the apostles and the first generation of Christians, 'godless error began to take its rise, and form itself through the deceit of those who taught another doctrine; who now also threw off the mask, since none of the apostles any longer remained, and tried to counter the preaching of the truth by preaching the knowledge which is falsely so called.'[1] It is a large question whether, in point of historical fact, it was quite so deliberately planned. It may well be correct to think that Christianity, in process of evolution at the beginning of the second century, found itself in startling encounter with this religious movement. It was a collision which persisted over decades, or in certain respects, one might say, over centuries. Various Church authors have devoted whole books of considerable length to the subject: those, for instance, whom we have mentioned already, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and many others. These controversies show just how widespread and influential Gnosticism used to be. It was combated as a lethal threat to the proclamation of the Gospel: and the bishops had, I would say, every justification for pointing out how great the gulf is between biblical Christianity and Gnosticism, even though Gnosticism made use of biblical texts.

The apologists of the Church for the most part point to Simon Magus, mentioned in Acts 8 and represented in many later narratives to be the apostles' chief antagonist, as the source of this movement. After his, other names are mentioned, as those of Menander, Saturninus, Carpocrates and Cerinthus. Most of them appear to originate from Samaria and Syria. A few of the dogmas

[1]Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* III 32.8 (Lawlor and Oulton's translation).

they advocated have come down to us; but they are not figures of whom we can form any clear picture. The movement seems to have spread very quickly. For instance, some account is given of a meeting between the apostle John and Cerinthus at Ephesus. In Alexandria, at about AD 125, a certain Basilides was teaching, followed soon after by Valentinus. The latter had also worked for a time in Rome, where he had himself been a candidate for the episcopal see. Valentinus must have had great influence as a teacher; for he had disciples in both west and east. Irenaeus remarked upon his influence in the south of France in the person of one Marcus, a highly successful figure. There is mention of a whole host of names of sects and schools, each with its peculiar, distinctive interpretations and doctrines, such as the Peratae, Naassenes (Ophites, worshippers of the snake), Archontici and the rest. They were spread throughout the Roman Empire, but concentrated more especially in Syria, in Egypt and at Rome. In the second half of the third century, the Persian religious innovator, Mani, made use of Gnostic propositions in forming his doctrines. Manichaeism was widespread, from China to North Africa: and it is common knowledge that the great Church Father, Augustine, was deeply influenced by it for a considerable time. Gnosticism certainly became a 'world religion' throughout the whole of that area. Gnostic ideas have persisted from early times to the present day in a sect of southern Mesopotamia, the Mandaeans. This sect (the name literally means 'those who know', Gnostics), is now small and is dying out. There is much difference of opinion as to its origin. According to some scholars, the Mandaeans are in a direct line of descent from certain baptizing sects of the Jordan valley area in the time of John the Baptist; but others maintain that it is a religion which emerged much later as a compound of various religious systems. However that may be, the continued presence of Gnostic ideas in the literature of the Mandaeans is beyond dispute.

With these few strokes I have attempted to sketch in broad outline the expansion of this spiritual movement. Within the framework of our subject it is impossible to go further into the question of Gnosticism as a whole. It is enough to know how widespread the movement has been. I say 'movement'; for seeing how much diversity of doctrines there is inside the general frame-

work, it seems only proper to speak of a 'current' or 'tendency', with recognizable characteristics but also many variations within it. Thus it is necessary to take full account of the question from which sources one's knowledge of Gnosticism has been drawn.

Until the Nag-Hammadi library was discovered, we possessed only a very few documents directly attributable to the Gnostics of the second and third centuries. These were confused and barely intelligible works, such as the so-called *Pistis-Sophia* (faith-wisdom) and the *Books of Jeu*, strange revelations which Christ is supposed to have made to his disciples. Comparison with the ideas of second-century teachers establishes quite clearly that one is dealing here with complexities at a later stage of development. The books of the Manichaeans and Mandaeans, which have survived, are copious enough; but then the question arises to what extent one can—or should—use these relatively late, non-Christian ramifications for reconstructing Christian systems of an earlier period, especially when there are indications of a direct influence of official Christianity. Some scholars have wanted to make out that a collection of lyrics like the *Odes of Solomon* and a book on the preaching of Thomas, like his *Acts*, are Gnostic; but this is far from being the generally received opinion. For the most part we turn for information to the epitomes and quotations—most of them brief—given by Church authors. (Harnack included a summary outline of these in his history of early Christian literature.[1]) There, however, lies the major difficulty. Are these epitomes fair or tendentious representations? Can one get from a single report a proper insight into the real ideas of an author? Have not these Church writers taken pains to stress whatever is strange and discrepant, and left out the 'Christian' elements? It is at this point that we can begin to see the real significance of the discovery at Nag-Hammadi; for it affords us opportunity to hear the Gnostics at first hand and to test the worth of what the Church writers have given us. It is inconceivable how much has been lost to us of the Christian evidences belonging to the second century; anything, therefore, which helps to fill in the picture is of the utmost importance. (In Chapter 9 I shall have to refer to yet another aspect of this, which has nothing directly to do with Gnosis and has

[1]A. von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur bis Eusebius*, I: Die Überlieferung und der Bestand, Leipzig, 1893, pp. 143 ff.

consequently been left aside for the moment.) If, for instance, it is true—as Puech and Quispel think it almost certainly is—that the fourth item in the Jung Codex is a book by Heracleon (second half of the second century), it means that we have recovered a comprehensive work by a most eminent theologian who was the first commentator on St John's Gospel: that trains of thought previously unknown have been laid open and an expression of the Christian faith brought to light, which drew a reply from no less influential a person than Origen.

Above all, this find will make it possible to get to know really well one or even more than one important branch of Gnosis and so to penetrate to the background of the movement, about which there remains a good deal of uncertainty. Now let me mention a few problems which still await solution. Is this Gnosis a Christian heresy, nurtured, as it were, in the soil of the Church itself and partly de-Christianized later on, or is it a movement from outside which in some degree overflowed into the preserves of Christianity? If that is the case, did Gnosis come before Christianity, did it arise at the same time or possibly even later? Then where does Gnosis come from? Does its source lie in Babylonia or Iran? Did it get an impetus from Jewish circles committed to ideas at odds with 'normal' rabbinical Judaism—those at Qumran, for example—or was it Greek philosophy, blended with various ideas from the east, which engendered Gnosticism? Hippolytus, in his *Refutation of all heresies*, repeatedly alleged a connexion with schools of Greek philosophy. Is that right? Can one cite Manichaean and Mandaean documents, without further question, as evidence for primitive Gnosticism, as if it had all had a single source? The answers given to all these questions differ widely. Just because our knowledge in this field is so fragmentary, and the lines of interconnexion are for the most part hypothetical, it is difficult to arrive at any firm conclusion. Thus the British scholar, R. McL. Wilson, was perfectly right in urging us to remember that the provenance of individual *parts* is not determinative for Gnosticism as a *whole*. One has to ask when, how, and why these different elements have been fused together into the totality we call 'Gnosis', and what within it is the dominant factor.[1] When one

[1]R. McL. Wilson, 'Gnostic Origins', *Vigiliae Christianae* (cited henceforth as *Vig. Chr.*) 9, 1955, p. 201.

sees in what a slip-shod way this extremely complex phenomenon is so often handled, and how often the passage of time and constant repetition elevate hypotheses to the status of fact, then it is great gain to be able to see clearly—even though in small part—what the real situation is.

III

THE BACKGROUND TO GNOSTICISM

At the close of the previous chapter we observed that there is very little unanimity among students of the phenomenon of Gnosticism regarding the source of this religious movement which spread so far under the Roman Emperors and in the succeeding period. One can well believe that each exponent of these diverse theories thinks there is good ground for the correctness of his own opinion. It is possible to collect parallels from all kinds of ancient theologies and philosophical traditions. Whoever sets himself to read the Gnostic books enters a marvellous world of curious names and potencies and imaginative conceptions. We come across names more or less familiar from the Bible, but also appellations certainly not to be found there: Barbelo, for instance, or Jaldabaoth. We hear of the One and the Eightfold; generally speaking, special combinations of numbers play an important role. Where does all this come from? It looks very often like a jumble of ideas, bits and pieces broken off from some larger and coherent whole, cyphers that had meaning for the initiate because a single word could conjure up a complete world of thought. At what point, one asks oneself, was the contradistinction first made between the Most High God and the Creator—an antithesis characteristic of so many Gnostic systems? These questions, and others like them, multiply themselves as soon as one takes up a document of this sort and tries to read with understanding, even though no ready-made answers are forthcoming.

What did all this mean to those particular Christians who toyed with such ideas? The question inevitably springs to mind when one reads the New Testament Gospels and then turns to these 'revelations' of Jesus. What can be the stuff of notions such as these are? How—and why—should the connexion with Jesus Christ have come about anyway? What could men have been wanting to express or utter in this way?

To understand all this a knowledge of the Bible is not

enough; for the Bible, when it is used, is used in a most peculiar manner; it was to be understood, not 'after the flesh', but 'after the spirit', and in these Gnostic circles allegorizing was zealously pursued. Yet apparently even that helpful knowledge does not take us far enough. One must look still further afield and grasp something of the environment in which these documents were conceived. To determine what that environment is, it is no good to start by fastening on one particular tendency or point of departure, or by taking one current of Gnosticism and thinking it must be more important than all the rest. That kind of partiality is all too common and in matters of scholarship is inexcusable. One must continually reckon with the fact that under the Roman Empire a host of religions and systems of thought were intermingled, and often in the strangest amalgam. It was the age of syncretism. Consequently, the chief point at issue is not the source of the various elements but what kind of mixture has emerged from them. All sorts of colours can be mixed together; but the dominant colour is not going to be the same in every compound. The ancients were highly conscious of variegations.

How many different aspects must be kept in view in any interpretation of Gnosticism is exemplified by the school of Valentinus, as presented to us by Irenaeus. The master's own system is a strongly religio-philosophical one, using an allegorical exposition of Gospel stories. When it comes to his pupil, Marcus, we find a man who loves playing about with 'mystical' letters and various activities of a sacramental character, which have more to do with mystery-cults than with the Christian sacraments. By his own account, he was thus able to impart salvation in its perfect form, giving access to the Fullness (*Pleroma*). Among the formulas which Marcus employed, a number are recognizably Semitic: and these were in use in southern Gaul.[1]

Now Gnosis is a typical product of syncretism, in which use is made of all sorts of elements, the Christian factor being sometimes very firmly maintained, whilst at other times it is merely incidental or simply not there at all.

[1]Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 21.3, explicitly says: 'In this connexion others pronounce some Hebrew names, the more to amaze the devotees, thus: *basema chamosse baaianora mistadia rouada kousta babophor kalachthei*' (there follows an incorrect translation).

Since the end of the last century, study of the history of religion has been intensively concentrated on the evolution of religion in the Roman Empire. Authors whose works have long been familiar have been studied afresh. Neglected writers, to whose strange ideas and habits of thought earlier generations paid no attention, were now seen to offer interesting data; excavation brought to light ancient sanctuaries, burial-places and inscriptions; in this respect papyri also made an important contribution. Paganism, as it had existed in a multiplicity of forms in the Mediterranean countries during the early centuries of our era before it was suppressed by the triumph of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, was restored to our view. All this research has made it clear that when Christianity spread through the (known) world, it did not do so in a religious vacuum or in the midst of religions that were dying away, but it found itself surrounded and opposed by a rich variety of religious patterns, theological and philosophical schools, which held out to the questing souls of men the promise of security in this world and the hereafter. Yet although a great deal is now known, so far as the facts and the variety of relations between the facts are concerned, much uncertainty still remains on many points. The Nag-Hammadi library provides in this respect a quite extraordinarily rich supplement to our knowledge, and it will considerably broaden and deepen our insight into the religious life of the second and third centuries.

If we are to understand the spiritual conditions prevailing under the Caesars, we must always bear in mind—and this is of the utmost importance—that all the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea were held together by one common bond: that of the Roman Empire. The area which nowadays includes a large number of countries, each with its own distinctive history, differing in religion and with mutually opposed political systems and interests, formed at that time a unity embracing peoples of varying extraction. Greece, Western Asia and Egypt had been brought under one rule through the lightning conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great (d. 323 BC). It is true that after Alexander's death this empire fell to pieces; but the kingdoms of his successors, the Diadochi, in spite of many differences, had this in common: that, culturally speaking, they all moved in the same direction. Thus one speaks of the 'Hellenistic

culture' which, to all appearances at least, dominated the life of such countries as Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor. After Augustus's victory at Actium (31 BC) the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean area were finally linked together. The *pax Romana* ensured more or less peaceful conditions in which trade and communications generally flourished. With the people who, under the constraint of slavery or by their own free will as travellers and merchants, moved between one part of the Empire and another, there moved also the ideas they carried with them. Generally speaking, one could manage very well anywhere by using the Greek language, and this was a powerful contributory factor. Just as Paul, when he travelled to various places in Asia Minor and to Greece and Rome, found Jewish communities there, so one might encounter anywhere the cult of the Egyptian goddess, Isis—even in distant Britain. These are just examples of a phenomenon with innumerable variations. The book of the Acts of the Apostles presents, for the first century, an interesting series of 'snapshots'. A Jew like Aquila, coming originally from Pontus, settled for some time in Rome, then at Corinth, then at Ephesus. At the court of the Roman proconsul in Cyprus Paul met a Jew who was there, not to proclaim the God of Israel, but to practise as a sorcerer. In Athens, a centre of exceptional religious enthusiasm, philosophers of the Stoic and Epicurean schools sat at the feet of Paul to see what this new teacher had to say. At Ephesus Paul's preaching brought him into violent collision with the local religious cult, because it proved a threat to the sale of the miniature temples which pilgrims from all over the place took away with them as relics. It is noteworthy that those converted came from circles owning books of magic. These were burned; but the degree of sacrifice which this act involved shows just what high value was placed on books of this sort.

The second century is of outstanding significance for the encounter between Gnosis and Christianity. Let us see what a few witnesses of that period have to say. The Emperor Hadrian was very fond of travelling and was a man who evinced a great concern over matters of religion. A letter of his has survived which, though possibly spurious, sheds a remarkable light on the religious situation. It refers to Egypt as being fickle and shallow-minded: 'There are Christians who adore Serapis (a renowned

Egyptian deity); and there are people who, having consecrated themselves to Serapis, call themselves bishops of Christ. There is not a single leader of a Jewish synagogue, not one Samaritan, not one elder among the Christians, but he is an astrologer, soothsayer or quack.'[1] That is not quite the picture that Christian documents would lead one to expect! It is probably a wild generalization; but even so it would scarcely have been written had there been nothing to justify it. Another example from Asia Minor brings onto the stage one Alexander, the prophet of Abonoteichus. He caused an oracle to be set up in that place, because he said a new manifestation of Asclepius had been born in the form of a snake. In the years round about AD 165 there was a continuous stream of people going there to consult the oracle. They came not only from Syria; even an influential Roman believed implicitly in the utterances of this divine oracle. The predictions were of a most ambiguous kind. Lucian described in some detail the shifts employed by Alexander to strengthen confidence in these supernatural occurrences: and the rites carried out there took the form of a 'mystery'. Alexander turned the local population against the Epicurean philosophers and the Christians there in Paphlagonia who were attacking his dishonest practices. Lucian's description[2] presents a picture of the credulous longing for divine 'revelations' typical of the time, and of how widely the fame of such cults was spread abroad.

Anyone wanting to know about the currents of religion during this period will find much material to interest him in the treatise *Concerning Isis and Osiris*, by the famous moralist, Plutarch (*c.* AD 100). This author travelled a great deal. From Greece, his country of origin, he visited Egypt and then worked for a time in Rome until he could get back to his native city of (inland) Chaeronea. The book[3] was written for a lady who fulfilled some high-priestly function at Delphi, but was also initiated into the mysteries of the Egyptian goddess, Isis. Plutarch describes the myth concerning the goddess Isis and her husband Osiris, who was slain by his adversary but later resurrected. According to Plutarch, however,

[1]F. Vopiscus, *Vita Firmi, Saturnini, Proculi et Bonosi*, in E. Preuschen, *Analecta*,[2] Tübingen, 1909, I pp. 16 ff.

[2]M. Caster, *Etudes sur Alexandre ou le faux prophète de Lucien*, Paris, 1938 (text with commentary); ET in Lucian, *Works*, Loeb ed., Vol. IV, 1925.

[3]ET: Plutarch, *Moralia*, Loeb ed., Vol. V, 1936.

one must not take this literally as historical fact, but seek to understand its meaning, which is indeed contained in the sacred actions, though hidden from the multitude. 'Wherefore in the study of these matters it is especially necessary that we adopt, as our guide in these mysteries, the reasoning that comes from philosophy, and consider reverently each one of the things that are said and done' (ch. 68). Plutarch expounds the sense of the Greek words, applies his philosophical interpretations and makes comparisons with the myths of other races; and by all these means he contrives to find in these stories and actions a systematic explanation of the cosmos; for under a diversity of appellations there is in reality one truth revealing itself. The many religions are thus taken at their worth, respected and accepted as profound symbols, but at the same time reduced to a unity of religio-philosophical knowledge concerning the First Principle and the Thought. Confronted with a great diversity of religions, impelled by a deep respect for their antiquity, fired by a deep sense of religion himself and guided by the most sublime conceptions of Greek thought, Plutarch tried—as a typical representative of that syncretistic age—to fit everything together in a single, comprehensive account of the cosmos and of the life of Man within it. Being a Greek, he wanted to find the exact mean between unbelief and superstition. It is yet another illustration of how frontiers were transcended and how the religious ideas of various races fused one with another.

Whenever one obtains access therefore to religious documents of that period—and particularly when these have been written in Greek—the chances are considerable that elements of extremely diverse origin will be found in them. A good comparison would be with a kaleidoscope: the variety of interrelations between the elements can be very great. The question is not simply: where did these elements come from? It has also to be asked: what stamp do they bear? Take Judaism, for example; for that was caught up in this maelstrom too. One finds in Philo and in Josephus (at the beginning and the end of the first century AD) a large measure of 'Hellenization'; but notwithstanding all their efforts to make the message of the Old Testament intelligible to their contemporaries, both these writers remained highly conscious of being Jews. In rabbinical writings also one meets with ideas derived from

Hellenism;[1] yet the principal *motif* is still Jewish monotheism and deference to the Law. This phenomenon occurs over and over again in a variety of instances. The *sources* of the separate parts out of which a particular system is constructed were naturally not always present to the minds of the devotees, as would be the case with an expert student of the formative process, such as Plutarch. The blending process had been going on for many centuries already. It had begun, certainly, by the sixth century BC, which saw the rise of the Persian Empire, and since then had passed through several distinctive phases. By the time one gets to the second century AD, the large-scale migration of ideas had been going on for so long, and often so unobtrusively, that in some cases there is no awareness of 'taking over' anything at all. In other cases there obviously is, a notable example in Gnostic circles being that of the so-called Naassenes. We possess a homily of theirs[2] which shows a formal affinity to the method of Plutarch. It includes a myth belonging to the cult of Attis in Asia Minor, but mixed with Greek, 'Chaldean', and biblical elements: and these sources are actually referred to in the text. But all these borrowed elements are brought to bear on the question of the destiny of the soul. The constituent parts are not crucial in themselves; but what is crucial is the coherent whole within which they are set.

All the same, it is a good thing to keep in view the question: from which ultimate source and along which courses has the water flowed to reach this basin? It helps one to see, more or less in perspective, the substance of what is expressed or emphasized. If we now proceed to enumerate consecutively the sources of the various elements, the order in which we mention them is not the order of relative importance. One has always to remember that in different systems the commixture of elements is effected in different ways: and only by considering each case separately can one discover how this came about in particular instances. Remember too what Irenaeus says somewhere:[3] that a good many Gnostic teachers, feeling a need to add a dash of originality to

[1]See e.g. R. Meyer, *Hellenistisches in der rabbinischen Anthropologie* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom A. und N.T. IV 22), Stuttgart, 1937.

[2]In Hippolytus, *Refutatio* V 7.2–9.9.

[3]*Adv. Haer.* I 9.5; 11.1; 21.5.

their instruction often embroidered any given theme a little by inserting fresh names, duplicating their concepts or pressing the allegory further; but they were not in fact drawing any fresh material from an external source. Then there is the development of Gnosticism *within itself* to be reckoned with; for it was not a closed system of rigidly circumscribed dogmas, but rather a movement of the spirit without definite frontiers, in many lands, among all manner of men, through century after century. We must give due weight to this diversity and not—as so often happens—make the complexities of syncretism even more complex by adding to them the errors and perplexities of modern scholarship.

Here then are the 'spheres of influence' which have to be taken into account:

(1) *Iran,* the ancient Persia, whence comes, in particular, the explicit expression of dualism, the antithesis between light and darkness, the absolutes of good and evil.

(2) *Babylonia,* the land of astrology. Astrology was very widespread in the ancient world, and its fatalism dominated the lives of many people. The frequently recurrent notion of the seven planetary powers ruling the world comes chiefly from this quarter.

(3) *Western Asia* (Syria, with its worship of the Sun-god as the Most High).

(4) *Greece,* with her philosophy; it was principally those currents of philosophy with a religious hue which strongly influenced Gnosticism, such as the popularized elaboration of Platonic concepts, stressing an opposition between matter and spirit, the Stoic with his theory that everything is motivated by the sparks of divine Reason, which includes everything within itself, and the Neo-Pythagorean ideas which revived at this time, with their asceticism and mystic doctrine of numbers.

(5) *Judaism,* with the Old Testament as its sacred book; so far as Gnosticism is concerned, its influence was largely negative, issuing in a repudiation of the God of the Old Testament as the evil Creator—but the influence is there; especially is there an affinity with various mystical sects, ostracized by official Judaism; this influence is felt most strongly in the sphere of the magic arts.

(6) *Egypt,* with its widespread mystery-cult of Isis-Osiris; in

one special branch of the Gnostic literature—the so-called Hermetic writings, which are of pagan origin—revelation is attributed to the Egyptian Thot (equivalent of the Greek god, Hermes); the thesis has been sustained that these Hermetic writings are a Greek version of the theology of ancient Egypt.

It is not equally easy in every case to detect the channels by which these ideas came in contact with one another and eventually coalesced; and that is understandable, as they were nearly always handed on under the seal of secret instruction. Many of the writings in use claimed the authority of ancient seers. The magical arts were practised assiduously and in a variety of ways. The allegorical method was applied eagerly for the construction and development of ideas, as well to the Bible as to the poems of Homer. These documents did not mean in so many words what they appeared to say, but they contained a higher and deeper truth, understood only by the initiated. Everything that came out of the Orient and carried with it an aura of age-old revelation was valuable currency during the second and third centuries. Those who spread abroad such revelations were highly regarded, much sought after, sometimes feared. They undertook to give an insight, without impediment, into this strange, confusing and precarious existence, to show how it arose and what was the way out of this world of appearances, malignity and transience into the eternal world of the fullness of light. The way was by no means invariably the same; it might be illumination of the spirit, admission to the mysteries, silent contemplation—or some exotic rite accompanied by strange formulae.

Gnosticism then is a product of this world of religious ideas and convictions, flowing and mingling together, and one can learn to recognize it by these signs, in a remarkable fashion. The Nag-Hammadi documents too are of significance for this reason: that most fortunately they serve—though not perfectly, of course—to complement our existing knowledge. A study of their composition gives an insight into the initial stages and processes of growth, which nothing else would reveal.

The second and third centuries of our era witnessed an upsurge of religious feeling. They also witnessed the first large-scale expansion of the Christian faith: and that is why they proved to be of such radical importance for the spiritual and religious life of

mankind. It is all summed up, briefly but powerfully, in these words of Professor Thiel: 'The religious life of Man has brought him much real gain; but he has had to put up with the other side of the bargain—with despotism, with barbarity, with primitive irrationality. The measure of these has been far too great and they have persisted all too long. Brash intolerance and an obscurantism, often deliberately cultivated in the name of a higher power, which opposes itself to learning and to science—these are among the forms it has taken.'[1] And the consequent effects have continued down the centuries.

[1] J. H. Thiel, 'De geschiedenis van het Hellenisme', in: J. H. Waszink, W. C. van Unnik and C. de Beus, *Het oudste Christendom en de antieke cultuur*, Haarlem, 1951, I p. 72.

IV

THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRISTIANITY

As we have seen, most of the writings discovered at Nag-Hammadi are the products of Christian Gnosticism. The fact that non-Christian books, such as the *Hermetic Tracts*, are also included is interesting in that it suggests a spiritual kinship with, and a certain predilection for, such writings on the part of the owner(s) of the library; but they were not of first importance. Obviously, therefore, we should glance for a moment at the relations between Gnosticism and Christianity, inasmuch as these form part of the background to this collection.

Into the world in which the syncretism described in the previous chapter embodied the spirit of the age, there came the proclamation of Jesus Christ. As appears from the Acts of the Apostles, the first evangelists, including Paul, at first directed their preaching exclusively to the Jewish communities found all over the Roman Empire. But to the Jewish synagogues there were usually attached groups of sympathizers, Gentiles who were attracted, sometimes for a period only, sometimes permanently, by the monotheistic religion of the Hebrews. This meant that there was direct contact with non-Jews, and when the break with the synagogue came, because the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah was rejected in that quarter, missionary activity was directed towards these pagans. 'What sort of new teaching is this?' wondered the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17.19): and that, probably, is how it went on, although we lack the evidence to trace precisely what happened. However, remembering the spiritual climate of that age, one can easily imagine how many people took Christianity to be a novel variation on a familiar theme, yet another form of eastern religion, with its apocalyptic figure of Jesus, its secret rites such as baptism and communion, a religion which—like the rest—gave promise of 'salvation'. A typical example of this is Simon Magus (the sorcerer) in Acts 8, who was represented by later Church writers to be the originator of Gnosticism (though

that would scarcely seem to be so from the New Testament narrative). When Simon sees that the gift of the Holy Spirit, with its remarkable accompanying phenomena, is imparted through the apostles' laying on of hands, he tries to get possession of this 'power' for himself by offering money. That would have meant a splendid addition to his repertoire! The apostles' reaction is to spurn his proposal fiercely. But did it always turn out like that? It speaks volumes, surely, that according to an ancient tradition[1] the Nicolaitans (denounced in Rev. 2.6, 15) were followers of Nicolaus, the deacon (Acts 6.5). In I Tim. 6.20 f., there resounds the exhortation to 'avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge'; and to this is added: 'by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith.'

It is still an open question whether the doctrines attacked by Paul in his letter to the Colossians and the ideas criticized in the letters to Timothy and the Johannine letters were types of Gnostic utterances or just syncretistic teachings in a more general sense. It is certain, however, that in the second century there was a very intimate relation indeed between the true believers and these Christian Gnostics, and though various ecclesiastics were in a position to distinguish clearly between them, it was difficult for the outsider to appreciate the difference between the parties, since they all named the name of Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

One sees an example of this in Rome. As appears from his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (*c.* AD 160), Justin Martyr, when his opponent raised the question, knew that there were people who called themselves Christians and acknowledged Jesus the crucified as Lord and Christ, yet contrary to the teaching of Jesus defamed the Creator of the world. He gives a list of some of them: Marcionites, Valentinians, Basilidians and followers of Saturninus, all named after the founders of these schools.[2] For Justin they are merely a fulfilment of Jesus's words, that false prophets should arise who outwardly would be like harmless sheep, but inwardly were ravening wolves (Matt. 7.15). Thus they went by the name of Christians; but when it came to the point of a real profession, they avoided martyrdom. How closely bound up with the Church they were appears from the remarkable fact reported by Tertullian

[1] Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 26.3; III 11.1.
[2] *Dial.* 35.6.

—and there is no reason to doubt its accuracy—that Valentinus had been a candidate for the office of bishop in Rome.[1] This teacher must have possessed great powers of eloquence, so highly prized in the ancient world, and he had a considerable following. He did not achieve his goal, because another man, Pius, was preferred, who had risked his life for what he professed. Celsus too, the opponent and enemy of the Christians (*c.* AD 170), mentioned a whole string of different sorts of Christians, as Valentinians, Gnostics, Simonians, Marcellians, followers of Salome, Martha and Mariamne. When Origen, more than half a century later, set out to refute Celsus, some of these sects were unknown to him even by name. He succeeded—with great difficulty, it is true—in tracing a remarkable drawing of the structure of the universe, referred to by Celsus, even though in Origen's day the sect among whom this diagram was in use—the Ophites or Naassenes—had already practically died out. Origen exclaims, 'What has this to do with us who belong to the Church? . . . Those who introduce strange new ideas which do not harmonize with the traditional doctrines received from Jesus cannot be Christians.'[2] Yet Celsus had evidently understood them to be Christians. He was also able to show that what the aforementioned diagram represented tallied completely with the mysteries of the Sun-god, Mithras.

More is known about these sects mentioned by Celsus, from other sources. Irenaeus, for instance, tells us that a certain Marcellina came to Rome when Anicetus (*c.* AD 160) was bishop there and gained many supporters, who called themselves 'Gnostics'. Among other things he says that they possessed images and alleged that a portrait of Christ had been fashioned by Pilate: they set up these images alongside those of Pythagoras, Plato and other philosophers.[3] Here we have a typical example of syncretism, as I have described it in the foregoing chapter.

As regards the relation between the Christianity of the Church and Gnosticism, as the Gnostics themselves saw it, there is an interesting passage at the end of the letter which Valentinus' great pupil Ptolemy sent to a lady named Flora. The contents of this letter, which deals with the question of who actually gave the

[1] Tertullian, *Adv. Valentinianos* 4.
[2] *Contra Celsum* VI 24; V 61 (ET: H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 1953).
[3] *Adv. Haer.* I 25.6.

Mosaic Law, are notable in themselves; but then in conclusion Ptolemy says: 'For the moment, do not let yourself be confused by your desire to know how, from one first principle of the universe, which is simple and is admitted and believed by us to be so—the uncreate, incorruptible and good—there come to exist also these other natures, the corruptible and the mean (middling), which are unlike the former, even though it is characteristic of the good to beget and bring forth what is like and is in essence at one with itself. For if God should grant it, you may later become acquainted even with the origin and birth of these things, when you have properly considered the apostolic tradition, as handed down to us also; at the same time we test all our reasoning by the teaching of our Saviour.'[1]

Here one can see that the real question for Ptolemy is that of the relation of this world, with its corruption and wickedness, to the principle of the Incorruptible and the Good; but that for his ideas he appeals to 'apostolic tradition'—and that little word 'also' alludes to the fact that in the Church men appealed to the tradition when they wanted to point out the differences between 'Church' and 'Gnosis'. The words of Jesus are his criterion too, but of course according to his own interpretation.

Perhaps a good illustration of this is the sacrament of 'redemption', with which these Valentinian Gnostics were familiar. Irenaeus describes various forms of the rite.[2] This is the explanation they give for it: 'They who have attained to perfect knowledge must needs be born again in that power which is above all. For it is otherwise impossible to gain entrance into the *Pleroma* (the fullness) . . . For the baptism instituted by the visible Jesus was for the forgiveness of sins, but the redemption brought by that Christ who descended upon him was for perfection . . . the former is psychic (relating to the soul, the natural, impalpable part of Man), the latter spiritual. The baptism of John was preached with a view to repentance, but the redemption through Christ came for the sake of perfection. He is referring to this when he says: "I have another baptism to be baptized with, and a longing to hasten thereto" (Luke 12.50).' Again, they point to Mark 10.38 and the texts in which Paul speaks of the 'redemption in Jesus

[1]Ptolemy, *Epistula ad Floram*, in Epiphanius, *Haer.* 33.7.8 f.
[2]*Adv. Haer.* I 21.2.

Christ' (Rom. 3.24; Eph. 1.7). This 'redemption' was effected in various ways, sometimes as a kind of 'sacrament of the dying', in which mysterious Semitic formulae were pronounced. Those who received this 'redemption' might answer as follows: 'I am established and I am redeemed: I redeem my soul from this world and from all things bound up with it in the name of Iao who redeemed his own soul unto redemption in Christ who lives.' Setting aside the question of how this formula should be interpreted, it is plain enough at any rate that they made use of New Testament language and employed a peculiar method of ensuring redemption that went beyond any normal Christian practice. It rested on a contrast between the earthly Jesus and the heavenly Christ, between the psychic and the spiritual.

The Gnostics represented themselves as 'spiritual' people who had come to the perfect knowledge of God and had acquired an insight into the origin of this earthly existence: ordinary members of the Church were cast in an inferior mould and could only struggle, by simple faith and good works, to reach salvation.[1] I do not intend to describe here the various systems by which such 'knowledge' could be attained; two forms from the Nag-Hammadi documents will be sketched out later on. Here we simply take a look at the bearing all this had on the Church's proclamation.

The point has already been made that people appealed to 'tradition'. For 'they tell us that this knowledge is not openly propagated, because not all are able to comprehend it, but that it is revealed secretly by the Saviour by means of parables to such as are fitted to understand it.'[2] Starting from this principle, they take each story—including those in the New Testament—as a sort of parable. By use of the allegorizing method they construe everything as bearing out their speculations. Passages such as Mark 4.10 ff; 4.33 f.: 'In many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it; and without a parable spake he not unto them, but expounded everything to his disciples, when they were apart' (see also John 16.12), were dragged in to support their interpretation. Many new 'revelations' were composed, which Jesus is supposed to have uttered, in particular during the

[1]Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I 6.1 f.
[2]*Ibid.*, I 3.1.

time between his resurrection and ascension. These revelations are given sometimes to all the apostles, sometimes to a single person for him to pass them on. In a few cases they take the form of colloquies, in which the disciples ask questions. The names of some of those who received such revelations were mentioned: Mary, Peter, John, James, and Philip. The Gnostic, Basilides, appealed to the tradition he had received from the apostle Matthew. So there blossomed forth a copious literature which, under the seal of Jesus and his apostles, held out, as it were, something extra which remained a secret from the uninitiated, the doctrines of Gnosis. Thus was the attempt made to put the preaching of Jesus and his apostles to the service of various issues and dogmas of a wholly different origin.

Such endeavours provoked a reaction which found expression in a treatise by Justin Martyr—now unfortunately lost—and later on in Irenaeus's great work, *Against Heresies*, as well as in many other writings. This early contact and rivalry between the Christian faith and syncretistic paganism left a mark upon the Christian Church which has persisted through the centuries that followed, right up to the present day. That is why the spiritual struggle fought out in the second and third centuries is of such outstanding importance. One might say that it was a conflict clear enough in its outcome, but in many ways obscure in its origins. We must be thankful for everything that helps to clear away that obscurity and shed some light on the reactions of the Church Fathers and the drift of their arguments; for the obscurity arises chiefly from the absence of documents informing us about that period. They were destroyed or in the course of time have disappeared: and herein lies the special value of the Nag-Hammadi library and its contents.

The growth of Christianity in Egypt is a good illustration of what I mean. It is a well-known, though nevertheless very remarkable, fact that nothing is said in the New Testament about the preaching of the Gospel in Egypt, even though big colonies of Jews were living there. In what is known as the Codex Bezae, an old biblical manuscript that contains some peculiar readings at variance with the normal text, we read in Acts 18.25, concerning Apollos of Alexandria, that this man had been told about the word (or had been instructed in the word) *in his own country*. From

this one might infer that Christianity was already known there; but how far is this true? Is it not a case of what some copyist at a later time believed? The tradition according to which Mark had brought the word to Egypt is extremely late and unreliable. At all events it is odd that no connexion could be established between that country and any immediate disciple of Jesus. A number of Christian writings such as the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the homily known as the *Second Epistle of Clement* are supposed, with a greater or less degree of probability, to have come originally from Egypt, but it is by no means certain; and, historically speaking, they do not offer much that one can hang on to. It is said that the Gnostic, Basilides, and his son, Isidore, taught there in the first half of the second century, and that Valentinus, who has been mentioned earlier, came from the Nile delta; but even for this the evidence we have is fragmentary. Clement of Alexandria (*c.* AD 200) admittedly mentioned several names and quotes briefly from documents circulating in Egypt during the second century, but his information is very slight. A heavy veil covers the history of the Church in this part of the world, and not until AD 180, or thereabouts, is it lifted to some extent. The question remains: how did Christianity get there and how did it develop in that early period? The significance of that question and the possible answer to it must be obvious to anyone aware of the major role played by Clement of Alexandria, and above all by his pupil, Origen, in their own time and later—obvious also to anyone mindful of the great influence exercised by Alexandria and the surrounding region in the early Church.

Twenty-five years ago, the German scholar, Walter Bauer, pointed out with considerable acumen how understandable it was that a veil had been drawn across this very early period, since it was an age which later generations could only impugn as 'heretical' and therefore preferred to forget, as it cast a slur on the orthodoxy of their country.[1] This thesis has certainly been challenged: and it is questionable whether it can in fact be rigidly maintained. One might just as fairly say that in a period of ferment and transition Christianity was changing, that it was not yet hardened to the rigid pattern of a later age. It is the old trouble all

[1]W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei in ältesten Christentum*, Tübingen, 1934.

over again: lack of evidence. But in this respect the Nag-Hammadi collection promises to release fresh springs, which either flow direct from the source (supplying us with new documents from the period of obscurity itself) or will at any rate gush forth when scholarship has done a little boring through (for to the expert student's detective eye these documents will yield quite a number of secrets and point to further clues). Perhaps too they will tell us something of other areas about which only a little is known: Syria, for example, whence Basilides is thought to have borrowed his ideas.

It is not impossible that in this way we shall succeed not only in getting a clearer glimpse of Gnosticism and a more exact insight into that obscure period in which Christianity arose, but in bringing into view the actual source of this 'knowledge' and its evolution, as it continued to exist within, alongside, over against Christianity.

V

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Of the many books comprising the Nag-Hammadi library there is perhaps none with a more intriguing title than *The Gospel of Thomas*. What does the book really contain?

There is preserved in Greek—and in a number of different versions—an apocryphal book about the childhood of Jesus to his twelfth year, which is associated with the name of Thomas the apostle.[1] The scanty accounts in the New Testament of the earliest years of Jesus's life have evidently fired the pious imagination. Altaner contends that these stories must go back to a Gnostic writing, revised at some later date to suit the Church's viewpoint; for Cyril of Jerusalem (middle of the fourth century) warns us against a 'Gospel of Thomas' in use among the Manicheans—a non-Christian, Gnostic movement which flourished in Persia from the middle of the third century.[2] But Origen, in his elucidation of the preface to Luke's Gospel, wanting to explain the word ἐπεχείρησαν (Luke 1.1), had already discussed a similar 'attempt' in a 'Gospel of Thomas'.[3] Hippolytus gives a curious aphorism, taken from the gospel of that name: 'He who seeks me shall find me in children from the seventh year; for hiding myself there in the fourteenth aeon I reveal myself.'[4] According to Hippolytus this gospel was used among the Gnostic Naassenes or Ophites. Yet in those recensions of the gospel about the childhood of Jesus which have been preserved no such sentence occurs; so we must distinguish two writings that happen to bear the same title. Which of them is represented by our recently discovered text?

Professor Puech was the first to be able to scrutinize photostatic copies of this gospel. In 1953 he issued the first report and

[1]ET in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 5th impression revised, 1953, pp. 49–57.

[2]Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* IV 36; B. Altaner, *Patrologie*,[5] Freiburg im Breisgau, 1958, p. 57.

[3]*Homily 1 on Luke.*

[4]*Refutatio* V 7.20.

informed us that it had nothing to do with the childhood of the Lord Jesus, but contained a large collection of 'Logia', that is to say, sayings attributed to Jesus. Moreover, being the accomplished scholar and expert in early Christian literature that he is, he was able at the same time to show that some small part of these sayings was known already, if only in a very corrupt form—not in our canonical gospels, as one might perhaps suppose; for as we shall see, these sayings stand in a very distant relationship to them indeed. It had long been known that among the Christians of the early centuries a number of the sayings of Jesus had been in circulation, which are not recorded in the New Testament Gospels. The New Testament itself offers an instance of this in Acts 20.35, where in his farewell speech to the elders at Ephesus Paul calls to mind a saying of Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' One may search in vain for this elsewhere in the New Testament. Of the scores of Agrapha, so-called (that is, unrecorded sayings), which have been preserved to us through certain New Testament manuscripts and early Christian writers, I will mention just two. Justin Martyr (d. AD 167) writes in his *Dialogue with Trypho* 47.5: 'Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ said: In what state soever I come upon you, therein will I also judge you' (preserved also, in a slightly variant form, by Clement of Alexandria and in a *Life of Antony*[1]). Origen, in his *Commentary on John* XIX 2, says: 'So long as they keep the commandment of Jesus, which says: Be trustworthy, ye moneychangers' (as also in Clement of Alexandria and Apelles, the follower of Marcion). These Agrapha, assigned in part to lost apocryphal gospels, such as that 'according to the Hebrews' and that 'according to the Egyptians', attracted the interest of scholars a long time ago. What impelled their researches was the question whether these 'words' really did convey yet more authentic sayings of Jesus. The most recent publication which attempts, in a very clear manner indeed, to sift out what is spurious from what is genuine is *Unbekannte Jesusworte*,[2] by the well-known New Testament scholar, Professor Joachim Jeremias, of Göttingen.

Since the close of the last century several important additions from various sources have been made to this collection of Agrapha.

[1]Clement, *Quis dives* 40; *Vit. Ant.* 15 (Migne, *PL* 73, 136A).
[2]ET: *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 1957.

As early as 1897, one of the earliest large-scale publications of Egyptian papyri (those from Oxyrhynchus) presented in its first number a series of eight sayings which, so far as could be made out from the damaged leaf, all began with: 'Jesus says. . . .'. In 1904, a new series was added to Pap. Oxy. I in the shape of Pap. Oxy. 654 and 655; this contained six new Logia. Various scholars have tried to fill in the lacunae and so to make these fragments more or less readable. As to the relation between these two leaves, it was concluded that they must also certainly have come from two different apocryphal gospels, and this is also what Altaner says in his recently published *Patrologie*.[1] In the first saying of Oxy. Pap. 654 the name of Thomas appears; but because the preceding line was unreadable, it was not clear how he fitted into the picture. The reading proposed by Klostermann,[2] when translated, runs like this: 'And Jesus appeared to the ten and said to Thomas. . . .'

It is unnecessary for our purpose to say anything more in detail regarding other finds of papyrus—fragments containing the remains of unknown gospels, such for example as those which Bell and Skeat made known in 1935. We turn our attention to the *Gospel of Thomas*; and for that it is quite essential to have the foregoing information; for Professor Puech was very quickly able to show that the fourteen Logia preserved in the Greek were all to be found in the Gnostic Coptic text, in pretty well perfect condition at that. Pap. Oxy. 655 comes into it too. The sayings in Greek are now seen to have belonged to the same collection; there is no longer any need for dubious speculative readings and, what is more, we have before us an extremely copious collection of one hundred and fourteen Logia. One can see that at long last this puts discussion of the nature and value of these 'sayings of Jesus' on a solid foundation, even if it still leaves plenty to puzzle us. The sequence of the sayings in the Greek text is slightly different from that of the Coptic translation; so the book existed in various copies. But the wording of the separate sayings is practically the same.

The preamble to this gospel says: 'These are the secret words which Jesus the living one has spoken, and Didymus Judas

[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 55.
[2] *Apocrypha* II: *Evangelien*,[3] Berlin, 1929, p. 20.

Thomas recorded. And he said: Whoever has found what these words signify shall in no wise taste of death.' It is clear from this heading that what we have here is a secret revelation: and this, as we previously saw (pp. 42 ff.), was a form of imparting their truths to which the Gnostics were much addicted. Although it is not stated in so many words, one may with fair certainty deduce that this document was used alongside the canonical Gospels of the 'great Church' and in opposition to them. As appears from the conclusion (as in John 8.52), the purport of the sayings turns on this, above all: their possession confers the truth and eternal life. Thomas then was the intermediary who handed on these sayings. In John 11.16; 20.24; and 21.2, the expression 'called Didymus' is appended to this name: this Greek term for a 'twin' is a rendering of the Aramaic 'Thomas', which has the same meaning. The author, however, did not know about the linguistic connexion and took both terms to be personal names. In our New Testament the name Judas is not associated with this apostle; but an old Syrian manuscript reads at John 14.22, in place of the simple Judas, 'Judas Thomas'. Elsewhere too in the Syrian tradition one comes across this name, but—so far as is yet known—only there: as, for instance, in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* (beginning of the third century) which describe his missionary activity in the east, and in which this Judas Thomas is in several places clearly understood to be twin brother to the Lord Jesus. It is not extravagant to conclude from what these names indicate that this document comes from Syria and probably from some bilingual locality. In Chapter 39 of the above-mentioned *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle is thus addressed by a talking ass's foal: 'Twin brother of the Messiah, apostle of the Most High and fellow-initiate in the hidden word of the Messiah, who hast received his secret pronouncements.' This possibly echoes the opening passage in our document, although points of contact between the *Acts* and this gospel are not particularly obvious in other respects.

From the title and from certain other pieces of evidence one concludes that Syria was its country of origin. As to the date, since the author intended his work to pass for a direct revelation from Jesus, he has drawn a veil over that. If the Oxyrhynchus papyri belong to the beginning of the third century and if—as we shall consider later on—the author used the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which

certainly existed before AD 150, then this collection must have been completed at the latest by about AD 170.

Much more important than that is the question of the character of these collected 'sayings of Jesus'. It is immediately evident that, as the papyri had already led us to suppose, we have here various utterances of the Lord, loosely connected and strung together. It has nothing to do with the book on the childhood of Jesus, which I mentioned earlier, although that too circulated among Gnostics, according to Irenaeus.[1] The design also is different from that of the New Testament Gospels. They provide a more or less chronologically arranged narrative, preceded in some instances by information about the birth of Jesus, that tells what happened between his baptism by John and his resurrection. The emphasis falls strongly on the events of the last week, and thus the cross is highlighted, just as in the same way it forms the heart of the Gospel message. Broadly speaking, that is not the case with the document that now concerns us. There is no historical progression; it does not lead up to the cross and resurrection; the sayings at the end have the same character as those at the beginning. Read right through this compilation and you find that it brings *sayings* together indeed, but that the *deeds* which in the canonical Gospels play such a prominent part in revealing and vindicating the messianic claim of Jesus have no place here. In some cases, the saying of Jesus is put in the context of a brief discussion between him and his followers: in a few places some slight feature suggestive of a situation is provided; but in far and away the great majority of instances there is simply an introductory 'Jesus said', followed by the saying.

At one time it was assumed, on the evidence of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, that this must really have been an extract made by somebody who had built up such a collection of Jesus' sayings for private use, and that the introductory formula marked them out as being utterances of the risen Lord.[2] Now as a matter of fact one does find various examples in early Christian literature of similar revelations ascribed to the period between the resurrection and ascension: the most famous of these is the so-called *Letter of the Eleven Apostles*, fully preserved in an Ethiopic version. But

[1] *Adv. Haer.* I 20.1.

[2] See E. Hennecke, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*,[2] Tübingen, 1924, p. 50.

nothing in the *Gospel of Thomas* points to this. Jesus the teacher is here he who brings the revelation in and through the word, as one finds again and again in the Gnostic writings. He is not so much Messiah as guide and pointer to the Way.

Naturally, the question arises: how are these sayings of Jesus related to those which occur in the New Testament? After all, the canonical Gospels contain many utterances of the Lord. In other words, is what we have here extracted from the Gospels? That in itself would be interesting enough, for it might possibly bring some variant readings to light; but everybody who has read the parts known already in their fragmentary state realizes that it is not so.

The second aphorism makes this apparent at once. It runs thus: 'Jesus says: Let him who seeks, not desist from seeking until he finds; and when he has found, he shall deliver himself and when he has delivered himself, he will be astonished and he will be king over all.' For such a saying, or for anything like it, one can search the New Testament in vain; but we find Clement of Alexandria (*c.* AD 200) quoting it twice. In his *Stromata* V 14.96, when making a comparison between Greek and Hebrew wisdom, he first quotes a saying of Plato's and then he says: 'Those words have the same force as these: "He who seeks must not desist until he finds; when he has found, he shall deliver himself and when he has delivered himself, he will reign as a king; and being a king, he shall have rest".' Without stating where this is to be found, he evidently employs it in his argument as 'holy writ'; yet in *Stromata* II 9.45, he indicates his source: 'In the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* it is written: He who has been astonished at himself shall reign as a king and he who has become a king shall have rest'—(between these two quotations there are minor differences, not relevant here). Clement was fully conversant with post-New Testament literature; we can now see where he borrowed this saying from, and that he considered it perfectly sound Christian teaching.

But the same author also shows us that still further sources lie behind this compilation. Take Saying 22: 'Jesus saw children being suckled. He said to his disciples: These children who are being suckled are like them who enter into the Kingdom. They said to him: Must we then as children enter into the Kingdom? Jesus said to them: When ye shall have made the twain one and

when ye have made the innermost as the outermost, and the outermost as the innermost and the highest as the lowest, and (when ye make) the male one with the female so that the male be not male and the female not female, when ye make eyes in the place of an eye and a hand in the place of a hand, a likeness in the place of a likeness, then shall ye enter.' In *Stromata* III 13.92 Clement of Alexandria quotes a certain Cassianus (*c.* AD 150) who repeats this saying of the Lord in answer to a question by Salome: 'When ye shall have trodden under foot the garment of shame and when the twain are become one and the male with the female neither male nor female.' Clement affirms that this was said not in the four traditional Gospels but in the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. This description of a return to the paradisal state is found elsewhere, again as a saying of the Lord: so in the *Second Epistle of Clement* (probably mid-second century): 'For when someone inquired of the Lord when the Kingdom should come, he said: When the twain shall be one and the outermost as the innermost and the male with the female neither male nor female.' In a rather different form it occurs in the *Acts of Peter*, where the apostle says, as he hangs upside-down on the cross (ch. 38): 'The Lord saith in a mystery: If ye make not the right as the left and the left as the right, and that which is above as that which is beneath, and that which is behind as in the fore, ye shall not know the Kingdom.' On comparing these differing versions, one sees that in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* there is evidently a combination. Remarkably enough, the first part turns up again in our collection, as Saying 37: 'His disciples said to him: When shalt thou be made manifest to us and when shall we see thee? He said: When ye have unclothed yourselves and ye feel no shame and have taken your garments and have laid them beneath your feet as little children and have trodden upon them, then shall ye see the Son of the Living and ye shall not fear.' Part of this saying can also be read in a papyrus, Pap. Oxy. 655, where it forms part of an assemblage of sayings in which the term 'clothe' or 'clothing' happens to occur. There it goes: 'His disciples say to him: When shalt thou be made manifest to us and when shall we see thee? He says: When ye have unclothed yourselves and feel no shame. . . . (the remainder of the text is missing). On the basis of the reference in Clement all these sayings are usually assigned to the *Gospel of the Egyptians*

(and this applies to the well-known translation of New Testament Apocrypha by E. Hennecke, as well as to other cases); but when one looks at the tradition as a whole, this seems extremely doubtful. What Clement elsewhere borrows from the *Gospel of the Egyptians* also includes conversations with Salome (Mark 15.40) with a strong bias against matrimony; it is the same with the saying in Cassianus, but not so with the other texts. Evidently the *Gospel of the Egyptians* presents us with a combination of originally unconnected sayings. Strikingly enough, the *Acts of Peter* expressly say that this text springs from a 'mystery'. At the same time, one can see from this example in what varied forms such aphorisms were being circulated.

In the course of transmission these aphorisms travelled by curious and complicated paths, as in the case of Saying 74: 'The Lord said: Many are close about the pit, none however within the pit.' The great opponent of Christianity, Celsus (*c.* AD 170) gives this saying as one part of what he calls a 'heavenly dialogue', which was in circulation among the Christians. Yet Origen (*Contra Celsum* VIII 15) does not know where he gets this from—probably from some sect or other: and this is said by Origen, who knows a good many different non-canonical sayings of the Lord, as his works testify in various places. He quotes one—to take an example—in *Homily 3.3 on Jeremiah*: 'Whoso is close to me is close to the fire; whoso is far from me is far from the Kingdom': an aphorism found in our compilation as Saying 82.

Saying 12 makes it clear that a familiarity with the *Gospel of the Hebrews* is certainly part of the background to this collection: 'The disciples said: We know that thou shalt go hence from us. Who is to be the greatest among us? Jesus said to them: In the place whereto ye are come shall ye go up to James, the righteous, on whose account heaven and earth arise.' Obviously, James is here assigned the first place among the disciples; he is the central figure of the creation. We are left in no doubt as to the standing of this James; for we know from Josephus and from early Christian authors that James, the brother of the Lord, was called 'the righteous' on account of his faithful fulfilling of the Law. Acts 15 and 21.18 show—what indeed is corroborated elsewhere—that he ministered as the first bishop of the Jerusalem community. For the Jewish Christians he was the leading figure. Since therefore

this saying lays so much emphasis on his pre-eminent position, one does not need to look very far to determine its provenance: and in view of that, it is tempting to refer yet other sayings to the same source.

Unhappily, this *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which was still known to the Church Father, Jerome, at about AD 400,[1] has been lost as a complete work; and only in quotations has something of it been preserved. We see now the possibility of getting to know it somewhat better and so becoming conversant with lines of thought which in the course of the Church's history have certainly played their vital part, but which lacked the power of survival or at all events were wiped out.

Quispel has drawn attention to one noteworthy example. Saying 39 says: 'The Pharisees and the scribes have seized the keys of knowledge; they have hidden them; they have not entered themselves and they have not allowed those who wished to go within to do so either' (in fragmentary form also Pap. Oxy. 655). This seems to be a combination of Matt. 23.13 and Luke 11.52. In the latter verse, manuscripts give a variant, where instead of 'taken away' they read 'hidden', just like this text. One comes across this same verb, 'to hide', in this context, in Pseudo-Clementine documents (*Recogn.* 2.30, *Hom.* 18.16) which go back to Jewish-Christian traditions.

At this point a number of interesting questions arise: and the first is again that of relationship to the canonical Gospels. Here, for instance, is Saying 26: 'Jesus says: You see the splinter which is in your brother's eye, but the beam which is in your eye you do not see. When you have pulled the beam out of your eye, then shall you be able to see clearly to pull the splinter out of your brother's eye'; a saying which is pretty nearly the same as in Matt. 7.3 ff. (Luke 6.41 ff. being an expanded version). Or take Saying 34: 'Jesus says: If a blind man leads a blind man, both of them fall into the pit' (see Matt. 15.14); or Saying 44: 'Whosoever has blasphemed against the Father, it shall be forgiven him: whosoever has blasphemed against the Son, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever has blasphemed against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, either on earth or in heaven'—a saying which looks like an elaboration of Matt. 12.32. So one could cite

[1] *De Viris Illustribus* 3.

still more sayings, in plenty. One striking fact that emerges from this process of comparison is that one can go on producing parallels to such sayings from the Synoptic Gospels, but no characteristic Johannine sayings appear at all. It is not possible to generalize about the relationship or sum it up in brief statements such as, for example, that it is always a matter of elaboration. There is no question of straightforward identity. Can these sayings be referred to the *Gospel of the Hebrews* tradition—a gospel, according to Jerome, closely akin to Matthew?

A further question concerns this business of the variant readings. We have already looked at one example of this when dealing with Saying 39. Quispel has shown[1] by a number of examples that this is not an isolated case. Everyone knows that the text of the New Testament has not come down to us with exactly the same words in all of the many manuscripts and translations. It was remarkable that Quispel's researches led him to conclude that in the *Gospel of Thomas* departures from the normal text most often took the form of variants of the so-called Western Text (i.e. the Codex Bezae in particular), and of the old Latin and old Syriac versions. In this connexion, Wensinck reminded us some years ago[2] that variants in this type of text are not simply to be explained as scribal errors, but must go back to different translations from the Aramaic and therefore to a very ancient and independent layer of the tradition. It is worth noting too that Quispel found certain points of contact with what is called the Diatessaron tradition. At about AD 170 the Syrian teacher, Tatian, composed from the four Gospels—(or were there five, as one solitary clue suggests?)—a Harmony, with one continuous narrative running through it. This text, unfortunately, has been lost; but when still in existence it made its influence felt in various directions, with the result that its effects are still discernible even in offshoots of a later time, such as the Middle-Dutch *Life of Jesus* (ed. Plooy) and a Persian Diatessaron. Corresponding elements in these works thus

[1] 'The Gospel of Thomas and the New Testament', *Vig. Chr.* 11, 1957, pp. 189–207.

[2] A. J. Wensinck, *The semitisms of codex Bezae and their relation to the non-western text of the gospel of Saint Luke* (Bulletin 12 of the Bezanclub), Leyden, 1937. On the problems of the so-called Western Text of the New Testament see the survey in A. F. Klyn, *A survey of the researches into the Western Text of the Gospels and Acts*, Utrecht, 1949.

point back to readings current in Syria during the second half of the second century.

With that is connected yet a third question, raised several times already in connexion with the Agrapha: have we in fact got genuine sayings of Jesus here? We know from Luke 1.1 that there were other attempts at gospel-writing, and from John 20.30 that not everything has been written down. But in his study of the *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, there is very little that Joachim Jeremias did not reject, or the authenticity of which he was prepared to vouch for. One notices too that the Synoptics do not afford parallels to all the sayings in our collection. Where does a saying like this come from (15): 'Jesus says: When you shall see that one who was not born of a woman, fall down on your faces and worship him: he is your Father'; or Saying 87: 'Jesus says: Wretched the body that cleaves to a body, and wretched the soul that cleaves to these twain'?

Was the Belgian New Testament scholar, Cerfaux, right in thinking it necessary to maintain[1] that the sayings have been expanded and reinterpreted from a Gnostic standpoint, with the Valentinians particularly in mind (see pp. 59 ff.)? One cannot generalize about this, but simply has to examine each saying separately, one by one, bearing in mind the abstractive character of the work. When one thinks of the bland way in which people in the second century calmly produced all sorts of apocryphal writings and put into the mouth of Jesus the most eccentric utterances, certain cases of falsification are only to be expected. But in other cases one can see no trace of it: and it is not *a priori* an impossibility that certain traditions—Jewish-Christian traditions especially—independent of the synoptic tradition have been preserved in this way; for it is common knowledge that a great deal belonging to the end of the first century and to the second century has vanished. This raises, of course, important questions for the Form-criticism school of Gospel exegesis, while at the same time a possibly independent source of evidence appears alongside the synoptic tradition.

As things stand at present, it is not yet possible to speak with certainty on these matters. Yet we can be sure of one thing: that

[1] L. Cerfaux and C. Garitte, 'Les paraboles du royaume dans l' *Evangile de Thomas*', *Le Muséon* 70, 1957, pp. 321 ff.

this document, when compared with other typically Gnostic works, exhibits much that deviates from Gnosticism, much that comes closer to the doctrines of the 'great Church'. The importance of the text of this *Gospel of Thomas* therefore lies in the *possibility* that authentic sayings of Christ do appear in it, in the use which it has obviously made of the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, in the comparison it affords with the synoptic tradition and in textual history, and in the opportunity of watching that process of change to which some of the Lord's sayings have been subjected (in this connexion it is especially interesting to see that this collection contains, in some instances, two versions of the same utterance). But all suggestions that we might have here a 'fifth Gospel', something which can take its place with the canonical Gospels, goes far beyond and is even contrary to the available evidence. The discovery of this invaluable work no doubt poses many problems, but with careful study must yield a great deal that will increase our knowledge of the various currents of early Christianity and of the influence that flowed from Jesus Christ himself.

VI

THE GOSPEL OF TRUTH

THE collection includes a manuscript, already referred to in a previous chapter, which has had its own peculiar history and has become known as the Jung Codex. The work which comes second in this manuscript has no title, but is called, after its opening words, *The Gospel of Truth*. It was brought out in a *de luxe* edition in 1956.[1] It comprises pages 16 to 43 of the manuscript, with a single lacuna (pages 33 to 36, two leaves). Inquiries in Cairo revealed that, fortunately, the missing leaves are still in being; since then they have been published and translated, so we have this work in an almost unspoilt state of preservation.

The opening passage runs thus: 'The Gospel of Truth is the joy of those who have received grace from the Father of Truth to know him through the power of the Logos which proceeds from the *Pleroma* (the fullness) that is in the mind and spirit of the Father: (and) which is he whom men call the Redeemer; for so is that work called which he must do for the redemption of such as knew not the Father; for the name of the gospel is the revelation of hope, because it is a treasure to them that seek him.' As can be seen, the theme is given straight away; it is the knowing of the Father by those who did not know him, through the mediation of the Logos (the Word) who is the Redeemer, a typical Gnostic theme. That this view of the matter is right is borne out on p. 22: 'Whosoever has knowledge (*gnosis*) understands from whence he has come and whither he goes' (see p. 22 above).

One can see from those opening words that the book wastes little time in coming to the point. There is no preface to tell us the name of the writer or those of the people to whom it was addressed. Since we at present possess only one manuscript of this text, it must remain a matter of uncertainty whether such an introduction ever existed; the copyist evidently did not know of

[1] *Evangelium Veritatis*, ed. M. Malinine, H. C. Puech and G. Quispel, Zurich, 1956.

one. The same thing happens with other early Christian books—that a heading or superscription is lacking; but in these cases the later tradition often comes to the rescue, even though it is not always trustworthy. The end of our 'gospel' is equally frustrating; for that too offers no information at all. Only once does the author make an appearance: and then just to make it clear that he has quite consciously kept himself in the background. Speaking about the saints, who have their 'place' in God, he says: 'The others in their places are now given to know that it does not befit me, having sojourned at the place of rest, to say any more. But in it shall I be and that in order to consecrate myself ever to the Father of the universe and the true brethren upon whom the love of the Father is poured forth, and in their midst there is no imperfection' (pp. 42 f.). It is as an initiate that he speaks here; from personal experience he has come to know the highest truth; but as with most of the ancient mystery religions, it does not befit him to talk more of it here (cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI 22). Nor are his own experiences of importance; he wishes simply to pass on the message of this salvation through knowledge. The book is about the work of redemption in its eternal setting: and one looks in vain for allusions to any events in the lifetime of the author.

Yet is there nothing at all known about this author and his time? Among writers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, whose accounts of documents which have been lost more or less agree, we have so far found nothing that might suggest a familiarity with this work. But Irenaeus offers one clue which may help us along. In his third book *Against Heresies* he talks about the 'Evangel' in its quadruple form and attacks the heretics who will have it that there are more or less than four gospels. One thing he says[1] is that the Valentinians pride themselves on possessing more gospels. 'They have swaggered forth'—this is literally what he says—'to such a degree of boldness that they give the title, *Gospel of Truth*, to something which they put together only a short while ago, even though in no point whatever does it accord with the Gospels of the apostles, so that their very gospel is not free from blasphemy. For if what they have published is indeed the *Gospel of Truth*, albeit so utterly at variance with those books handed down to us by the apostles, then any who so wish could conclude

[1] *Adv. Haer.* III 11.9.

therefrom—as the writings themselves show—that what the apostles have delivered is no longer the "gospel of truth".'

Now here we have the same title; and since—as will appear—our document does indeed show points of agreement with Valentinian Gnosticism, one can say that very probably it is the same book. Admittedly, it seems remarkable that, in describing the Valentinian doctrine in the first book, Irenaeus has made no use of this one, and that when Valentinus is elsewhere mentioned, no quotations are made from it. Yet on the other hand, the Bishop of Lyons must have had it at his disposal; for he would not otherwise have been able to make the comparison with the canonical Gospels. Furthermore one has only to read it in order to see that his remark that this *Gospel of Truth* differs entirely from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, is fully justified. While the New Testament Gospels follow the line of history from the birth and baptism of Jesus to his crucifixion and resurrection, while they relate specific meetings between Jesus and other men of his time and give us information about his miracles and sayings, this *Gospel of Truth* presents nothing of all this. It is true that here and there reference is made to events in Jesus's life, but then only in very general terms: it is more an account of the eternal meaning of Jesus's appearing than a narration of facts. It is rather a homily or edifying treatise *about* the Gospel than the sort of book we should recognize under that name. Another thing one misses here—and this is characteristic of a great many Gnostics—is the Old Testament connexion. Only one allusion is to be found, whereas the canonical Gospels are linked up with the Old Testament very closely indeed, by the number of quotations, for example. Nor does the *Gospel of Truth* give us any collected sayings of Jesus, such as those we have come to know from the *Gospel of Thomas*—not even a secret revelation after the resurrection. What it does is to meditate upon the necessity of redemption, and its *modus operandi*.

On pp. 31 f. our document gives a curious exposition of the parable of the 'lost sheep'. (Matt. 18.12–14; Luke 15.3–7). Thus it discusses the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep that had not wandered off to go in search of the one sheep that had strayed. At that point it adds this commentary: 'For 99 is a number that is counted on the left hand which holds it fast, but as soon as the One is found, the whole number goes over to the right. Even so,

he who lacks the One, that is to say, the whole right hand which makes up what is wanting, takes it from the left hand and transfers it to the right: and so the number becomes 100.' This astonishing explanation is more or less intelligible when one remembers that, in antiquity, it was customary to distinguish numbers by the position of the fingers and to count on the hand. The values of 1 to 99 were expressed on the left hand, the centuples by using the right hand. One has to remember that 'left' and 'right' also signify 'unpropitious' and 'propitious'. Now one would expect the application to be that God or Christ should search for the one sheep and so make up the hundred; the fact that in accordance with the whole tenor of his work the writer so much emphasizes the element of 'wandering' makes this the obvious assumption. But extraordinarily enough—as appears at once from his opening remarks—'the One' is God himself! He, the One (the *Monos*, following the emphasis in the Bible on the unity of God), is 'missed' by erring mankind; and so the defect is represented in the symbol of the left hand, but when the One is added it goes over to the 'propitious' side.

This curious interpretation not only shows us how the author handled the words of the Gospel story—(one could point to many similar examples of outrageous exposition of Scripture both within and outside the early Church)—but it also confirms that the book came from Valentinian circles. As a matter of fact Irenaeus tells us that this very same interpretation occurs among a particular sect of the Valentinians, namely, the Marcosians.[1] Again, such concepts as 'want' and 'completion', 'fullness' and 'rest' (denoting the heights of felicity) and various other terms which one meets with here are part of the Valentinians' characteristic vocabulary.

This Gnostic sect took its name from the teacher Valentinus who, though born in a district of the Nile delta, taught for a considerable part of his life in Rome. His activities there belong to the period between AD 130 and 160. Even his adversary, Tertullian, cannot desist from applauding the intellectual powers and eloquence of Valentinus. No wonder, therefore, that he acquired a substantial following. About AD 140, he even made an attempt to get himself elected bishop of Rome; but another man, who had

[1] *Adv. Haer.* I 16.2; II 24.6.

risked martyrdom because of his bold and open witness, was preferred. According to Tertullian it was this mischance which caused him to break with the Church. It is hard to distinguish here between cause and effect. About ten years later, the supporters of Valentinus form themselves into a sect, which certainly calls itself Christian, but is one from which a Justin Martyr totally dissociates himself.[1] It is interesting to note that Valentinus was not merely a contemporary of the apologist, Justin, and the penitential homilist, Hermas, but worked at the same time and in the same city and community with them. Among his pupils were outstanding figures such as Ptolemy, whose acuteness of mind is fully reflected in his *Epistle to Flora* on the problem of the Old Testament Law: and there was Heracleon, the first expositor of St John's Gospel, to whom Quispel and Puech tentatively attribute the fourth treatise in the Jung Codex as well.[2] Also among Valentinus's disciples one comes across such figures as Marcus the magician, whose initiation-ceremonies had enormous success in Asia Minor and in Gaul. There were innumerable variations between the subsidiary groups of Valentinians; all sorts of additional or supplementary names were brought into the system, without its being very much altered in essentials. This novel teaching spread far abroad to east and west. The Church Fathers coupled Valentinus with Marcion as one of the arch-heretics, and their hostility shows how clearly aware they were of being up against a formidable enemy. In Asia and in Egypt, supporters of this movement existed until well into the fourth century.

As things stand at present, one cannot state with certainty that Valentinus himself is the author of this *Gospel of Truth*. As we have seen, the writer does not give away his identity. Irenaeus speaks in general terms of the Valentinians who push their own particular gospel to the forefront—but a collaboration between several writers is out of the question in this case. Pseudo-Tertullian, the one writer, apart from Irenaeus, who offers any information relevant in this connexion, mentions a gospel by Valentinus himself, but gives no title. After comparing it with later developments of

[1] *Dial.* 35.6.

[2] H. Puech and G. Quispel, 'Le quatrième écrit gnostique du Codex Jung', *Vig. Chr.* 9, 1955, pp. 65 ff.

the doctrine, I believe it possible to conclude that it can indeed be attributed to the master himself: and that he must have written it in Rome, at some time before his break with the 'great Church'. The editors, Quispel and Puech, consider this a not unlikely hypothesis, although they emphasize that for the present it is still a supposition.[1]

It is evident, even from the Coptic version, that this work was composed by a skilled orator. Notice, for instance, the hymnic character of this description of the appearing of the Logos (the Word):

> His (God's) Wisdom contemplates the Logos,
> His intent gives him expression,
> His knowing is made manifest,
> His . . . is a garland upon him,
> His joy is mingled in him,
> His majesty is exalted in him,
> His image has he revealed,
> His rest has he enclosed within him,
> His love is embodied in him,
> His faithfulness has encompassed him;
> So goes forth the Logos (the Word) of the Father into the universe, as fruit of his heart and expression of his will (pp. 23 f.).

Or take this moving depiction of the calling of God: 'Wherefore is any man, when he has knowledge (*gnosis*), a being from above. When he is called, he hears, he answers and turns unto him who calls him and returns unto him and knows how he is called. So long as he has the knowledge, he does the will of that one who has called him, he wishes to be well-pleasing to him, he receives rest' (p. 22). On p. 29 is given a detailed account of visionary experiences, with which is compared the world of those who as yet have no *gnosis* and still live in appearance only: 'They flee hither and thither or they are powerless, should they decide to go in pursuit of others; they are embroiled in fightings, wherein they deal out blows or suffer blows themselves; they fall from heights or fly through the air, having no wings. At other times it is as if they be slain, though there is none pursuing them, or it is as if it is

[1]H. C. Puech and G. Quispel, *Evangelium Veritatis*, Zurich, 1956, p. *xiv*.

they themselves who put their neighbours to death, for they are spotted with their blood. Up to that moment when they who pass through all this awake—they see nothing, they who were among all these perplexities, because these are nothing.' As Quispel has shown, the author has been able, with exquisite skill, to make a sketch of the dream-passages borrowed from Homer serve the purposes of his preaching.

Yet this extract is not given as a quotation; there are no introductory words: 'As the poet says'. This is typical of the author's method. His writing is an undifferentiated whole. At some points he is quite obviously working with New Testament material: and we saw one example of that in his use of the parable of the lost sheep. But then he does not say, 'It is written in the Gospel', or 'The Lord says'. Closer inspection shows that there is a large number of such 'concealed' citations in this 'gospel', from the Gospels as well as from the Epistles and the Revelation of John.[1] The author makes use of bits and pieces of the New Testament, taking them up like loose fragments of stone and fitting them into a mosaic pattern of his own. This fact is important for the history of the New Testament canon, because it shows that at the time when this Valentinian gospel was put together the main features of the canon already possessed the authority of Holy Writ. It also confirms what Tertullian tells us to the effect that Valentinus made use of the entire canon and—unlike Marcion—did not extract pieces from it, but that he attached another meaning to the words.

The theme of Gnosticism is enunciated in this book, as we have already seen: 'Whoever has *gnosis* knows whence he has come and whither he goes' (p. 22). This is worked out in a whole number of variations in which the material is expressed again and again with different shades of emphasis. Here is no graduated ascent to a dramatic climax and resolution; no, it is more like a continually reiterated circular movement about a fixed centre. The subject of

[1]See W. C. van Unnik, 'The "Gospel of Truth" and the New Testament', *The Jung Codex*, tr. F. L. Cross, 1955. H. I. Marrou, '*L'Evangile de Vérité* et la diffusion du comput digital dans l'antiquité', *Vig. Chr.* 12, 1958, pp. 98 ff., makes the point that the peculiar manner of counting in the *Gospel of Truth* (see pp. 60 f. above) was not restricted, as I thought, solely to the western part of the Roman Empire, thus serving as an argument for Rome as the place of authorship; it was current generally throughout the ancient world.

this composition is the work of 'the redemption of them who knew not the Father' (pp. 16 f.): and that is why the Logos is also called Redeemer. But now the question is: who is redeemed—from what, how and why?

Immediately after the opening words it is stated that the universe had been in quest of him from whom it was derived; the universe was *within* him, the Incomprehensible, the Inconceivable, who transcends all thought (p. 17). The perplexing thing is that, being in the Father, men did not know him (p. 22). Because men did not know the Father, their anguish and terror came into being, thickened as it were like a mist and made perception impossible. This gave Error, with its empty falsehood, its opportunity. Life within its sphere is compared to the phantom images of sleep (p. 29) and of drunkenness (p. 22). Men are in thrall to the world, where jealousy and strife prevail. Because they did not know the Father, imperfection arose; where there is oneness, there is fullness; but where strife and jealousy prevail, there imperfection is found (p. 24). In this manner is depicted the misery to which the world has fallen prey. Man must be rooted in God—then will he 'be' indeed, possess a name and a form, which he has received from the Father (pp. 27 f.); but so long as that is not so, there is ignorance of the Father and the false appearance (of reality) that ends in final perdition. . . .

But this sad state of affairs does not continue. Another destiny has been appointed, which is outlined in these words: 'This is the manner of being of them who are above, close to this immeasurable greatness, as they strive towards the one and only who is perfect and is before them there. And they go not down into the kingdom of the dead, nor is envy or yet lamentation their lot, neither is there death among them, but in the Resting One they rest, without self-exertion or circling about the truth. But they are themselves the truth. And the Father is in them and they are in the Father, while they are perfect, while they are inseparable from that true Goodness. They have no want in any respect at all, but they rest, refreshed by the Spirit' (p. 42). That is the place of the blessed, to which however all do not attain; there are those who still remain in the power of error and perdition.

What is it that has brought about the decisive turn in this case: what determines whether one remains in error or enters into rest?

Page 25 provides the answer: 'By *gnosis* shall he purify himself of multiplicity unto unity, whilst the gross substance within him is consumed as by a flame, darkness by light, death by life.' On p. 26 there is a lively picture of the judgment carried out by the Logos who appears as a two-edged sword (cf. Heb. 4.12). The people are likened to vessels (as in Rom. 9.21; II Tim. 2.20 ff.). When the Logos appeared in bodily form (John 1.14) 'there arose a great confusion among the vessels, for some were empty and others full . . .; some were sanctified and others broken up. All spatial relations were shaken and brought into confusion, for they had neither stability nor fixed location. Error was dumbfounded, not knowing what it should do: it was distraught and lamented, because it knew nothing. As Gnosis approached Error, the which is indeed the annihilation of Error, so was Error made void. . . . Truth appeared; all his offspring knew him; they greeted the Father in truth with a strength of perfection which made them one with the Father. For each one cherishes the truth, for the truth is the mouth of the Father, his tongue the Holy Ghost, which binds them to the truth . . . when he receives the Holy Ghost.' But he who continues in ignorance to the end 'is the offspring of oblivion and shall be dissolved with it' (p. 21).

'This is the Gospel of him whom they seek, which has revealed to the perfect through the tender mercies of the Father the hidden mystery of Jesus Christ' (p. 18). For as oblivion arose because they did not know the Father, so shall oblivion at once cease to be, if they know the Father. This is signified in rather different words on p. 21: 'Because the consummation of the universe is in the Father, it is necessary for the universe to return to him. Thus, when someone attains to *gnosis*, he receives what is his and makes it truly his own. For whoever is in ignorance is imperfect, and great is that thing he lacks, because he lacks that which must fulfil his being'; God has provided for this by making a book of the living before the foundation of the world. This book no one can open (see Rev. 5); it is like a will which is opened only after the death of the testator; that is why Jesus suffered patiently, because he knew that his death would mean life for many (p. 20). He came first as a teacher to confound those who were wise in their own eyes and to give the children the *gnosis* of the Father. When he appeared, Error destroyed him in its rage by nailing him to a cross. 'But he

is become a fruit of the knowledge of the Father, which is not blighted when men have eaten thereof' (cf. Gen. 2.17; the tree of knowledge in paradise is paralleled by the cross as the Tree of Life). 'But to them who ate of the fruit has he given to rejoice in this discovery. For he found them in himself and they found him in themselves, the Incomprehensible, the Inconceivable, the perfect Father, who brought forth the universe, in whom the universe is and whom it needs, because he contains within himself the consummation of the universe' (p. 18). But for Jesus death was not the finish; he rose again; he let himself be touched and breathed upon his disciples. Nothing could hold him back; he spoke that new thing which is in the heart of the Father. 'He has given true ideas and wisdom and compassion, redemption and the Spirit of power from the infinitude of the Father. He caused punishments and scourgings to cease—for it was these that had driven many from his sight who needed solace in their error and their bonds—and by his power he has annulled them and destroyed them by *gnosis*. He has become the Way for them that wandered; *gnosis* for them that were in ignorance: the Finding for them that sought and the strengthening of them that wavered; the spotlessness of them that were spotted' (pp. 30 f.). At the end of this *Gospel of Truth* this revelation of the invisible Father is expressed through the promulgation of the Name (pp. 38 ff.). 'The Name is invisible; for he alone is the mystery of the Invisible, that shall come to the ears which are wholly filled therewith'; 'the Unbegotten has no Name', but the Son has taken the name of the Father and makes him known (see John 17.26). Quispel[1] has explained this form of Christology by reference to Jewish speculations regarding the hidden and the uttered Name, which must also have been known to early Christianity.

Now that we have taken a look at the principal ideas in this Valentinian treatise, we can see that it is quite justifiably called a 'gospel' in so far as it sees the decisive action of God in the appearing of Jesus Christ, in respect of both his person and his work. It is entirely Christocentric and makes no difficulties—as so many Gnostics did—over the incarnation of the Word. Nevertheless, in its doctrine of redemption it disagrees with the Bible in certain

[1]G. Quispel, 'Het Johannesevangelie en de Gnosis', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 11, 1957, pp. 173 ff.

ways which are characteristic. Although one does find in the New Testament expressions such as 'ignorance', 'error' and the like to indicate a falling away from God, the primary cause of this falling away, from the New Testament standpoint, is 'sin'—and in this 'gospel'—or whatever you choose to call it—sin is not even mentioned! Notice also that instead of the historical development in the Bible, we have here a process divorced from history. The author may know his Epistle to the Hebrews; but there is no place in his book for such a sentence as Heb. 1.1: 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.' He says not a word about the Old Testament revelation of God. There is no reference to the relationship with Judaism, which was a burning question with many of his contemporaries. As for the conception of the Godhead in this work, we can only say that, starting perhaps from a sentence like Rom. 11.36: 'From him and through him and to him are all things', or from the oneness of God, the author was able to reach his own conclusion; but that this God of the Totality, in whom everything is included, has more in common with the God of the philosophers, of the Stoics in this case, than with the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. In spite of the New Testament language and the Christocentricity there is an unbridgeable gulf here. Irenaeus had been perfectly right, regarding the Valentinians, to make the point that a Christian who would keep pure and undefiled the rule of truth he received at his baptism, would assuredly recognize the names, sayings and parables of Scripture here, but not the whole scheme of things.[1]

This document is a characteristic sample of Gnostic preaching. It does not advocate Christianity. It is no book of missionary purpose, intended to win the heathen. It sets out to give the essence of the Christian revelation, but gives only a caricature, because it starts from a non-Christian God. It shows us clearly what were the forces at work in the middle of the second century and what spiritual warrings were afoot.

[1] *Adv. Haer.* I 9.4.

VII

THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN

THE title of this document, the 'Secret Doctrine' of John, occurs at the end of the text, as edited by Walter Till in 1955 (see p. 13 above; p. 77 of Till's edition). It is a work which must have enjoyed great popularity among Gnostics, as is plain enough from the fact that, besides the Berlin manuscript, a copy also turned up at Nag-Hammadi; and Till used this for purposes of comparison. But over and above these, the library includes two other manuscripts with the same *Apocryphon*, though in expanded form (these have not yet been edited or compared in detail). This 'second edition' of the work shows clearly what great value was attached to it. It is also important as indicating in what respects later generations felt the need to modify its contents; thus it gives us an insight into the evolution of a Gnostic system. However, since the texts have still not been closely compared, there is as yet nothing to be said on that score. These other texts may possibly throw some light on various obscure points in the text now provisionally edited, because they have preserved a superior reading or help to illuminate some at present baffling connexion; for the text as we now have it presents a great number of exegetical problems. It may well be that yet other manuscripts from the same library will throw light on these; but at the moment to plunge into these and similar questions would amount to mere idle speculation, because the material is not available.

And here it must be said once again—at the risk of tedium, I am afraid—that there is nothing one can say about the author of this secret doctrine. There is nowhere any mention, any hint, of the time or circumstances in which the writer lived, such as one does find, by contrast, in the case of the *Letter of the Eleven Apostles*, for example. The questions dealt with in the course of the treatise are Gnostic questions, generally speaking; but so far it has proved difficult to particularize over details.

Our document begins with a story of how John, the son of

Zebedee, after Jesus had gone away, once went to the Mount of Olives and was downcast because of a dispute with a Pharisee who inveighed against Jesus as a seducer, in that he had caused his disciples to be disloyal to the inheritance of the Fathers (pp. 19 f.). So then, underlying this is a controversy with Judaism (see Matt. 15.2); the divorce between Judaism and Christianity is already an accomplished fact, and there is an awareness that Christianity and rabbinical religion put the stress on different things; but beyond that there is no positive connecting link, the more so since in what follows the matter is not raised again. As we shall see, Judaism has really no part to play in the thought-structure of this *Apocryphon*. John's sadness is dispelled by a revelation of Christ, who repeats the promise of Matt. 28.20 and makes himself known as 'the Father, the Mother, the Son'—a trinitarian formulation, in which the 'Spirit' as mother points to a Semitic origin (*ruach*—spirit—is feminine in Hebrew), and which one more often encounters in the very early period (cf. the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, fragment 5, Klostermann, p. 7: My mother the Holy Ghost took me by one of my hairs and led me to Mount Tabor). He is the Eternal, who shall reveal 'what is, what has been and what is to be' (as in Rev. 1.19). John is to pass this on to kindred spirits (pp. 21 f.). At the close (pp. 75 f.) this commission is repeated, with the addition that it must be a secret revelation; here too, the words 'in order that you should write it down' are a reminder of Rev. 1.19, as also is the sentence: 'I shall proclaim to you what is to be.' With a solemn imprecation upon any person who should trade this disclosure for material gain, Jesus takes his departure. 'And John came to his fellow-disciples and began to tell them what the Redeemer had told him.'

In this story of a 'call' there are clearly reminiscences of the Revelation of John in the New Testament: and a familiarity with it is taken for granted. But what a contrast in content and aim between these two works! Except for the passages referred to above there is no common ground at all. The Revelation is a book that consoles the community under persecution and looks toward the future; its visionary witness proclaims the cosmic struggle, the Judgment and the Second Coming. There the community lives in suspense: how much longer? 'Come, Lord Jesus'. But here 'John' is vexed with questions: 'How was the Redeemer

appointed and why was he sent into the world (cf. John 3.17) by his Father who sent him? Who is his Father? Of what nature is the aeon (age) which is coming upon us?' (p. 20).

It is not the future but the past which excites this author. He does not look forward, like the Apocalypse, to the future coming of the Lord, but tries to fathom out his past. Biblical eschatology is totally absent. Even if the writer knew the Apocalypse, he has most certainly 'spiritualized' it; for him the vital questions lie elsewhere.

This book must have been written therefore at some time after the end of the first century; but it is more difficult to establish the latest possible date of composition. Carl Schmidt, the first to devote himself to work on this *Apocryphon*, believed that it had been used as a source-book by Irenaeus;[1] for in his first book *Against Heresies* (*c.* AD 180) one finds in chs. 29 f. some obvious parallels. Now on Schmidt's authority this has been pretty generally accepted, particularly since the text long remained inaccessible, as we have seen; but Doresse has queried this dating. In my view, there is good reason for such doubt. It is surely remarkable that those passages common to Irenaeus and to this document, though certainly there, are nevertheless confined to one particular section, and do not relate at all to the latter part of the *Apocryphon of John*. Why Irenaeus, if he did know it, should have left it aside remains a mystery. Now strikingly enough, the second part of our *Apocryphon* is different from the first in both style and structure; this can be seen, for example, in the use of the dialogue-form, which is absent from the first part. This suggests, in my opinion, that the *Apocryphon of John* is not all of a piece, but is compounded of a number of different pieces. The relation between this book, as we now have it, and Irenaeus is therefore not that of 'source-book' and 'excerpt'. It seems much more likely to me that, though independent of each other, both have borrowed from the same source. The connexion is not so simple and rectilinear, particularly as one comes across different parallels in Epiphanius, which again occur just in the first part. In this introductory framework we cannot take such a complex question any further,

[1] C. Schmidt, 'Irenaeus und seine Quelle in *Adversus Haereses* I 29', *Philotesia*, Paul Kleinert zum 70. Geburtstag dargebracht, Berlin, 1907, pp. 317 ff.

but must be content with affirming that it is not good enough simply to say that Irenaeus shows himself acquainted with *this* document in its extant form. The aim of the treatise, as defined on p. 22, is to furnish knowledge concerning the visible and invisible and instruction about the perfecting of Mankind. Thus it is not so much a matter of Man's getting to know God and so becoming divine as of an insight into the true nature of Man himself. The anthropological question of the nature and destiny of the human being is therefore central.

The book properly begins with a lengthy description of the transcendent majesty of God, 'the Father of the universe', who dwells in the unapproachable (cf. I Tim. 6.16). Human language and ideas are not able to describe that majesty. Nothing can be said of him, except by negative inference from the natural world. This description of the being of God agrees in many respects with utterances of the Church Apologists, such as Aristides and Justin Martyr. This representation of divinity, which sees the Godhead as wholly transcendent and without any connexion with this world, tallies with that of certain philosophical movements in the second century. God stands above and beyond all things. The big question which this raised was how Man could be brought into a relation with God, living as he did in the spiritual desert of this earth, in a state of imperfection. It is this question which the *Apocryphon of John* now tries to answer.[1]

This most high God saw his own image in the sea of light that encompassed him. This image, this thought of God took shape and became Barbelo (this name has still not been finally explained). 'She is the first Ennoia (thought), his image; she became a first creature, that is the maiden spirit, the three-fold male . . . the aeon which does not age, the male-female' (pp. 27 f.). She conceives at her own wish Ennoia, First Knowledge, Indestructibility and Eternal Life. She gazes into the pure light and brings forth a blessed spark of light not entirely of like value with herself; this is the first-born son who is anointed with goodness and for that reason is called Christus (Christus = 'anointed'; 'good' = *chrestos*), p. 30. The true God gives him all power; through him appear Will, Spirit and Word. From the Christ-Light and from

[1]For a fuller account of this, see my paper read to the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences, which I hope shortly to publish.

indestructibility come the four great lights of Intellect, Grace, Sensation and Idea. . . . They are given Greek names, but connected with names that remind one of the Hebrew; these are, however, untranslated (the Hebrew terms are also known from papyri concerned with magic). With each of these four words yet other figures are associated, such as Truth, Recollection, Perfection, Wisdom, Peace: and some of these names occur as doubles. So the twelve aeons arise, who assist Christ. From Barbelo and Intellect, by the good pleasure of God and of Christ, the perfect one, there comes into being true Man (or Adam). Praising God, he was appointed over the first light; then Seth over the second light, his descendants over the third, and over the fourth they who knew their final end but were not immediately converted.

Then comes a second phase in this cosmogonic process. Without God's approval, Wisdom (Sophia) contrives out of her own thought the birth of an imperfect being, of repugnant shape, with the appearance of a serpent and a lion (suggestive of the Aion-figures known to us in connexion with the Mithraic cult). The name of this being is uncertain, but is apparently Jaldabaoth (or Saklas?). Wisdom repudiates him, because she has borne him in ignorance (pp. 37 f.). He draws out of his mother a great deal of her strength and departs to another place. He unites himself with Unwisdom and brings into being twelve powers (the rulers of the zodiac): and afterwards there come yet more spirits, his servants, to the number of three hundred and sixty. These twelve bear exotic names, but also other titles, such as Lust and Anger. Seven of them are appointed to rule the heavens (the planetary powers, including Jaoth, Eloaios, Adonaios, Sabaoth) and five over chaos. They receive something of Jaldabaoth's fire, but nothing of his light-energy. When in the upper heavens, each of the seven also receive a virtue, such as Foresight, Zeal, Wisdom and so forth. Then Jaldabaoth exclaims: 'I am a jealous God; and there is none beside me' (Ex. 20.5; Isa. 45.5 ff.). These proud words imply that there is yet another God, for why should he be jealous otherwise? (p. 44). Full of shame and remorse, Wisdom begins to stir (there is obviously an allusion to Gen. 1.2 at this point) in darkness and ignorance. At the compassionate entreaty of the other Aeons, Wisdom is rehabilitated; but she has to wait

until the deficiency of her light-substance has been repaired. A voice sounds in her ears: 'Man exists and also the son of Man.'

Now a new passage begins. The reflection of the (heavenly) creature who was an image of God (see above) appears in the waters. The powers see that and cry out: 'Let us make a Man in the image and likeness of God' (cf. Gen. 1.26). They then create out of themselves a man whom they call Adam, in order that he shall be a light for them (pp. 48 ff.). They form him out of their own energies and each of the seven endues him with some quality. These are called bone-essence, marrow-essence, hair-essence and so on. However, Adam has no power of movement. God is moved to compassion by the prayer of the mother: and at the wish of the highest Aeons he breathes his Spirit—that is the strength of the mother—into the man, so that Adam is able to move. This arouses the jealousy of the seven evil powers, because what they have made now contains divine spirit. 'They perceived that he was free from wickedness, because he was wiser than themselves and was come into the light.'

On account of this jealousy they bring Adam down to the realm of matter; but God pities him and sends forth his good Spirit, Life, to help him, who shows Adam the cause of his defect and the possibility of his ascending. Life and Light are latent in Adam and put him above the powers who made him. Then Fire and Earth, Water and Wind unite and bring him into the shadow of death; they are also darkness and carnal desire, the spirit of malignity. There he is imprisoned in the body, as in a grave. But the highest Ennoia of the first light is at work in him. Jaldabaoth now brings him into the paradise of the world of sense. The Tree of Life is bitterness and death, the anti-spirit, who wants to prevent Adam from understanding his true destiny (p. 56). The Tree of Knowledge is the vision of the Light; by command of the anti-divine power, therefore, none should eat of it; for otherwise Adam would escape from his clutches by looking up to his true destiny. Christ teaches how it should be eaten. It was not the Serpent (Gen. 3); the Serpent counselled the propagation of lust; he wished to bring forth from Adam the divine power and for that purpose caused a deep sleep to fall upon him (cf. Gen. 2.21)—that is, the inability to have understanding (p. 58). But the Light in Adam remained concealed. Jaldabaoth now created a female figure;

Adam came to himself and acknowledged her, the mother of the living, as bone of his bone (Gen. 2.23). By eating of the Tree of Knowledge Adam and the woman were separated from Jaldabaoth; whereupon he made them accursed and they were thrust out of paradise. Then Jaldabaoth, through Eve, raised up Jave and Eloim, the righteous and the unrighteous, whom men call Cain and Abel (pp. 62 ff.). Jaldabaoth also gave the procreative instinct to Adam, and so he begat Seth: Seth received from the mother the wit to overcome his incapacity for knowledge and to rise up from the vileness of the grave. Thus the Spirit works towards the final achievement of Man's salvation.

John then asks whether all are redeemed into the purity of the divine light (p. 64). He is answered to the effect that this is a very hard question. 'They over whom the spirit of life comes, after they have united themselves with the power, are saved and perfected; they shall be worthy to ascend up to that great light, for they shall be worthy to purify themselves by it from all baseness and the temptings of evil' (p. 65). They are to endure all things in order to stand upright in the fight and to inherit eternal life. What—and this is the next question—shall be the fate of the souls who have not done this, although indwelt by the Spirit of life? The answer is that so powerful is the Spirit that such a soul is not lost. But where a hostile spirit has entered, that soul is lured away. When one leaves the body, one escapes from evil and passes into rest. But the souls who have not understood the universe are abused by a pseudo-spirit and are subjected to tormenting powers until, through a process of reincarnation, they achieve knowledge (pp. 66 ff.). Those who have had knowledge but have not responded to it are preserved until the day of punishment. All those who have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3.29) will be punished with eternal torment (pp. 70 ff.).

After this dialogue concerning the ultimate fate of souls, John asks where the spirit-adversary comes from. Jaldabaoth, because he saw that men excelled him through the divine spark which indwelt them, brought Destiny into being and through the times and seasons used his powers to subjugate the celestial divinities, angels, daemons and men, in order to keep them under his dominion. He felt remorse at what he had done (cf. Gen. 6.6) and caused a flood to come up. The Light-power warned Noah and

hid him at a sheltered spot within a cloud of light, with some others of the 'good' stock among Seth's descendants. The wicked powers tried to seduce the people by dispatching their angels to have intercourse with the daughters of men (Gen. 6.1). When this did not succeed, they created the pseudo-spirit; under the forms of real men they enticed the women with various costly and desirable things and led them into temptation. That caused them to forget their true vocation, and they grew hardened. But the merciful Father-Mother assumed the likeness of their kind (cf. Rom. 8.3) and thereby brought redemption. John is to write this down as a revelation for spirits disposed like himself, so that the generation which does not waver shall be established (i.e. made safe, saved : pp. 72 ff.).

Many details, of course, have had to be passed over; but that is, in its main features, the content of this document, rendered so as to give an impression of the whole, which is marvellously put together. At first reading it is a strange hotch-potch; and even after repeated reading and study there remains much that is obscure. But it becomes apparent to the discerning eye that a connecting thread runs through the whole.

This *Apocryphon* is a typical product of syncretism (see pp. 29 ff.). Greek concepts of the cosmic elements, the body as a tomb, Destiny, faded notions of astrology, which regard the astral powers as forces opposed to God, references to the creation-story in Genesis (in several places with a sharp anti-Mosaic bias on the writer's part)—all these are here welded together to furnish between them a means of answering the question: what is this Man, who experiences in himself the struggle between good and evil? how can he reach perfection, how is he to be saved?

It is therefore a book seeking to answer a question which is continually troubling mankind and giving them to think. These were matters that preoccupied a large number of zealous-minded people in the early centuries of our era. The solution too is typical of Gnosticism. Man is saved by becoming aware of his true nature, of the divine spark within him; for though lying ensnared in the trammels of matter and desire, yet in his deepest thoughts he harbours a portion of divinity.

In this the role of Jesus Christ is clearly no more than that of mediator of the true Knowledge, which is the real saving power.

Jesus has no central place in the work of redemption. The figure of Jesus could come right out of the book without changing its character in any essential respect. We are very far removed here from the New Testament proclamation in which he overcomes the powers of this world by his passion and resurrection. The reason is that in this *Apocryphon* the fall from God is not envisaged as sin committed in defiance of his holy commandment, and there is consequently no question of an atonement. Consonant with this is the belief that creation as such was not undertaken by God, but was an act on the part of powers opposed to him. There is plenty of evidence that the author knows his New Testament intimately. In the account given above there are references in several places to texts in the New Testament, and those instances could readily be multiplied. But they are woven into an entirely different context of thought from that in which they occur in the New Testament.

To understand this book properly one must also allow for the fact that a good many texts in the Genesis account of the creation presented difficulties to people when they reflected seriously on the words. Take the sentence: 'Let us make man.' To whom does an apparently plural being—(can this be the one God?)—say this? What then is the image and the likeness? Why are there two accounts in Genesis of the origin of Man? What took place in paradise? When such questions were first raised we do not know; but that the questions had come up is clear from various Jewish writings of that time. The theory that at first Adam had been an immobile mass and was later brought to life by the breath of God (Gen. 2.7) is found also in rabbinical commentaries on Genesis; but here these ideas are made to subserve a representation of deity which is dualistic and antithetical to the Jewish monotheistic conception.

All this is at first sight very confusing: but it forms a coherent whole which becomes clear enough if the following points are borne in mind:

(*a*) The sublime conception of an omni-transcendent and perfect God cannot be connected with this imperfect world. This creation must have been called into being by powers opposed to the Godhead. Yet there is in Man an awareness of God: how is this separation-cum-connexion to be accounted for? The solution

is sought here in a gradual declension and a fall from wisdom—an idea that one meets with elsewhere in Gnostic systems.

(*b*) There are in Man three 'layers': the 'spiritual', the 'psychic' (pertaining to the 'soul') and the 'material'. The first (*pneuma*) is, as the New Testament also teaches, a gift of God; the second (*psyche*) is the life of the human soul; the third is the exclusively natural or earthly being (*sarx*, the 'flesh'). This last is subject to transience and death; the second is the sphere of the passions and covetous desires, the peculiar domain of 'anguish'. In this sphere Man experiences something of freedom and choice, whereas on the natural plane his course is prescribed and unavoidable. Paul too makes a tripartite division, though he sees 'soul' and 'flesh' in a closer organic relation. According to our author, these three parts of Man came successively into existence; and the drift of Genesis 1–3 makes it transparently clear to him how, in the history of Man's emergence, these three descending steps came about.

(*c*) All three of these elements are present in Man; there are not, as with some Gnostic systems, three human types. The divine spark, *pneuma*, must completely penetrate the *psyche* with its light so that this imperfect element may attain to perfection by breaking asunder the shackles of matter.

(*d*) As soon as a man perceives what his 'true' situation is regarding each of these three—and it is Gnosis, the revelation, which gives him this perception—then he is saved.

The author leaves a lot of questions unanswered. The very fact that he borrows the stuff of his ideas from several areas of thought which are worlds apart produces tensions and gives rise to questions which the modern reader asks, and must ask, but to which he gets no answer. But for the writer these things were not important. Everything is brought to bear on just this one question: who is Man, and how is he, in his defective state, to find union with the perfect God?

His reply must be taken seriously, and it has a magnetic attraction; for again and again, right up to our own time, and in many forms of language, people have thought like this and answered like this. One can feel here the strong pull of the varieties of mysticism; but the sharper the response, the more apparent becomes the remoteness of all this from the message of the Bible. One can understand how fascinating for the people of the second

century these ideas must have been; for they borrowed their terms of expression from many races and, through them, proffered the word of longed-for salvation, as an outlet for distracted souls. One can understand too that the Church, anxious to safeguard the message of the Gospel, in both Testaments, as a precious trust committed to her charge, had to set herself vigorously against it; for despite a veneer of biblical language, the 'Gospel of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ' is replaced here by a totally different message.

Because of its peculiar combination of ideas drawn from sharply divergent systems of thought, this document throws a special light on the rise of Gnosticism. Everything points to its having originated outside Christianity and to the enrichment of an existing system at a later stage with Christian material. As regards the biblical creation story, there is some striking agreement of interpretation; but various features of the story are rejected. A closer study will be certain to show which particular Gnostic group is implicated by this. A good part of the data prompts the thought that behind this document there lies a Syrian type of Gnosticism. This *Apocryphon* then is evidence not only for a particular form of explanation of the world and the longing for redemption from a Christian standpoint, but also for phases of religious but non-Christian thinking which preceded it.

VIII

THE APOCRYPHON OF JAMES

I SHOULD like, in conclusion, to say something about one other document in the collection, namely the *Apocryphon of James*, which is the first work in the Jung Codex. The text of this has not yet been published, it is true; but Professor Quispel has most kindly placed his draft of a translation at my disposal. Nothing more than a beginning has been made with the study and interpretation of this.[1]

To go simply by the title, one might instinctively suppose this to be akin to the similarly entitled work by John, which was discussed in the preceding section; but closer inspection shows that assumption to be rash and wrong. Admittedly, this is also a secret revelation, to be handed round only among a select few; but in subject-matter it is quite different from John's book.

It has nothing to say about the creation of heavenly powers, about a cosmic drama or the miraculous advent of human kind. Man here possesses no 'spirit' which, though ensnared and confined in various ways, is nevertheless the 'good' at the centre of his being; for he has yet to receive this spirit and let himself be filled by it through and through. This *Apocryphon* bids us look not back into the past but towards the future, towards our entering into the Kingdom of God. It insists again and again upon the fact that the disciples have to be 'saved'. Yet this expectant looking towards the future does not imply an eschatological viewpoint. Nothing of what is due to happen in the future is described, as it is in so many apocalyptic writings. The aim is to exhort us to take the upward way, the path to heaven.

The contents consist of charges which Jesus delivered in conversations with some of his disciples after his resurrection and shortly before his ascension. So far as the form is concerned, it

[1]H. C. Puech and G. Quispel, 'Les écrits gnostiques du Codex Jung', *Vig. Chr.* 8, 1954, pp. 7–22; W. C. van Unnik, 'The origin of the recently discovered *Apocryphon Jacobi*', *Vig. Chr.* 10, 1956, pp. 149 ff.

agrees with the *Letter of the Eleven Apostles*; but the parallel does not extend beyond this. So far it has not proved possible to detect any use of quotations from this document by early Christian authors; nowhere is there any mention even of its title. This is very disappointing, when one thinks of the otherwise plentiful amount of information about lost works left to us by men like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, Eusebius and Epiphanius. In this case therefore we really have nothing to hang on to. Within the book itself, there is nothing that points unambiguously to a time or place of origin. The author certainly knew how to cover up his identity! The document claims to be a letter, written by James at the request of a person not again referred to after the first mention: 'Because you besought me to send a secret book, the revelation of which the Lord accorded to both Peter and myself, I have not been able to refuse you this . . . but I have put it down in Hebrew characters and send it to you—to you alone. However, since you are a servant of the blessed salvation, you must make every effort to ensure that this book, which the Saviour was not willing to entrust to all of us his twelve apostles, is not shared among many.' He also alludes here to another document which he had sent to his correspondent six months before. That is possibly—as Puech and Quispel surmise—one of the other apocryphal writings linked with the name of James in the Nag-Hammadi collection. During one of his last appearances the Lord Jesus had sent the other apostles off to their work, but had specially summoned James and Peter to receive this revelation.

As to who this James is, nothing more is said on that score. It is, of course, the brother of the Lord who naturally springs to mind here. At the end, he does indeed tell us that the other disciples came to ask him what the Master had revealed. 'We answer: He arose and saluted us with the right hand. To us all he promised life . . . And when they heard it, they submitted to the revelation, while they felt great affliction concerning that which must come to pass. But as I was unwilling to plunge them into a scandalous confusion, I sent them off elsewhere, one by one. I myself, however, went up to Jerusalem, praying that I might have my portion among the beloved who shall be made manifest' (pp. 15 f.). Thus James is here very closely connected with Jerusalem, while the other disciples go forth into the world.

James the brother of the Lord is well known as having been leader of the Jerusalem community for many years. On the other hand, this James seems to have counted himself among the twelve disciples. There is no reference to his conversion, so one could perhaps suppose him to have been the brother of John. Possibly what we have here is a blending together of two persons with the same name. It was well known from the Gospels that Peter, James and John formed a special group within the circle of disciples. Moreover, Clement of Alexandria heard from older presbyters that the disclosures these three had to pass on to the other disciples were in turn communicated by them to the seventy-two.[1]

It is worth noting, in the introductory passage, not only that the actual committal of the revelation to paper is said to have been done in the sacred language, but that such scrupulous care is taken to urge that the revelation itself be disclosed only to a few. Why this is urged with such insistence is not immediately clear. It is not, in my opinion, because of anything in the character of what is revealed; for that is not of such a private nature as to entail secrecy. It has, for instance, nothing to do with the mysteries of the divine nature, as in the Jewish Cabbala. The simplest explanation, for the present, would appear to be that the author wanted by this means to obviate the difficulty that people might push aside his treatise and its message with the rejoinder that nothing like this was to be found in the recognized gospels.

The revelation is presented as sayings of Jesus prompted from time to time by the questions and comments of his disciples. The impression which this makes on them is continually being pointed out, and it is by no means one of uninterrupted joy at having been deemed worthy to receive these disclosures. The mood alternates between elation and sadness. Take, for instance, p. 11: 'When we heard these things we were glad; for we had been sad at what he had said first' (according to the text: 'What we had said first'—but that makes no sense). 'When he saw that we were glad, however, he said: Woe to you who have need of a mediator; woe to you who have need of grace; blessed are they who, having confidence, have laid hold on grace for themselves.' On p. 13 Peter says to Jesus: 'Sometimes, to be sure, you urge us on towards the King-

[1]Clement of Alexandria, in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II 1.3 f.

dom of heaven; at other times you cast us away, O Lord; sometimes you prevail upon us and draw us into faith and you promise us life: at other times again you cast us out of the Kingdom of heaven.'

Ultimately this revelation is bound to be decisive. Sayings such as John 10.6: 'This figure (or "parable") Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what it was he was saying to them,' and John 16.25: 'I have said this to you in figures; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father,' have obviously affected the saying here which runs (p. 7): 'Formerly I spake to you in parables, and you did not understand me. Now a second time I speak with you openly, and you perceive it not.' The promised time for speaking openly has indeed come, but the stupidity of the disciples is as gross as ever. That is why Jesus speaks to them here in such forceful terms. It is on account of the parables that he is obliged to linger among them (p. 8). These have still to be explained; and when they are understood, it is sufficient. Then Jesus can go away. He therefore urges his disciples to take great trouble over the word, 'for the word is in the first place the source of faith; in the second place, of love; and in the third place, of works. In these three is life.' This is elucidated with a fine comparison: 'The word is like a grain of wheat. When a man has sown it, he puts his faith therein and when it is sprung up, he cherishes it, seeing many grains instead of one: and so long as he works, he is sustained, the while he makes it ready for food. Besides that, what is left over he has for sowing. Again, this is the way whereby you may receive the Kingdom of heaven'.

Jesus is now on the point of leaving them. The moment itself is curious. Indeed it says on p. 2 that this took place 550 days after the resurrection! Quite a different date from that (i.e. forty days after) commonly accepted for the ascension, in accordance with Acts 1.3. Thus Luke's second book was evidently not known among the circles which produced this *Apocryphon*. This eccentric notion is not one which occurs only in the present instance, but appears to have persisted in Egypt for a considerable time. An almost identical number—545—is mentioned in the distinctively Christian interpolation in the late Jewish book, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, composed probably at about AD 100. Some Gnostics

recognized a period of eighteen months between the resurrection and the ascension: and this was part of their tradition, because they made use of the number in their symbolism.[1] The ultimate source of this curious tradition has so far remained obscure. The Church historian, Harnack, thought that it agreed neatly with the conversion of Paul, mentioned in I Cor. 15.8, as the occasion of the 'last appearance'. However, that is not altogether convincing.

Besides the call to find salvation, in general terms, there are two questions in particular which preoccupy the author and are answered through the lips of Jesus. James points out that the disciples have left their families and followed Jesus (cf. Matt. 19.27; Luke 14.26 ff.): 'Grant us,' he adds, 'that we be not tempted by the evil one.' Jesus's answer runs as follows: 'What then is your grace, while ye do the Father's will, if ye receive no gift from him in recompense when ye are tempted by Satan?' The temptation to apostasy is given a positive value here: obedience to God's will in this critical situation itself ensures receipt of a reward at his hands. 'I say to you,' Jesus continues, 'that God will cherish you and will make you like unto me' (cf. Rom. 8.17; II Tim. 2.12). 'Will ye then not desist from indulging the flesh and from the fear of suffering?' Still they have not gone the whole way with Jesus; they must remember how brief in fact is this earthly life. 'Therefore scorn death and take care for life. Be mindful of my cross and my death, and ye shall live' (pp. 4–5). Well we know that again and again the Christians of those early times were faced with the ultimate decision. There were some who said that one was quite justified in escaping martyrdom by making false depositions; but here the disciple is most definitely urged to choose to follow Jesus all the way, however extreme the consequences may be. Jesus says in conclusion: 'Do not seek to avoid death; it shall instruct you in your election' (p. 6); what this means is that through their faithfulness unto death they will attain to the glory of God, which is their true destiny.

A second and pressing question relates to prophecy. We know, of course, that in the earliest communities of the Church certain people exercised the gift of prophecy. In the New Testament, one thinks for example of a person like Agabus (Acts 11.28; 21.10) and of such passages as I Cor. 14; Eph. 4.11. By the beginning of

[1]See the text in Puech and Quispel, 'Les écrits gnostiques . . .', p. 21.

the second century abuses of this practice appear to have arisen, and throughout that whole century one can detect that prophecy was the subject of much contention, which turned chiefly on the question: who is the true prophet? The circle which produced this *Apocryphon* was evidently one eager to breathe new life into prophesying. James inquires of Jesus: 'Lord, how shall we be enabled to prophesy to them who ask of us that we should prophesy for them? For many are they who ask of us and expect to hear our message.' The reply which Jesus gives sounds very surprising: it is that with the beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6.27) prophecy has come to an end (cf. Matt. 11.13); for it is from the head that prophesyings are wont to proceed. Prophecy therefore is an outmoded phase.

In matters of Christology, this author has no time for what is often called the docetic standpoint, according to which Jesus could only have had a phantom body. Here Jesus declares: 'I am come down to dwell with you, that you in your turn may dwell with me' (p. 9); and later: 'For your sakes have I descended; ye are the beloved; ye shall be the means of life for many. Pray to the Father, beseech God often and he will grant it you. Blessed is he who shall behold you with him, when he is extolled among the angels and is glorified among the saints. Life is yours: rejoice and be glad, as redeemed sons of God.' For them Jesus has put himself under the curse (p. 13; cf. Gal. 3.13). The people, whose representatives the disciples are, stand 'outside the inheritance of the Father' and are therefore called to repentance with sharp words. 'None shall be saved, except they believe in my cross. They that believe in my cross, of such is the kingdom of God' (p. 6). The cross is central, even though—as James observes—it is now, after the resurrection, far from Jesus (p. 5). For the disciples, in their following after Jesus, it is still very much to the forefront. 'So long as I am with you, heed me and obey me; but at that time when I shall be far from you, think on me' (p. 12). Just as Jesus has entered through suffering into glory, the disciple must also suffer, as we have already seen. On page 8 we read: 'James, be saved. I have commanded you to follow after me and I have told you how to answer before governors (Matt. 10.19 ff.). See that I have descended and have spoken and have been afflicted and that I have received my crown.' The body in itself is not the lair of sin,

yet there is a tendency to sin in earthly existence: 'the body is apt to slay the soul'; but the Spirit brings the soul to life and thus the body too becomes free from sin (pp. 11 f.). For this reason the disciples must be filled with the Spirit and be vigilant (p. 2). 'Knowledge' (*gnosis*), it is insisted again and again, is the means to obtaining life; but it does not consist in any kind of supernatural, esoteric doctrine or in an understanding of the 'nature of Man', but rather in knowing what Jesus the Redeemer has imparted and knowing that without him all is lost. It must be said, however, that the doctrine of redemption, the soteriology, in this book is not worked out in exact detail; there is more allusion than elucidation on the author's part.

Noteworthy too is the description of the ascension (p. 15). 'When Peter had said these things, he departed; but we knelt, I and Peter; we gave thanks, we lifted up our hearts on high to heaven; we heard with our ears and saw with our eyes the tumult of wars and sound of a trumpet and a great confusion; and when we ascended out of that place, we lifted up our minds yet higher still; and we saw with our eyes and we heard with our ears the angels' hymns and cries of praise; and angels rejoiced and the lofty ones of heaven sang; and we rejoiced in our turn. After these things our spirits yearned to raise us aloft to the very Majesty of God; and when we were gone up, it was not suffered us to see and to hear any thing.' That is a typical account of ecstasy, as this is described—although in different words—in various Jewish apocalypses. A distinctive feature in this case is the upward gradation: first, heart—the sphere of war; then mind (*nous*)—the second sphere of celestial praises; then Spirit (*pneuma*)—the third sphere of the Majesty of God. So these two disciples follow Jesus on his journey through the heavenly regions, where a chariot of Spirit (p. 14) conveys him, just as once Elijah was carried aloft by a fiery chariot. Thus he returns to the right hand of the Father; he casts off the earthly life like a garment in order to put on once more the heavenly life. He salutes his disciples with the right hand in token of blessing. As Puech and Quispel have so clearly shown, *motifs* of ancient symbolism have left their mark on this journey into heaven. In many respects this account reminds one of a similar passage in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, mentioned earlier. But, as for the disciples, they must go back to

the others to give them the promises of the Redeemer and the assurance of salvation.

As one peruses this document, it becomes clear in many places that the author had knowledge of reports similar to those we read in the Gospels; but one cannot say definitely that he knew the Gospels himself. The purpose of the book, from start to finish, is to hand on the proclamation of Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord; but though in some features it does accord with the Gospels, it is nevertheless different from them.

Whether the author was, in the strict sense, a Gnostic seems doubtful to me. The characteristic doctrines of Gnosticism, as made familiar to us, for example, by the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Apocryphon of John*, are not found here. True, there are a number of things that are taken over by Gnosticism. One could also instance some parallels with thoughts that we encounter in Paul's letters; but these are to be referred rather to general consensus than to the direct influence of the great apostle. It is of the character of this work, for instance, that the notion of a return and judgment at the last day is entirely absent. The whole thing is centred on the soul's heavenward journey and the descent of Jesus which makes possible the ascent of human kind. Another striking fact is the absence of polemic against Judaism. As I have said already, there is no clear indication of when the document was composed. The most likely supposition is that this *Apocryphon* originated in Egypt in a small, somewhat out-of-the-way community, where the message preached about Jesus had penetrated in an oral form (we know that a good deal of peculiar 'gospel-material' was current in Egypt) and not in the form of our New Testament writings. Its appearance in a remote corner could also explain why Clement of Alexandria appears not to know the work. Although not actually Gnostic in itself, it contained much that a Gnostic would have needed to use—the reason, no doubt, why it came to be preserved in the library at Nag-Hammadi. The primitive character of its Christology, the ideas in which it concurs with the *Ascension of Isaiah* and, in particular themes, with the homily known as the *Second Epistle of Clement* (*c.* AD 150), certainly suggest that it was written down during the first half of the second century. Unfortunately, our knowledge of Christianity in Egypt at that period is exceptionally scanty; in fact it does not emerge into the

light of history much before AD 180 or thereabouts. It is not possible therefore to make much progress in placing this document in the spiritual *milieu* which gave it birth. On the other hand, just because our knowledge is so slender, we should be grateful that what we have here does help to fill in the gap, in the hope that still more will come to light in future years.

The surprises which Egypt has already sprung in the past give us grounds for believing that this hope will not prove an idle one.

IX

EPILOGUE

WITH the help of a few selected documents from the Nag-Hammadi library, which have become available in recent years, we have tried to reach some understanding of the sects which produced them, of their thought-world and spiritual life and of what it is they have preserved. We have tried to picture the background of this movement, and we have had something to say about its relation to the New Testament.

It is a strange world that we have encountered, full of many peculiar ideas; yet it is perhaps not too much to hope that some of the questions which these people wrestled with have been made intelligible and that some light has been shed on their conceptual world. Here are the typical evidences of those spiritual struggles that mark the first centuries of our era. We must often have the same sense of unfamiliarity when we make acquaintance with documents of the 'great Church' from this period.

Are these then the 'documents of a faith dead and gone without trace'?[1] Nobody who is to any extent at home with the currents and undercurrents of our spiritual life today is likely to assent to this description of Gnosticism. Such widely separated movements as theosophy and anthroposophy have been instanced—and with every justification—as modern forms of Gnosticism.[2] Time and again one comes across similar ways of interpreting Christianity—for example, among the Rosicrucians who, just like the ancient Gnostics, give out their interpretation as the real 'truth' of Christianity. It is no accident that expensive editions like

[1]Subtitle of W. Schultz's *Dokumente der Gnosis*, Jena, 1910.

[2]See e.g. T. L. Haitjema, H. Schokking and J. C. Kromsigt, *Christusprediking tegenover moderne gnostiek* (The Christian message contrasted with modern Gnosticism), Wageningen, 1929, and G. Harbsmeier, *Anthroposophie —eine moderne Gnosis*, Munich, 1957. This is by no means just an allegation on the part of those opposed to these tendencies; those who advocate them are quite willing to disclose their spiritual affinity with the Gnostics of the early Christian period.

those of the *Gospel of Truth* or C. Schmidt and W. Till's *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften* are so quickly sold out. Such texts have long been read by others besides students of religious life under the Roman Empire. Among psychologists and psychiatrists too considerable interest is shown in these expressions of *vita spiritualis*, because its language of symbols shows a close affinity with, and gives an insight into, the psychic structure of a good many of our contemporaries.

But however relevant these documents may be in that respect, that consideration still does not give a straight answer to the question why this little book should appear in the series *Studies in Biblical Theology*, the direct concern of which is with the academic study of the Old and New Testaments. It therefore seemed to me only right that I should devote a few final remarks to the question of the relevance of these documents to, and their significance for, New Testament studies. Anything more than a few observations, a few hints, it cannot and must not be. In this book we have concentrated strictly on what has come to light in the Nag-Hammadi library. It was not and could not be part of our aim to make a general survey of Gnosticism as a religious phenomenon in the Roman Empire. The study of these documents is just at its very beginning, or has not even started yet, properly speaking; but in due time, when further progress has been made, it will be possible —and necessary—to write an account of this movement as a whole, in all its ramifications. It will also then be possible to discuss the subject of the relation between early Christianity and Gnosticism in a genuinely responsible way.

In Gnosticism one has an exceptionally important rival to youthful Christianity, the more so in that it often attached itself to Christianity so tightly. The encounter between these two movements took place at an extremely critical moment for the Christian Church, that is, just when it began to spread out into the world, in obedience to the command: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28.19). The existential compulsion, the constraint, which the Lord Jesus Christ had laid upon the Church was confronted with other religious movements and had to justify itself with regard to them. There was no small likelihood that they, who were the 'not many wise' (I Cor. 1.26), would prove unequal to the task. However, that did not happen. In the

development of Christianity the struggle with Gnosticism has had a diminishing significance. We have seen already that in the course of centuries a very large number of Gnostic writings disappeared, and that because of all these losses the movement was only very partially understood. That is why this Nag-Hammadi library is such a capital find; it now puts into our hands, in a complete state, documents through which the Gnostics speak for themselves, and it puts us into a much better position for getting to know what the spiritual struggle was like.

Besides that, these works now brought to light for the first time can enable us to reconstruct earlier stages of development, rather as the geologist draws his conclusions from examining the various layers of deposit in a lump of stone. This is indeed a necessary task. We may be thankful that so much has been preserved to us from the early Christian centuries; but when one remembers that the period in question embraces, say, a hundred and fifty years (and years lasted just as long in the ancient world as they do in ours; when one views them from a great distance one is inclined to forget that!) and that a very extensive geographical area is involved, then it soon dawns upon one how little in fact has survived and how big the gaps are. Every possibility of repairing them and making good our losses must be welcomed. The recent book by Daniélou[1] has shown that here in these latest discoveries lies a rich source of material.

But for New Testament studies in the strict sense too these writings are significant. In that connexion, there is one thing that must be kept clearly in mind: the fact that so many documents have been retrieved as one collection does not necessarily mean that they all originated in the same quarter. The Gnostics often applied the principle of '*Je prends mon bien où je le trouve*'; and it is already apparent, from what has been said earlier, that the connexion with Christianity is much closer in some of these writings than in others. It follows that the bearing of this collection on the New Testament will vary according to the nature of the different books. I should like to make four points in this connexion:

(1) These documents bring us into the world of the second century, that is, into the period which saw the formation of the New Testament canon. As regards the history of the canon and

[1] J. Daniélou, *Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme*, Tournai, 1958.

its formation a great deal of obscurity remains. One must hope that on this matter fresh viewpoints may emerge, just as they have been established—if I was right in my opinion—with respect to the *Gospel of Truth*.

(2) We can also expect positive results for textual criticism. As we know, the discovery of all kinds of papyri during recent decades has given access to the third century—an improvement on the situation at the end of the nineteenth century, when the editing of texts was based on the 'major' manuscripts dating from the fourth century. But the second century is still an obscure period of development. To it belong the two focal points of complex and mystifying problems known as the 'Western Text' and 'Tatian'. Quispel found in the *Sayings of Jesus* a number of remarkable parallels with readings from Tatian's *Diatessaron*. We can hope for progress in the study of textual developments only if fresh data come to hand: and that is precisely what has now happened.

(3) We know that, apart from the canonical Gospels, there once existed various other compilations of sayings of Jesus, in the shape of gospels, now lost, or of detached aphorisms. These are sometimes formulae closely related to those we find in the 'received' Gospels; but at other times their form is quite unfamiliar. Are we dealing here with later formulations, well-known texts which have somehow been disturbed, or some independent tradition? In some instances, there is much to be said for the last theory. So far as the study of the Gospels is concerned—in respect of 'form criticism', for example—there is material available here which, when amplified, could prove to be of great consequence.

(4) In the sphere of New Testament scholarship, and more particularly of New Testament theology, much use is made in certain quarters of the concept of 'Gnosis', and that is above all the case with the school of Bultmann. Bearing in mind that this, which necessitates a programme of 'demythologizing' because Paul and John lean so very heavily on 'Gnosis', is an integral part of the New Testament, and remembering how very much the ideas of Bultmann dominate the discussion, especially in Germany but also to an increasing extent elsewhere, one can only be grateful for any further light that is shed on the 'Gnosis' phenomenon. For we no longer have to resort to purely hypothetical reconstructions—we have knowledge of a whole mass of relevant facts.

Anyone who has made a study of the speculative passages on Adam in the *Apocryphon of John*, for example, will not so easily get away with explaining Paul's exposition in Rom. 5 and I Cor. 15 in terms of similar ideas of a Gnostic type: and anybody who has seen here how the Gnostics handle the concept of the 'Son of Man', will not be inclined to try to shed light on this term in the Gospels by reference to such ideas of 'primeval man'. An understanding of the history and growth of Gnosticism, such as now becomes possible, must make us cautious about drawing so freely on very late Manichaean and Mandaean sources—as has happened often enough—in order to explain something in the New Testament. We may also expect that when these documents have been properly studied, academic myth-making will be a more sober business, and some of the myths will be up for sale.

I should like to end with a twofold wish: first, that the work of research on this momentous find will succeed in making progress; secondly, that I may have succeeded in setting out clearly enough in this small book the nature and the significance of the discovery. The true meaning of the New Testament proclamation stands out the more distinctly, precisely when it is set against the background of its own time. For though all our knowing is in part, we desire with Paul to come more and more to know Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection.

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