ISMO DUNDERBERG

Gnostic Morality Revisited

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Mohr Siebeck

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I find myself very privileged as being surrounded by so many brilliant colleagues and students in Helsinki, who have patiently read and commented on my work prior to publication. Although many of them will be mentioned in the footnotes of individual chapters, I wish to acknowledge their contribution here as well. Heikki Räisänen has, even after his retirement, never declined to comment on my texts, and his comments have always been both reassuring and incisive. I thank the members of our gnostic studies team in Helsinki for their numerous insights and comments on the very first, and mostly very rough, drafts of the chapters in this book: Antti Marjanen, Risto Auvinen, Minna Heimola, Outi Lehtipuu, Ivan Miroshnikov, Tuomas Rasimus (from Quebec), Alin Suciu, Ulla Tervahauta, and Päivi Vähäkangas. Risto Uro gave valuable comments on Chapters 1 and 9, Tua Korhonen on Chapter 1, and Raimo Hakola on Chapter 10. Outi Lehtipuu and Niko Huttunen were kind enough to read and comment on the preface on short notice. Henri Montonen carefully reformatted the original

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* * *

The chapters in this book are, with one exception, previously published. I have made only a few modifications to the original publications, and only when I felt there was something obviously wrong in the original.

The articles are republished here with due permission from the publishers of the original publications, which are as follows:

Chapter 1: *New Testament Studies* 59 (2013): 247–67.

Chapter 2: Pages 201–21 in *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchachos Codex held at Rice University, Houston Texas, March 13–16, 2008.* Edited by April D. DeConick. Nag Hammadi and Manichean Series 71. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

Chapter 3: Pages 419–40 in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era.* Edited by Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 301. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.

Chapter 4: Pages 383–96 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*. Edited by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Chapter 5: Pages 67–93 in *The Apocryphal Gospels within the Context of Early Christian Theology.* Edited by Jens Schröter. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 260. Leuven: Peeters.

Chapter 6: Pages 220–38 in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*. Edited by Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen and Ismo Dunderberg. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2010.

Chapter 7: Pages 113–28 in *Zugänge zur Gnosis*. Edited by Christoph Markschies and Johannes van Oort. Leuven: Peeters, 2013.

Chapter 8 is previously unpublished but will also appear in the conference volume of a Valentinian Conference held in Rome, October 2013 (ed. Einar Thomassen; Nag Hammadi and Manichean Series; Leiden: Brill).

Chapter 9: Pages 14–36 in *Voces Clamantium in Deserto: Essays in Honor of Kari Syreeni*. Edited by Sven-Olav Back and Matti Kankaanniemi. Studier i exegetik vid judaistik utgivna av Teologiska fakulteten vid Åbo Akademi. Turku: Åbo Akademi, 2012.

Chapter 10: Pages 347–66 in *Beyond the Gnostic Gospels: Studies Building on the Work of Elaine Pagels*. Edited by Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott, Nicola Denzey Lewis and Philippa Townsend. Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentu 82. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.

For the names of Nag Hammadi texts, I follow those used in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (ed. Marvin Meyer; New York: HarperOne, 2007). For my references to the Nag Hammadi texts, I always give the codex pages, but I mention the line numbers only when I discuss more technical details and individual expressions in those texts.

The abbreviations of other source texts and in bibliographical entries follow those given in *The SBL Handbook of Style* (ed. Patrick H. Alexander et alii; Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1999).

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Introduction

The chapters in this book were written after my study on second-century Valentinian Christianity,[1] and they, in one way or another, reflect themes that arose in the course of writing that book. When it was out, I had in mind making a prompt return to New Testament studies. The New Testament professorship I received at my home university in Helsinki seemed to lend added urgency to this decision. I thought that my days in second-century studies were numbered and that the book I had written would simultaneously remain my rookie work in and swansong to this field.

It turned out, however, that there was some demand for second-century perspectives at conferences, seminars and workshops arranged by my New Testament colleagues, and this demand has kept me occupied with second-century Christianity until now. Most chapters in this book go back to research papers I was asked to deliver on such occasions. I used these presentations as venues, not only to beat the drum for some perspectives in my study on the Valentinians that I considered to be of more general interest, but also to further explore points that I had touched upon but not fully elaborated in that study. Thus, to those familiar with my previous work, the studies collected in this book offer a mixture of old and new.

I

One of the roles my New Testament colleagues expected of me was that of an expert on the second-century reception history of the scriptures. I should have anticipated this expectation, but I did not, nor was I well prepared for that role. Although my scholarly training had been in New Testament studies, reception history played little role in my work on the school of Valentinus since I found some other issues that I considered to be more crucial than reception history. Therefore, it was a welcome opportunity for me (for which I probably was not

[1] Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

duly grateful when the invitations came) that I was asked to work on this issue as well. Three chapters published here (4, 5, and 8) go back to such invitations.

In writing these studies, I also began to resuscitate my interest, which I had developed when I earlier worked on the *Gospel of Thomas*,[2] in topics pertaining to the New Testament canon. What I now found especially fascinating, and sometimes frustrating, were some New Testament colleagues' beliefs and strong value judgments related to canonical and noncanonical texts. It seemed a matter of course that some theologically conservative scholars of Christian origins were both adamant and predictable in their dismissal of all noncanonical gospels and the forms of "alternative" Christianities to which these gospels bore witness. Such alternatives might be easily conceived of as rivals to the form of Christianity that won the day in the Roman Empire in the fourth century (cf. chapter 10), and hence the energetic dismissal of these gospels.

It was more of a surprise to realize that more critical scholars of Christian origins also made quite strong theological claims about the formation of the New Testament canon. It also seemed customary among some of them to take *our* New Testament as a given (cf. chapter 9). There was very little historical reflection as to what texts the New Testament is comprised of (although the selection varies in the earliest manuscripts of the entire New Testament!), and there was hardly any reflection as to why this collection was needed and by whom (for these issues, see chapter 5).

In my take on the canon issue in this book, I aim at steering away from any deterministic theories in which it is assumed that the canon generated itself. I am ready to confess that I (unlike some of my colleagues) feel very much unable to assess whether and in what way the early Christian texts outside the New Testament are of poorer quality than those in it. Such assessments often seem matters of theological taste rather than results of careful argumentation, and their real goal is to reaffirm the New Testament as the default position and debunk everything else as deviations from that position.

In working on the chapters related to the canon issue, I became increasingly aware of the simple fact that even the collection we call "the New Testament" is a cultural construct, not a historical given. This applies even to the best scientific New Testament edition, Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*. It does not provide us with all the texts present in the earliest New Testament manuscripts; it only contains critical editions of the twenty-seven books that comprise *our* New Testament. The critical edition does not contain the *Epistle of Barnabas*, nor the *Shepherd of Hermas*, nor *1–2 Clement*, although these texts are known to us for the very reason that they were included in some of the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. Their inclusion in New Testament manuscripts

[2] Cf. Ismo Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple in Conflict?: Revisiting the Gospels of John and Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

shows that those who copied them "considered these writings to form part of the sacred Scriptures."[3]

The omission of these texts from the critical editions of the New Testament may be one reason why even more critical New Testament scholars often so effortlessly separate the "New Testament" from other bodies of early Christian literature, such as the "Apostolic Fathers," where *Barnabas*, *Shepherd,* and *1–2 Clement* are now conveniently placed. We all know (or should know) that the collection called the "Apostolic Fathers" did not exist in antiquity (the first version of this collection appeared in the 17th century), nor is there any clear definition which texts belong to this collection, nor were individual texts included in this collection clearly separated from those in the "New Testament" in the early Christian period.[4] Nevertheless, both in teaching and in scholarship, it is customary to neatly separate the "Apostolic Fathers" from the "New Testament," and this distinction continues to determine the way we conceptualize the different "phases" of Christian origins.

As Daniel Boyarin points out, boundaries between groups of people (or those between countries, ideologies, etc.) do not simply *exist*, those boundaries are always *drawn* by someone,[5] and, as the present political situation reminds us, the boundaries are also constantly negotiated and redrawn, either in subtle ways or with brute force. The intention of an active drawing of the boundaries (instead of simply trying to define something that has always "been there") is clear, as Boyarin further argues, in early Christian and Jewish heresiology, but it is equally clear that modern scholars are also often, more or less intentionally, engaged in boundary drawing with the research they produce. The case with "the New Testament" and "the Apostolic Fathers" is one example of how the boundaries, once drawn by someone, can gradually become "naturalized" in scholarly usage. The same problem, of course, pertains to other "naturalized" categories as well, such as "gnosticism."

II

It might be difficult for scholars devoting themselves to scriptures to understand what other issues could possibly be more interesting in second-century studies than the reception of and the debates revolving around the texts that became

[3] Bart Ehrman, Introduction to *The Apostolic Fathers* (ed. and trans. Bart Ehrman; LCL 24; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

[4] For an account how this collection has evolved from the seventeeth century onwards, see Ehrman, "Introduction."

[5] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

holy scripture for Christians. I do not want to repeat too much what I outlined in greater detail in my study on the Valentinians,[6] but I shall very briefly reiterate the crucial points of interest since they lay the basis for my perspective and approach in most chapters of this book, including those where Valentinians are not mentioned at all.

All chapters in this book are about, or touch upon, people and texts that, in someone's book, are "gnostic." There are obviously varying degrees of this assessment in different cases. Most specialists place Valentinian and Sethian forms of Christianity under the rubric "gnosticism." Opinions are more divided as to whether some other texts discussed in this book, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Authoritative Teaching* and the *Exegesis on the Soul* are "gnostic" or not (cf. chapters 1 and 5).

The main difference between these two sets of evidence is that Valentinians and Sethians were mythmakers, who found it important to attribute the creation of the world to an inferior creator-God, whereas the texts in the latter group show little or no interest in creation stories and do not posit the existence of a separate creator-God. In consequence, if one is willing to argue (as many still are) that the texts in the latter group are also "gnostic," one must seek in those texts very subtle, and often barely visible, hints at the "gnostic" mythology that allegedly underlies them.

This poses an obvious problem in interpreting the texts of the latter type. As soon as their "mythic" undercurrent is "uncovered," they are prone to be interpreted first and foremost against this background. This yields to dubious explanations since it is, then, assumed (1) that the myth in the background was what really mattered to the authors of these texts, and (2) that these authors for one reason or another wanted to keep secret that "real thing" from those for whom they were writing. In other words, these texts are interpreted in light of their alleged hidden agenda. The locus of explanation is shifted from what the text says to what it does *not* say. The old accusation brought against early Christian mythmakers, that they sought to dupe their audiences and only laid bare their true teaching to those they managed to deceive, still persists in modern scholarship, though this suspicion is now usually more politely formulated (e.g, by using the language of "exoteric" and "esoteric").

Many specialists of the Nag Hammadi and other Coptic texts are moving away from classifying the texts of the latter type as "gnostic" ones and now use other categories to describe their intellectual context. For instance, the same scholars who originally detected gnostic features in the *Gospel of Thomas* and *The Book of Thomas* now classify these texts as "Platonic."[7] Those still claiming that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a gnostic work often seem to have some other than purely

[6] Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 1–31.
[7] Cf. chapter 1, note 9 below.

academic reasons for doing so (cf. chapter 10). Designating the *Gospel of Thomas* a gnostic gospel is more often than not part of the argument to the effect that this gospel is of secondary value in comparison to those in the New Testament and, thus, does not merit the attention it has received in gospel studies. The gnostic provenance of the *Gospel of Thomas* is more often stated than carefully argued, and such statements customarily first and foremost serve the purpose of the exclusion of any "alternatives" to the canonical gospels rather than reflect careful scrutiny of the gospel itself.

As will be seen below, I do not designate any of the texts in this latter group as "gnostic." In chapter 1, I call these texts "nondemiurgical" to simply distinguish them from texts where the myth of the inferior creator-God (demiurge) occupies a crucial place.

III

The terms of "gnostic" and "gnosticism" are no less problematic in connection with the early Christian "demiurgists,"[8] that is, the mythmakers who assumed the existence of an inferior creator-God in their new stories of the creation.

Just like "the Apostolic Fathers," the term "gnosticism" does not occur in early sources but originates the 17th century.[9] The main problem with that term, however, is not its late date but the fact that it creates the impression that the early Christian mythmakers discussed in this book formed a relatively united front that was opposed to some other united front in early Christianity. This impression persists, even though all agree that these mythmakers never formed a unified group in history. Their attitudes towards the body, society, other Christians, and the entire visible world differed greatly. More recent studies have abundantly demonstrated that there was no "gnostic spirit" that would have been common to all these mythmakers. Their teachings betray no shared "sense of alienation" in the world,[10] nor did these people univocally promote "hatred of the body."

[8] This term goes back to Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). Williams proposes that, instead of "gnosticism," it would be more advisable to speak of "biblical demiurgical traditions." This designation would refer to the two most important ingredients in the myths of the early Christian mythmakers discussed in this book: the retelling of the biblical creation story, and the Platonic assumption of a separate creator-God (demiurge).

[9] Cf. Bentley Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334–50.

[10] The quest for the "gnostic spirit" is characteristic of the work of Hans Jonas, who defined as his goal in the study of "gnostic" sources "to understand the spirit speaking through these voices and in its light to restore an intelligible unity to the baffling multiplicity of its expression"; Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of*

A sense of social alienation can be felt in some parts of the "gnostic" evidence; there are dismissive remarks on the body in some of the evidence, and some texts lend voice to a hostile attitude towards other Christians or the Roman society or both. None of such views, however, is universally attested in the evidence related to these early Christian mythmakers.[11] That they are portrayed as extremists in thought and practice is the result of scholarly generalization, based upon very selective usage of the available evidence.

The diversity among early Christian mythmakers is often accepted in principle but not in practice. What I found striking in my study on Valentinians was the scholarly tendency to cherry-pick from the available evidence the most negative statements concerning the body, other Christians and the visible world, and to ignore those bearing witness to more moderate sentiments. One very typical example is the lumping together of the Valentinians, most of whom had a relatively positive view of their contemporary world, and the Sethians, most of whom adopted a far more critical stance to that world, as representing the same group of "gnostics." In such cases, the evidence is more often than not taken from the Sethians since their more austere views about the body, society and other Christians better serve to illustrate the scholar's conception of "the gnostic spirit" – as opposed the true "Christian" one. The Valentinian evidence is less useful for this purpose since it comes very close at many points to what is conceived of as "true" (read: "our") Christianity.

One of the points I sought to make in my study on Valentinians and still do here is this: the deviation of these mythmakers from what later became the orthodox Christian belief in one God has become a more distinct group denominator in modern academic scholarship than it was in history. I may have become oversensitive to this issue but my gut feeling is that when scholars of the New Testament and the early church are reporting "gnostic views," you can expect to hear soon how the things were conceived "in the church," and that latter position is usually clearly distinguished from the "gnostic" one.[12] The same sense of superiority that characterized some scholarly assessments of canonical gospels as opposed to noncanonical ones can also be felt in modern researchers'

Christianity (2nd ed.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), xvii. For a critical rejoinder to Jonas, see now Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies* (NHMS 81; Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[11] Cf. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism."*

[12] For some recent examples, see Frances Young, "Creation of Human Being: Forging of a Distinct Christian Discourse," *Studia Patristica* 44 (2010): 334–48, esp. 341 ("The dogma ['out of nothing'] arose, then, in the second century, when not only was the apologetic enterprise engaging with philosophy, but cosmogony was a key element in the debate with gnosticism"); Christopher T. Bounds, "Competing Doctrines of Perfection: The Primary Issue in Irenaeus' Refutation of Gnosticism," *Studia Patristica* 45 (2010): 403–8 (where the analysis is divided into "the Gnostic doctrine" [403–5], and "the Church doctrine" [405–7]); D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Irenaeus on Gnostic Biblical Interpretation," *Studia Patristica* 40 (2006): 367–79.

evaluations of "gnostic" views. One surprising fact is how sharp, condemnatory, and even emotional, these evaluations often are. A leading authority of ancient philosophy calls "the Gnostics" "the magpies of the intellectual world of the second century."[13] A renowned sociologist of religion oozes a disdain for both ancient "gnostics" and the modern scholars studying them.[14] Those working on the reception history of New Testament texts in the second century are often quick to disparage the "gnostic" interpretations as "perverting," "abusing," and "distorting" the true meaning of these texts.[15] One prolific writer on the New Testament and early Christianity is even concerned that the academic study of gnosticism opens the door to demons[16] – the reader beware!

Such scholarly claims both presuppose and reinforce the dualistic conception of early Christianity as fundamentally divided into two opposed poles, with the early church at the one end, and the "gnostics" at the other.[17] This model obviously presupposes too much unity at both ends, at the "church" end as well as in that of "the gnostics." It also ignores the fact that the alternative cosmic myth and the teaching of the second god were not the only issues on the table when early Christian teachers discussed and debated with each other. The cosmic myth aside, the Valentinians stood on many other issues closer to Clement and Origen of Alexandria than to the Sethians. The sense of affinity among Valentinians, Clement and Origen is also sometimes acknowledged in Clement's and Origen's works. For instance, Clement *supported* his own teaching about self-control by quoting Valentinus' bizarre illustration of Jesus' unique self-control over his body – that Jesus ate and drank but did not defecate.[18] Origen often seriously reflects on, and occasionally approves of, Heracleon's allegorical interpretations of John's gospel.[19] Such instances of blurring the boundaries, ancient and modern alike, tend to remain in the shadows in scholarly literature, however. This may

[13] John Dillon "Monotheism in Gnostic Tradition," in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (ed. P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 69–79, p. 74.

[14] Rodney Stark, *Cities of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 154.

[15] Cf. below chapter 5 n. 3 (Charles Hill); chapter 8 (Andreas Lindemann); for yet another representative of this attitude, see Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Frühes Christentum und Gnosis: Eine rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie* (WUNT 225; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), e.g. 210, 253–9, 301–2, 308, 386–8; 493–500; cf. Ismo Dunderberg, Review of Weiss, *Frühes Christentum und Gnosis*, *RBL* (2011) [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/7365_8026.pdf].

[16] Cf. chapter 10 n. 2 (Ben Witherington).

[17] Cf. Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

[18] Valentinus, frag. 3 = Clement, *Misc.* 3.59.3. Valentinus' teaching was probably not as bizarre as it may seem to us since similar stories were also told about legendary Greek sages (cf. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism*, 22). Clement clearly took no offense at this teaching of Valentinus.

[19] Cf. Harold W. Attridge, *Essays on John and Hebrews* (WUNT 264; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 193–207; Ansgar Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon Philologus: Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert* (WUNT 142; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 26.

indicate that our scholarly discourse is "conflict-driven": we as scholars find "conflicts" to be more relevant – and no doubt more exciting – than instances of peaceful coexistence and mutual learning.

Another, related problem is that "gnosticism," as a category of difference and exclusion, tends to predetermine the scholar's focus: it is set on what is conceived of as being different from something else. Deviation from the norm is what truly matters in this picture, and the essence of the other (in this case "gnosticism") is searched in difference. Points of shared convictions seem either non-interesting, and thus not worth studying, or dangerous, in which case the scholar may feel the call to reaffirm the existence of the boundary between the two poles. The most prominent, and suspect, explanation in the latter case is that those "gnostics" who seem to come especially close to the boundary were not sincere but have put on the cloak of a true Christian only for strategic reasons, that is, in order to win new converts to their gnostic cause.

In consequence, I avoid the language of "gnosticism" in my own usage – with two exceptions which are the titles of this book and chapter 5. (In the latter case, I confess I just could not come up with any better shorthand for the materials discussed in that study. Within the chapter itself, however, I try to be as clear as possible on the problems pertaining to the terminology of "gnosticism," and on the broad variety of positions on the Hebrew Bible in these materials.)

My rationale for not using the terms "gnosticism" and "gnostic" in my own analysis is that it would be very difficult to use these terms without falling into the incorrect polarities described above. The usage of these terms unavoidably creates the impression that the people grouped under this term somehow belonged together and somehow as a group differed from some people, no matter what term is chosen to designate the beliefs of those in the latter group: "orthodoxy," "proto-orthodoxy," "the Great Church," or "mainstream." Such polarities eschew the rich diversity of early Christian groups and views.

The usage of the G-word would also add little to my analysis since I have not found as my calling to lay bare in any of these studies the distinct "core" of "gnostic thought" that made it different from everything else in the second century. I rather seek to make sense of individual early Christian teachers and texts by placing them in a dialogue with other contemporary teachers and texts, both Christian and non-Christian.

The purpose of some of the studies presented here, unsurprisingly, is to shake the foundations of the great wall between the church and gnosticism. This endeavor is most clearly visible in my study on early Christian martyrdom and its critics (chapter 3). I wrote it in dialogue with, and opposition to, the usual generalization that those in the church embraced martyrdom, whereas those on the gnostic front sought to avoid it. The same goal is pursued in chapter 4 on the Genesis interpretations of early Christian mythmakers: this study seeks to delineate different ways of using and evaluating traditions stemming from the

Book of Genesis, but it does *not* seek to exhume a unifying core underneath these varied usages of the Hebrew Bible.

Instead of searching for *the* "gnostic" ideology and its distinct markers, I classify the evidence by using more specific group designations that are relatively well established in gnostic studies. It goes without saying that Valentinus and his followers figure prominently in the chapters of this book, but in many chapters I also refer to the views of "Sethians."

Both designations are subject to debate in more recent literature. In my opinion, the Valentinians are well attested in ancient sources as a distinct early Christian group. They had opponents who found them important enough to be disagreed with and who for this reason wrote lengthy polemical treatises against them.[20] The case with "Sethians" seems less secure since the external evidence for them is not so prominent as that for Valentinians. Sethian theology is first and foremost a scholarly construct based on ideological affinities between a group of Nag Hammadi texts and the views described at some length in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* 1.29–31. While some scholars find in Sethianism the "classical" form of ancient gnosticism,[21] others have considerably modified or even abandoned

[20] This scholarly consensus on the Valentinians has come under critical scrutiny. Geoffrey Smith, *Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), argues that "the school of Valentinus" was a heresiological construct rather than a historically accurate designation. Hugo Lundhaug finds unnecessary the usual hypothesis of Valentinian provenance of some Nag Hammadi texts, such as the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3) and the *Liturgical Fragments* (at the end of NHC XI). Lundhaug argues that the Nag Hammadi texts make the best sense when placed in the Egyptian monastic context of the fourth and fifth centuries, but he does not explain how the references to a lower creator-god in a number of these texts would fit in that context. For example, the statement in the *Gospel of Philip* that "the world came into being because of a false step (ⲡⲁⲣⲁⲡⲧⲱⲙⲁ)" since the creator-god failed in his attempt to make it "imperishable and immortal" (*Gos. Phil.* 75:2–11 // § 99) is not mentioned at all in Lundhaug's otherwise thorough study of this text: Hugo Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul* (NHMS 73; Leiden: Brill, 2010); cf. idem, "Evidence of 'Valentinian' Ritual Practice? The Liturgical Fragments of Nag Hammadi Codex XI (NHC XI,2a–e)," in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner* (ed. Kevin Corrigan and Tuomas Rasimus; NHMS 82; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 225–243; idem, "'Gnostisisme' og 'Valentinianisme': To problematiske kategorier i studiet av Nag Hammadi-biblioteket og tidlig kristendom ["Gnosticism" and "Valentinianism:" Two Problematic Categories in the study of the Nag Hammadi Library and Early Christianity]," *Chaos* 36 (2001): 27–43. The theory about the monastic context of the Nag Hammadi Library is debated among coptologists; for an extended critical review of the "Pachomian monastic hypothesis," see now Stephen Emmel, "The Coptic Gnostic Texts as Witnesses to the Production and Transmission of Gnostic (and Other) Traditions," in *Thomasevangelium: Entstehung – Rezeption – Theologie* (ed. Jörg Frey, Enno Edzard Popkes and Jens Schröter; BZNW 157; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 33–49.

[21] Cf. David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Bentley Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism."

the Sethian hypothesis.[22] I still see the Sethian hypothesis as resting on the solid observation that there are notable and distinct affinities in the set of texts now classified as "Sethian" ones. The affinities are largely of an ideological nature, however, so it may be advisable to speak of "Sethianism" as referring to shared myths and beliefs, and not to make farfetched assumptions on "Sethians" as a group (or groups) of people brought together by these shared teachings.[23]

IV

As the title of this book suggests, issues related to morality are crucial in most studies published here. I am especially interested in clarifying what kind of ethical ideals and moral guidance, either explicit or implicit, the texts discussed in this book offer.

This perspective is connected with the claim that these texts should not be taken as reflections of a distinct "gnostic" spirit. Rather, these texts belong to those written by educated early Christians, who became more and more inspired by and oriented towards philosophy from the second century onwards. Ancient philosophy, in turn, was not all about "systems of thought," it was also about putting philosophy into practice ("doing philosophy"). In other words, ancient philosophers provided their adherents with a way of life, which the adherents were expected to follow.[24]

Comparisons between philosophers and the early Christian evidence discussed here are nothing new as such. Most previous comparisons, however, have been often focused on theory. That is, the focus has been set on the great traditions, especially those issuing from Plato, and they are approached as "systems of thought." In consequence, the ultimate goal has often been to compare philosophers' systems of thought with those of the "gnostics." Less attention have been paid on issues related to morality and lifestyle, although these issues were probably of primary relevance to "average" students in any of these educated groups.

The moral concern is often linked with the rise of "moral philosophers" in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods, but this concern already looms large in Plato's dialogues (cf. chapter 1). What ancient philosophers provided their

[22] Cf. Alastair H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996); Tuomas Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Myth and Ritual* (NHMS 68; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[23] Michael A. Williams, "Sethianism," in *A Companion to Second Century Christian "Heretics"* (ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen; VigChrSup 76; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 32–63.

[24] For this perspective on ancient philosophy, see especially Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (trans. Michael Case; Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

students with was instruction that led to calmness (ἀταραξία) and true happiness (εὐδαιμονία). The ancient moral literature certainly includes detailed instructions about things to do and those to avoid, and reflections about principles of ethical decision making. Much of the ancient philosophers' ethical instruction, however, revolved around one's *inner reactions* towards the impulses stemming either from within (one's body) or from the surrounding world (objects of delight, pain, desire and fear). Ethical reflection was focused on how one is able to keep calm and rational, and not to give rein to the false beliefs connected with passions. There were differences between schools regarding how much emotions need to be suppressed but all schools insisted on the great importance of self-control as the means of achieving true happiness.

The importance of ancient moral philosophy began to dawn on me when I was working with Valentinian tales of the creation. Some narrative details, which I had first thought of as poetic embellishments of creation stories, turned out to be much more than that when they were placed in the context of ancient philosophy. For example, in the Valentinian story about Wisdom, abandoned outside the divine realm, her entanglement in emotions (distress, fear, anxiety) and her way out of that state were painstakingly described (cf. chapter 6.2). In the myth, the Savior is introduced as visiting Wisdom from above in order to offer her a cure for those emotions. The role assigned to the Savior in this myth, thus, was similar to that of ancient philosophers who presented themselves as doctors of the soul.[25] I realized that Valentinians shared some common ground with moral philosophers, and the recognition of that common ground helped me better understand the Valentinian sources I was working with.

In consequence, perspectives gleaned from ancient moral philosophy began to play an increasingly crucial role in my approach to the Valentinians and other early Christian intellectuals. In addition to the philosophers' theories about emotions, their discussions about the perfect human (ὁ τέλειος) and other types of humans (some of whom aimed at moral progress, whereas some others did not) called for comparisons since similar categorizations of classes of humankind were present in the philosophers' works and in my primary sources. It seems obvious that the early Christian texts discussed in chapter 1 belong to this pool of thoughts. The *Gospel of Judas* and moral philosophers may seem more unexpected bedfellows but I seek to show that a link between them can also be made (chapter 2). My interpretations of the Valentinian views about the classes of humankind in chapters 6–8 are also closely linked with the ancient philosophers' views about moral progress.

It may be debated how essential the link to ancient moral philosophers is for understanding the sources discussed in this book. I probably take this connection further than most other specialists in the field would do. One of the benefits I

[25] This is a brief summary of what I argued in Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism,* 95–118.

see in this choice is that it enables us to better see connections between this body of evidence and Jewish and early Christian teachers. In addition to Hellenistic and Greco-Roman philosophers, I often resort to Philo, Clement and Origen as points of comparison since it seems to me that they are engaged in discussions about the very same issues that occupied Valentinians and other Christians discussed in this book. This perspective also serves to undermine the great church-gnosticism divide. For example, the sense of spiritual superiority, which is sometimes taken as being part and parcel of the "gnostic" thought, seems less distinct when compared with Clement's views about the perfect human (whom he called "the gnostic") and especially with Origen's (sometimes quite nasty) descriptions of "simple" Christians.[26]

V

One issue one might expect to find discussed in a book on gnostic morality is the accusation of immorality of the early Christian mythmakers in their opponents' works. This, however, is not a primary concern in the studies collected in this book. Suffice it to say that the Nag Hammadi Library radically changed the picture of the "Gnostics Behaving Badly."[27]

The doyen of church history in England, Henry Chadwick, was among the first to note this change. He rightly recognized the ascetic orientation of the Nag Hammadi texts, and their potential for use in Egyptian monastic communities; this approach has more recently become a notable trend in Nag Hammadi studies.[28] Chadwick, however, was strikingly reluctant to completely abandon the picture of immoral gnostics. The new picture of "gnostic" morality, which Chadwick designated as "the domestication of Gnosis," did not yield to a critical review of the heresiologists' image of libertine gnostics, giving themselves license to indulge in every possible kind of sexual misconduct. Chadwick resorted to a general argument in support of the heresiologists. In his opinion, there is so much evidence for excessive sexual behavior taking place in all kinds of religious communities in the course of history that it is entirely plausible that such behavior also took place in gnostic communities.[29]

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[26] For a comprehensive account of Origen's views about lower-class Christians, see Gunnar af Hällström, *Fides Simpliciorum According to Origen of Alexandria* (Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 76; Helsinki: The Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, 1984).

[27] For the most comprehensive analysis of this issue, see Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 139–88.

[28] Cf. n. 20 above.

[29] Henry Chadwick, "The Domestication of Gnosis," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* (2 vols; ed. Bentley Layton; SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 1.3–16.

This argument overlooks that the evidence for the libertinism of early Christian mythmakers comes solely from hostile sources, and that tarnishing the opponents with such accusations was common coinage in ancient polemics of all varieties. Rumors of sexual immoderation (as opposed to moderation among "us") and wild orgies were regularly spread concerning all kinds of groups of people not belonging to "us."[30]

Another theme neglected in this book are the scholarly claims about individual New Testament texts and gnostic morality. It is fascinating to see how stubbornly the gnostic position, regardless of how it is defined in each case, is associated with the *opponents* of New Testament authors. The new picture emerging from Nag Hammadi texts may change the way the "gnostic" position is defined. Regardless of how that position is defined, however, it is always (or most often) on the wrong side. By way of example, there has been a long-standing tendency to link the confusing remarks about sin and sinlessness in 1 John with "gnostic" opponents whom the author wanted to refute. The author's opponents can be denounced as "heretics," who denied Christ's incarnation and thus "the salvific truth of faith,"[31] and it can be assumed that those who claimed to be sinless promoted "heretical perfectionism" – as opposed to the author's "orthodox perfectionism."

If one then takes a closer look at what distinguishes the two types of perfectionism, the wrong variety seems practically identical to the Valentinian teaching as reported in the hostile sources. It is assumed in the theory of the two types of perfectionism that the author of 1 John and the alleged opponents agreed that being sinless is possible (though the author does not seem very consistent on this point), but the opponents believe so for the wrong reasons. Just like the Valentinians according to the hostile sources, the opponents of 1 John according to this theory denied the possibility of sinning because it is incompatible with one's divine nature, whereas the author's orthodox variety of perfectionism takes seriously the possibility that Christians can sin and addresses this problem.[32] The problem with this theory is obvious: given that 1 John was written prior to the Valentinians, it is difficult to find any compelling evidence for the alleged "heterodox perfectionism," based upon the notion of "salvation because of nature," that would predate 1 John.

[30] Cf. Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[31] Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992–99), 2.272–74.

[32] John L. Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community* (SBLDS 33; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977); for a critique of Bogart's antignostic interpretation of 1 John, see, e.g., John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (Sacra Pagina Series 18; Collegeville, MA: Liturgical Press, 2002), 162–64. The antignostic interpretation of 1 John still persists, however; for one recent example, see Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on First, Second, and Third John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).

Similar problems pertain to Pauline studies. There still seem to be passages raising the impression that in them "Paul speaks like a gnostic." One key passage for this contention is usually 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, where Paul claims to be one of those speaking the divine wisdom "among the perfect ones," then distinguishes between two kinds of Christians, the spiritual ones (οἱ πνευματικοί) and the animate ones (οἱ ψυχικοί), and then affirms the lack of insight among the latter. It is surprising how the image persists that Paul here suddenly "speaks like a gnostic"[33] (cf. chapter 8). Of course he does. For the distinction between the spiritual and animate Christians is best attested for Valentinians, and they read and interpreted Paul's letters! The Valentinian evidence, however, is sheerly inconclusive when it comes to the question of where Paul adopted this distinction from, and this Valentinian evidence certainly does not do for the evidence that either Paul or his opponents in Corinth had some "gnostic" tendencies. Philosophical discussions in Hellenistic Judaism offer a far more plausible context for understanding Paul at this point.[34]

VI

Since so many of the studies published here revolve around similar themes, I experienced some difficulty in trying to put them into a reasonable order. I decided to start with five "non-Valentinian" articles, then to move on to three solely devoted to Valentinian themes, and to conclude with two articles with some more general remarks on the study of the New Testament from the perspective of a New Testament scholar with a foot in the camp of second-century Christianity.

In chapter 1, I seek to show how the Platonic imagery of the soul, drawn between mind and matter, evolved into two different kinds of stories about the soul in Nag Hammadi texts. Instead of classifying those texts into "gnostic" and "nongnostic" ones, I divide them into "demiurgical" and "non-demiurgical" ones, depending on whether the story of the soul involves an inferior creator-god or not. Instead of trying to find hidden clues of a "demiurgical" myth in the "non-demiurgical" ones, I intend to turn the whole mode of explanation upside down: the demiurgical versions are one way of telling the traditional story of the

[33] Cf. Weiss, *Frühes Christentum und Gnosis*, 418 (with references to Walter Schmithals, Ulrich Wilckens); see also ibid. 421 (with reference to Hans Windisch on 2 Cor 4:4).

[34] Cf., e. g., Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in First Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism* (SBLDS 12; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973); Karl-Gustav Sandelin, *Die Auseinandersetzung mit der Weisheit in 1. Korinther 15* (Meddelanden från Stifteltens för Åbo Akademi Forskningsinstitut, 12; Turku: Åbo Akademi, 1976); Gerhard Sellin, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Korinther 15* (FRLANT 138; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1986).

soul drawn into two directions, "up" and "down." Moreover, I pay special attention to the moral aspects reflected in these stories. One of the discoveries new to me in working on this chapter was that luxury is at least as much of a problem as is excessive sexual desire in these texts.

It is claimed in chapter 2 that ancient philosophers' views about anger and anger control help us better understand the *Gospel of Judas* and other Sethian texts, such as the *Secret Book of John*. What I found particularly fascinating in working on in this essay were ancient theories of "morality ladders," so I tried to figure out where Judas, as portrayed in the *Gospel of Judas*, would stand on those ladders. The *Gospel of Judas* is certainly no moral philosophical treatise, yet I believe there are some clues inviting this kind of comparisons – such as Jesus urging his disciples to bring forth the "perfect human." This was a stock designation for those (very few) on the highest step in the morality ladder in the philosophical discourse.[35]

I already mentioned above that chapter 3 is the one chapter most clearly written to question the church-gnosticism divide. I seek to demonstrate that there was no uniform "gnostic" avoidance of persecutions, nor was there a uniform "ecclesiastical" approval of martyrdom. The beauty of martyrdom was, by and large, in the eye of the beholder. All parties regarded their own martyrs as heroes of the faith but in different ways devalued the martyrdom experienced by other kinds of Christians, those who did not belong to "us." One personal reflection I left out of this essay is how easily scholars adopt insider terminology in talking about this issue. The most shocking illustration is that the new phase in the history of the church in the fourth century is often designated "the end of persecution." This designation is only *very* partially true. This new phase meant relief for some Christians but not for all of them: the persecution of those Christians who ended up on the wrong side of the orthodoxy-heresy divide continued, and sometimes with greater intensity than before.

Chapters 4 and 5 are related to the reception history of the scripture, but these chapters are different from each other in terms of topic, scope and approach. The study on Valentinian, Sethian and other kinds of interpretations of the Book of Genesis in chapter 4 was originally written for a handbook and is, thus, more of an introductory nature. For this very reason, this chapter may best serve as a follow-up of some issues touched upon in this preface. The broader conclusion is not new among the specialists: there are considerable differences in the interpretations of the Hebrew Bible in the sources discussed here; there was no shared

[35] One detail needs to be added to this essay: the new fragments of Codex Tchachos that became available after this study was written make it clear that it is Jesus (and not Judas) who enters the cloud in *Gos. Jud.* 57–58. (In my conclusion to chapter 2 this issue was left open.) Professor Gregor Wurst has kindly made the relevant material available online: http://www.kthf.uni-augsburg.de/prof_doz/hist_theol/wurst/forschung_downloads/Neue_Fragmente_IV.pdf (last visited September 25, 2014).