Gnostic Views on the Origin and the Nature of the Universe

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In several respects, ancient Gnostic views on the origin and the structure of the cosmic world differed from the cosmological ideas of contemporary Hellenistic philosophers. First of all, Gnostics claimed to possess detailed knowledge of the divine realm *above* the cosmic world, the *plêrôma* ("fullness"), and their mythological texts explain the coming into existence of the visible cosmos from tragic events within this meta-cosmic reality. It is my contention, however, that the points of agreement between Gnostic and Hellenistic philosophical cosmologies are at least as significant as the differences are. I hope to show that Greek philosophical ways of thinking underlie Gnostic mythological tales about God and about the origin of the world and man.

Let me first quote the opening words of *Eugnostos the Blessed* (Nag Hammadi Codex III,3 and V,1), because they disclose how a Gnostic author could think of the cosmogonical teachings of contemporary (second- or third-century) philosophers. The anonymous author states:

> The wisest (of people) have speculated about the truth on the basis of the structure of the universe but their speculation has not reached the truth. Philosophers mention three (different) opinions about the structure of the universe, and thus they do not agree. For some of them say that the world was directed by itself, others say that providence directs it, and others that it was fate. But none of these opinions is true. For whatever is from itself is empty, it is self-made. Providence is foolish. Fate is an undiscerning thing[1].

In another Gnostic text, the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* (Nag Hamm. Cod. III,4 and Berlin Codex 8502,3), the quoted words are put into the mouth of the Christian Savior. With these words he

[1] NHC III, 70,8-71,5; cf. V, 1,9-24.

answers a question posed by one of his disciples about "the nature (*hypostasis*) of the universe and the plan of salvation"[2].

The untitled treatise which in recent studies is called *On the Origin of the World* (Nag Hamm. Cod. II,5 and the surviving fragments of Cod. XIII,2) opens in a comparable way: all people are mistaken because "they are not acquainted with the [structure] of chaos (a Gnostic reference to the physical world) nor with its root"[3].

My central text is the *Secret Book* (*Apocryphon*) *of John*, "the Gnostic Bible" as it is sometimes called in scholarly literature[4]. This writing survives in four ancient papyrus manuscripts: three of the thirteen fourth-century Coptic codices found in 1945 in the Egyptian desert near Nag Hammadi include a copy of this document[5]. The three codices contain several other writings, but in each of them the *Secret Book of John* is the first text. A fourth copy is preserved in the so-called Berlin Codex, a Coptic manuscript probably from the early fifth century discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, likewise in Egypt (reportedly in the environs of Achmim)[6]. The Berlin Codex and Nag Hammadi Codex III contain a somewhat shorter version of the text than Nag Hammadi Codices II and IV [7]. Most experts assume that the shorter version represents an older stage in the literary history of this document than the longer version. A fifth textual witness is Bishop Irenaeus's summary of what seems to be an early Greek version of the first sections of the *Secret Book* in his work *Adversus Haereses*, which he completed in about 185[8]. Irenaeus's reference and some features of the book's contents suggest that the lost Greek original was composed around the middle of the second century.

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[2] NHC III, 92,4-93,16; Berlin Codex (8502), 79,18-82,9.

[3] NHC II, 79,28-29.

[4] M. TARDIEU, *Écrits gnostiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 10: "*la bible des antibiblistes*"; 26: "*la Bible gnostique par excellence*"; cf. M.A. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 8 and 198.

[5] NHC II, III, and IV.

[6] Abbr.: BG (*Berolinensis Gnosticus*, the manuscript was acquired for the Egyptian museum of Berlin in 1896). In this codex the *Secret Book* is preceded by the *Gospel of Mary*.

[7] Synoptic text edition: M. WALDSTEIN and F. WISSE, *The Apocryphon of John*, NHMS 33 (Leiden - New York - Köln: Brill, 1995).

[8] *AH* I, 29. This part of Irenaeus's work is preserved in a Latin translation. A. ROUSSEAU and L. DOUTRELEAU, *Irenée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies*, I,2 (Paris: Cerf, 1979), 358-64.

The book contains one of the most comprehensive accounts of the ancient Gnostic myth of origins. After the introductory frame narrative, in which the claim is made that the myth was revealed by the Christian Savior in a post-paschal appearance to John, one of the sons of Zebedee, the actual mythological teaching begins with an exposition about the fully transcendent God, "the Invisible Spirit", and about the gradual unfolding of God's infinite mind. The many pages devoted to this description give evidence of the Gnostic interest in the divine realm above the physical cosmos. I begin with this part of the myth.

I. The meta-cosmic realm of the true God.

In advance, it has to be observed that Gnostic teachings distinguish clearly between a fully transcendent God and a demiurgic God, often named "Yaldabaoth"[9]. The latter is conceived as a cosmic (demonic) being. As we will see further below, he is blamed for his supposed ignorance and malevolence.

Despite appearances to the contrary, Gnostic ideas about the Supreme God, the Demiurge, and the relations of both Gods to humankind had unmistakably Greek philosophical (theological, anthropological, epistemological) roots. I mention four basic ingredients:

Theological dualism. The distinction between a fully transcendent God and a demiurgic God was not a Gnostic invention. In his *Timaeus*, Plato still presented the Demiurge as an aspect or function of the divine principle itself, but, starting with Aristotle[10], later philosophers more clearly distinguished the Demiurge from the Supreme God, whom they conceived as an unchanging Entity[11]. Aristotle insisted that the Supreme God is not engaged in any practical activity and that he therefore cannot be the *causa efficiens* of motions and changes in the physical world. Gnostic intellectuals shared the assumption that the transcendent God is not responsible for the lower world. This enabled them to speak highly of their true God while at the same time thinking negatively about the Creator of the physical cosmos. What they added to the current

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[9] The etymological meaning of this Semitic name is not clear (Begetter of Sabaoth=Abaoth?) Cf. K. RUDOLPH, *Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 73.

[10] Cf. A.P. BOS, *Cosmic and Meta-cosmic Theology in Aristotle's Lost Dialogues* (Leiden - New York - Köln: Brill, 1989); id., 'Teologia Cosmica e Metacosmica nella Filosofia Greca e nello Gnosticismo', *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-scolastica* 84 (1992) 369-82.

[11] See e.g. J. DILLON, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996[2]), 367-9 (Numenius).

philosophical notion of two different Gods was indeed their utterly negative view of the Demiurge (and their identification of this lower Godhead with the Biblical God, see below).

Anthropology. It was a widely accepted idea among Hellenistic philosophers that the innermost core of the human being was not created but that it is of divine descent and nature, preexistent and eternal. This anthropological idea means that *in their inner selves, humans are consubstantial with the transcendent God*. It certainly is one of the fundamental ideas of the Gnostic myth. (It is clear that Jewish and non-Gnostic Christian contemporaries thought differently about man's relationship to God.)

The principle "like knows like". Gnostics believed that in spite of their present condition, humans are able to know the fully transcendent and ineffable God. I assume that this belief was not only based upon the above-mentioned anthropological concept but also upon the Greek philosophical principle that like knows like: if in the core of their being, humans are God-like they are familiar and acquainted with God, which means that they are able to have knowledge (*gnosis*) of the transcendent God and his pleromatic realm.

Contacts with the divine. Gnostics are likely to have believed that the spiritual core of *all humans* shares God's eternal nature (contrary to what Irenaeus and other Patristic authors report[12]). But they must have observed that not all human beings are aware of the divine essence or "light power" in themselves. Gnostic documents explain this fact from the idea that the divine *dunamis* is *latently* present in human beings: it has to be awakened and to grow[13]. It is tempting to trace this idea to Aristotle's teaching. Aristotle and the philosophers influenced by his metaphysics held that the *nous*-potential in man is "actualized" through contact with the always actual divine *Nous*[14].

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[12] Cf. Irenaeus, *AH* I 6-7 and II 29 and the discussion in W.A. LÖHR, 'Gnostic Determinism Reconsidered', *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992), 381-90, and LUTTIKHUIZEN, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions*, NHMS 58 (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2006), 83-6.

[13] Cf. M.A. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 195: "the *potential* to belong to the spiritual race is imagined as having been present at birth for *all* humans" (his emphasis); LUTTIKHUIZEN, *Gnostic Revisions*, 62-5.

[14] *Metaph* XII 1072b19-21; *Eud* fr. 10 (Ross, fr. 1012). Plutarch and other philosophers interpreted the relevant idea of Aristotle as a "touching" of the divinity, cf. *Is* 77, 382d-e; MERLAN, 'Greek Philosophy from Plato to Plotinus', in A.H. ARMSTRONG (ed.), *The Cambridge Hist. of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, 59; id., *Monopsychism*, *Mysticism, Metaconsciousness. Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1963), 33; *From Platonism to Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968), 168.

From this brief presentation of the underlying philosophical ideas I turn to the actual descriptions of God's reality. The *Secret Book* and several other mythological Gnostic texts begin by emphasizing God's transcendence in terms of negation: God is unknowable, immeasurable, invisible, ineffable etc.[15] This is reminiscent of the "negative theology" of some Hellenistic philosophers. A clear example can be found in chap. 10 of the *Didaskalikos* composed by Albinus (Alkinoös). Also according to Apuleius, *De Platone* 5, God is "ineffable, unnameable, invisible, unconquerable".

The *Secret Book* goes on to describe God's thinking. Like Aristotle's always actual *Nous*, the Gnostic God is said *to behold or "think" himself* (the Greek verb *noein* is used)[16]. It is the beginning of a long exposition of the externalization of God's mind. In line with the later Platonic concept of the Ideas or Forms as God's thoughts[17] Gnostic theologians conceived the "eons" of the divine world as the thoughts of the Supreme God. The divine eons taken together could be imagined as a map of God's eternal mind. But more metaphors are used[18]. The Supreme God is also imagined as a source from which the eons came forth or "emanated". Below I will point to the Gnostic adaptation of the traditional image of God as a Father.

First we read that God's thought of himself "*became* a reality". Or did the Gnostic author intend to say that God's thought of himself always *was* a reality? Anyhow, the obvious presupposition is that God's first thought and all further divine thoughts – differently from human thoughts – are (spiritual) *realities*. As the philosopher Albinus formulates: "Whether God is

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According to Alexander of Aphrodisias, our minds can only act through contact with the divine *Nous*. Cf. P. MOREAUX, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen* II (De Gruyter Berlin, 410): "der göttliche Nus kann in den menschlichen von aussen her eingehen, seine Vervollkommnung bewirken, ihm die Unsterblichkeit verleihen"; F.L. ROIG LANZILLOTTA, 'Devolution and Recollection, Deficiency and Perfection', in: A. HILHORST and G.H. VAN KOOTEN, *The Wisdom of Egypt* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2005), 443-59, esp. 455f.

[15] BG 22-26; NHC II, 2-4. Cf. *Allogenes* (NHC IX) 62-64.

[16] BG 26,15-17; NHC II, 4,19-21.

[17] Cf. J. DILLON, *The Middle Platonists*, 95, 254f, 410.

[18] Cf. Z. PLEŠE, *Poetics of the Gnostic Universe. Narrative and Cosmology in the* Apocryphon of John, NHMS 68 (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2006), 114-38.

Mind, or a being with mind, in either case he must have thoughts, and these thoughts must be eternal and unchanging"[19].

God's thought is conceived as a female entity. Not surprisingly, she is called "Ennoia" or indeed "Protennoia". Another, more cryptic name given to her is "Barbelo"[20]. She is described as God's other half and as the source (*mêtra*, "womb") of all further divine thoughts.

God and his female counterpart can be referred to as Father and Mother. Their unity is underlined. Sometimes (esp. in Nag Hamm. Cod. II) the name *Mêtropatôr*, "Mother-Father", is used to refer to the Supreme Deity. Furthermore mention is made of a Son. But it is noteworthy that the Son is named "the Self-Generated" (*autogenês*, *autogenetôr*). Does the Gnostic author try to avoid the impression that the supposedly immutable God generated a child?

II. The origin of the Demiurge and his demonic world.

In order to explain the emergence of imperfection from perfection, darkness from light, matter from spirit, etc., the Gnostic myth of origins recounts a complex narrative about a process of decline that started somewhere in the environment of the Supreme God and ended up in the demonically ruled sublunary world.

The *Secret Book* focuses on the coming into existence of cosmic beings (archons or demons) and on the creation of man. There is little interest in the origin of the gross-material world or in that of other creatures. I will therefore complement the relevant information of this document with a few details from other mythological Gnostic texts.

In the *Secret Book* and in comparable writings, this story begins with the Sophia myth. It tells how in spite of her spiritual nature as one of God's eons, Sophia was deluded by psychic impulses[21]. She conceived a thought (a reflection of herself) and wished to exteriorize this

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[19] *Didaskalikos* 10, 163,28f.

[20] B. LAYTON suggests that "Barbelo" (or "Barbero") is a mythic name of Egyptian background. If it is related to the Coptic word *berber* for "boiling over, overflow", as LAYTON proposes, its meaning might be something like "the great emission", *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1987), 15.

[21] According to BG 37,11 (cf. 51,4), Sophia was driven by 'the *prounikon* which is in her'. For the meaning of the Greek term *prounikos* (impetuous, lustful, lascivious?) see the discussion by A. PASQUIER and M.W. MEYER in: K.L. KING (ed.), *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 47-70, and A.H.B. LOGAN, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 123.

thought[22], but she did so without the consent of God. So, first of all, it was an act of *hybris* and insubordination. But she also acted without the co-operation of her male consort (her *syzygos*). In other words, her "son" was conceived by her, a female, alone. Without a male parent[23], the child was doomed to be a deficient and imperfect being:

> Her thought could not remain idle. And an imperfect product came forth from her that was different from her appearance, because she had made him without her consort. He was not like his Mother, for he had another form (…) He had the figure of a lion-faced serpent. His eyes were shining with fire[24].

Subsequently we are told that Sophia cast her son away from her, "outside those places, that none of the Immortals might see him"[25]. The clear suggestion made here is that it was Sophia's action – her reaction to the birth of her misshapen child – that led to the coming into existence of something outside the divine realm. It is the beginning of a cosmogony in the stricter sense of the term.

When Yaldabaoth left the pleromatic realm, he took away a portion of divine *dunamis* from his Mother. This is an important detail of the myth, for it is supposed to explain the presence of divine substance in the cosmic world. (Shortly later we hear that the demiurgic God breathed this power into the face of the first human, Adam, a clear allusion to the Greek translation of Gen 2:7, see below.)

The description of Yaldabaoth's outward appearance – a lion-faced serpent – characterizes him as a demonic figure. Sophia placed this demonic being on a throne outside the divine realm, and so installed him as the Chief Ruler of the cosmic world.

The *Secret Book* mentions in some detail (particularly in the longer version of Nag Hamm. Cod. II and IV) the many demonic powers and angels generated or created by the demiurgic God. It also states that he produced a firmament for each power after the pattern (*typos*) of the first eons. But the *Secret Book* adds that this does not mean that Yaldabaoth had

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[22] BG 36,16-37,11. NHC II 9,25-35.

[23] Aristotle taught that the male parent provides the form, the mother the matter of the child (*GenAn* 729a-730a). This embryological idea was widely accepted in later antiquity. See I.S. GILHUS, 'Gnosticism: A Study in Liminal Symbolism', *Numen* 31 (1984), 106-28, esp. 112. It explains the misshapen features of Sophia's child.

[24] BG 37,12-18. NHC II 10,2-7.

[25] BG 38,1-5; NHC II 10,11-13.

seen "the Indestructible Ones". Rather it was "the power he had taken from his Mother that produced in him the pattern for the world order"[26].

The *Secret Book* states, too, that Yaldabaoth did not share with his cosmic subordinates the divine substance he had taken from his Mother. I quote the shorter version which on this point is more explicit than NHC II and IV:

> He shared with them of his fire which belongs to him (….). But he did not give them of the pure light power which he had taken away from the Mother[27].

So, for the time being, Yaldabaoth is the only one to possess the divine light power in the lower world. The report of the many demonic angels and their names (Semitic-sounding angel's names as well as abstract names reminiscent of Plato's Ideas) ends with the following ironical statement:

> When he (Yaldabaoth) saw the creation and the numerous angels around him that had come forth from him, he said to them: "*I am a jealous God* (cf. Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9) *there is no other beside me* (cf. Isa 43:11; 44:6,8; etc.). But by saying this, he already indicated to the angels attending him that another God does exist. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?[28]

It is remarkable that ego proclamations of the Biblical God are quoted to expose the inferior qualities (jealousy, ignorance, arrogance) of the Gnostic Demiurge.

This section of the myth ends with the story of Sophia's repentance. When she heard the supposedly arrogant and blasphemous utterances of her son, she began to move around (or: to go to and fro) between the realm of pure light and the dark regions below[29]. In one of the versions of the *Secret Book of John*, the Greek verb *epipheresthai* is used for Sophia's moving around, the same verb which the Septuagint version of Gen 1:2 uses to express the moving of God's Spirit upon the waters of chaos[30]. It is worthwhile to quote this passage in full, not only because of its

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[26] BG 44, 5-9; NHC II 12,25-13,5.

[27] BG 42,13-18.

[28] BG 44,9-19; NHC II 13,5-13.

[29] BG 44,19-45,5; NHC II 13,13-17.

[30] The identification of the (female) Spirit of God (in ancient Jewish and Christian imagery God's Spirit was a female being; this idea had its background in Semitic languages in which the word for spirit, *ruah*, *ruha*, is grammatically feminine) with Sophia, 'the Mother', is not uncommon in Gnostic mythological literature.

content (a highly allegorical and mythological interpretation of this well-known Biblical verse) but also because it is here that the Gnostic myth begins to run parallel to the Mosaic accounts of the creation in Gen 1 and 2. It is also here that the monologue of Christ's revelatory teaching is interrupted for the first time by a question of John, the receiver of the revelation.

> "Then the Mother began to '*move to and fro*'. She realized that she was lacking something (….). And she grew darker because her consort had not collaborated with her." I said: "Lord, what does 'she moved to and fro' mean?" And he smiled and said, "Do not think that it is as Moses said, '*above the waters*'. No, but when she recognized the wickedness which had taken place, and the theft which her son had committed, she began to be ashamed. And she did not dare to return but she was agitated. This agitation is the 'moving to and fro'"[31].

When Sophia recognized her mistake and repented, she was rescued by her divine consort. However, she was not restored to her place in the divine realm but to the cosmic ninth sphere, above her son, until, that is, her deficiency would be corrected (which would happen when finally the lost divine power returns to the divine realm)[32].

The coming into being of a world outside the divine realm is explained in a slightly different way in other mythological Gnostic texts. The author of the *Nature of the Rulers* (Nag Hamm. Cod. II,4) assumes that the divine realm is curtained off by a veil (*katapetasma*). In the second part of this treatise, the mythical figure Norea (or Orea) asks Eleleth, one of the light angels of the Invisible Spirit, how the cosmic rulers came into existence: "Who created them and their power? With what kind of nature (*hypostasis*)? Of what material?" In his answer, Eleleth says *inter alia*:

> "There is a veil between the realms above and the regions below. And a shadow came into being beneath the veil, and the shadow became matter, and it was put apart"[33]

At first sight, it may not be fully clear whether the matter *(hulê*) on the cosmic side of the veil is imagined as gross-material or rather as the fine-material (ethereal) substance of the higher

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[31] BG 44,19-45,19; NHC II 13,13-26.

[32] BG 46,9-47,4; NHC II 13,32-14,13.

[33] NHC II 94,8-14.

cosmos (the regions of the planets and the stars). But the latter alternative seems to be the more probable one because it is suggested by the direct context where Eleleth narrates the Sophia myth (substantially the same myth that is told in the *Secret Book of John*). Sophia wanted to create something by herself, without her male partner. The result was the birth of "*something material* (literally: "a product *in matter*", *hulê*) like an aborted fetus". A few lines further on Eleleth repeats that the future Demiurge came to be *from matter* (*hulê*). And thereupon Eleleth relates that when the Demiurge saw a vast quantity of *matter* (*hulê*), he became arrogant and said: "I am God, and there is none but me"[34]. There can be little doubt, in my opinion, that in these sentences, the term "matter" refers to the ethereal substance of the higher cosmos. This would mean that the myth reckons with a tripartite universe: the spiritual or divine realm above the cosmos, the fine-material world of the Demiurge and his demonic angels, and the gross-material sublunary world. This is interesting because it corresponds with the tripartite anthropology reported in the next section of the Gnostic myth of origins.

I briefly mention a Valentinian-Gnostic view of the coming into existence of the cosmic world as a result of developments within the divine realm. According to the so-called *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3, fragments in NHC XII,2), the divine eons existed inside God, but "the Father" was so inconceivable and unfathomable that they were not able to comprehend him. The ignorance of God's eons brought about fear. The fear in turn gave rise to error. Fear and error grew solid like a fog ("so that no one was able to see"). Finally the solidified ignorance resulted in the coming into existence of the material world[35]. We have no reason to doubt that the distinction between the fine-material higher cosmos and the gross-material lower world is presupposed in this document but, as far as I see, it is not made explicit.

III. The lower world.

As already observed, the Gnostic myth focuses on the fate of the spiritual substance that the demiurgic God Yaldabaoth had withdrawn from the divine realm. The next section explains how the Demiurge lost this power to the human being created by him. Here the myth begins to have

[34] 94,5-23.

[35] The *Gospel of Truth* adds that the forgetfulness of the Error did not come into being *from* the Father but *because of* him. "When he will be known, forgetfulness will cease to be" (NHC I 18,4-11).

the character of a combat story. It speaks about a conflict between the rightful owner of the divine "power" and its usurper, the demiurgic God.

We have seen that the section of the *Secret Book of John* dealing with the higher cosmos ends with the self-proclamations of the Demiurge Yaldabaoth and the story of Sophia's repentance. What follows is a report of the moves and countermoves of the forces of good and evil. First, representatives of the true God provoke Yaldabaoth to create man (the human being will prove to be God's chosen instrument for bringing his lost light power back to the divine realm). For this reason God (or one of his eons?) revealed himself to them in a human shape: "the underside of the waters which are above the material world was illuminated by the appearance of his image"[36]. When the cosmic rulers saw this image they said to each other, "*Let us* (plural!) *create a man in the image of God and the likeness*" (Gen 1:26 acc. to the Greek translation of the Septuagint)[37]. And they moulded a form *out of themselves*, and each of the powers created *from its power* the soul"[38].

What was created first according to this story was the *psychic body* of man, which is supposed to share the substance or nature of the cosmic archons (this idea gives support to ancient astrological beliefs: changes in the higher cosmos have repercussions in human souls). But in spite of the fact that the creature of the cosmic rulers was moulded after a divine image and from their own psychic substance, it was not able to move[39]. Apparently this was anticipated by the divine opponents. In a second action, emissaries of the true God were sent down to Yaldabaoth. They said to him:

[36] NHC II 14,26-30:

[37] BG 48,10-14; cf. NHC II 15,2-4: "Come, let us create a man after the image of God and after our (!) likeness, that his image may serve as a light for us." The LXX translation (*kat' eikóna*) enabled Gnostic mythologizers to speak of a cosmic appearance of God's image. According to the Hebrew original of Gen 1:26 God intended his creature *to be* an image of God

[38] BG 47,20-48,2. Cf. the more detailed story of NHC II 14,17-15,9.

[39] This narrative item is reminiscent of Talmudic and other Jewish tales about the making of a *golem*, an artificial anthropomorphic being.

> "Blow your spirit (*pneuma*) into his face and the thing will arise[40]." *And he blew into his face his spirit* (Gen. 2:7 acc. to the LXX), which is the power of his Mother. In his ignorance he did not realise (this). And the power of the Mother went out of Yaldabaoth into the psychical body. (…) The body moved, gained strength, and shone[41].

Adam's soul-body received the divine power, while Yaldabaoth was left as just a psychical being. When the Demiurge and his companions realized what had happened, they seized him, i.e. Adam's soul-body with the divine power in it, and brought their creature deep down into the cosmos[42].

This passage of the myth reminds us of the earlier story of Sophia's reaction to the birth of her misshapen child Yaldabaoth. While her removal of Yaldabaoth from the divine realm led to the coming into existence of a region outside the *plêrôma*, the action of the cosmic rulers resulted in the coming into existence of the darker part of the cosmos, the terrestrial world. There, "in the shadow of death", they made another form. ("Another form", for what was formed first was Adam's psychical body out of the ethereal substance of the archons.) Now they composed a body from the four gross-material elements: earth, water, fire and air[43].

The Gnostic storytellers refer to this second body as a "tomb with which they clothed the human being" and as a "fetter of forgetfulness"[44]. It was meant by the rulers as a prison for the human being, more precisely for the divine power in the human soul. Indeed, the subsequent stories relate how the demiurgic God and his companions tried to imprison, if not bury, man's spiritual power in the lowest part of the cosmic world and so to prevent it from returning to its place of origin in the realm of the true God. Adam is designated as "the first one who descended" and as "the first one to become separated"[45]. In the last part of the longer version of the *Secret*

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[40] NHC III 24,7-8. The other textual witnesses read: 'blow *something of your spirit* into his face'. But the subsequent narrative presupposes that Yaldabaoth blew all the spiritual power he had withdrawn from his Mother into the first human being.

[41] BG 51,14-52,1; NHC II 19,22-33.

[42] BG 52,15-17; NHC II 20,7-9.

[43] BG 55,2-6; NHC II 21,4-6.

[44] NHC II 21,9-12; cf. BG 55,10-13 ("the fetter of matter").

[45] BG 55,13-15; NHC II 21,13-14.

Book of John, the cosmic rulers are made responsible, too, for the establishment of *heimarmenê*. Through fate they govern humanity and enchain it in fear and forgetfulness[46].

In sum, the *Secret Book of John* and related Gnostic writings describe human beings as microcosms: the essential core of their being is believed to share the nature of the true God, while their souls supposedly share the substance of the cosmic rulers, and their bodies of flesh and blood that of the four sublunary elements.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this anthropological concept is the sharp distinction between the psychical and the spiritual component of man, a distinction that runs parallel to that between the Supreme God and the demonic Demiurge. On this important point, Gnostic myth-tellers elaborate on a development in Hellenistic philosophy. Cf. Plutarch, *De facie in orbe lunae* 943a:

> Most people rightly hold a man to be composite, but wrongly hold him to be composed of only two parts. The reason is that they suppose mind to be somehow part of soul, thus erring no less than those who believe soul to be part of body, for *in the same degree as soul is superior to body, so is mind better and more divine than soul* (my emphasis, GL).

To a certain extent, this view of the relationship of soul and mind can be traced to Plato's *Timaeus*, where the rational part of the soul is fashioned by the Demiurge himself, whereas he delegates the formation of the irrational parts to the "younger gods". But scholars agree that the more essential distinction of soul and intellect/mind and the emphasis on the separateness of the *nous* is influenced by Aristotle's teaching[47].

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[46] NHC II 28,21-31.

[47] *De an* 3,4: "the mind is separable (*chôristos*)"; 3,5: "when isolated (*chôristheis*) the mind is its true self and nothing more, and this alone is immortal and everlasting". Cf. J. DILLON, *The Middle Platonists*, 211ff; H. Dörrie, 'Gnostische Spuren bei Plutarch', in: R. VAN DEN BROEK and M.J. VERMASEREN (eds), *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 92-116; A. P. BOS, 'The Distinction between "Platonic" and "Aristotelian" Dualism, Illustrated from Plutarch's Myth in *De Facie in Orbe Lunae*', in: A. PÉREZ JIMENEZ and F. CASADESÚS BORDOY (eds), *Estudios sobre Plutarcho: misticismo y religiones mystéricas en la obra de Plutarcho* (Madrid-Malaga: Ed. Classicas & Charta Ant., 2001), 57-69; Id., 'The Dreaming Kronos as World Archon in Plutarch's *De Facie in Orbe Lunae*', in: L. DE BLOIS et al. (eds), *The Statesman in Plutarch's Works* I (Suppl. to *Mnemosyne*), Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2001, 175-87.

IV. The relationship between Greek philosophical and Biblical-Jewish influences.

In the *Secret Book of John*, the story of the creation of Adam is followed by the Paradise story and the creation of Eve[48] (in this order), the birth of Eve's sons, the Flood and the story of the intercourse of demons with "the daughters of men" (also in this order). In a study of Gnostic cosmologies, these sections of the myth are less relevant. But the detailed references to Biblical texts, first of all to Gen 1-6, may raise the question of how we should imagine the relationship between Greek philosophical and Biblical-Jewish influences on the development of the Gnostic myth of origins.

Because I have discussed this question in some detail elsewhere[49], I will be short. First of all, we have to account for the fact that the Gnostic references to Biblical texts are often very critical. As we have seen, in the *Secret Book of John* and other Gnostic texts, the Biblical God is identified with the ignorant and malicious Demiurge. And more than once we read in the *Secret Book* that "it was not as Moses said"[50]. What we have to explain, therefore, is not only the detailed knowledge but also the highly critical use of Biblical texts. Besides this, we should try to distinguish between coherent basic ideas and individual narrative motifs. I propose the following development:

1. At the basis of the Gnostic myth of origins are the – at that time culturally dominant – Greek philosophical ideas mentioned above. Note also that it was not unusual in this philosophical tradition to explain doctrines with the help of myths.
2. The Gnostic myth of origins does not represent an age-old popular tale. Rather we are dealing with (variants of) an *artificial* myth composed by late antique (semi-)intellectuals. These myth-makers did not create out of nothing. To them, the first chapters of Genesis may have been a source of information about primeval events like

[48] This retelling denies that Eve was formed "from Adam's rib, as Moses said". Cf. NHC II 22,32-23,4 and BG 59,12-17. Apparently it intends to make clear that Eve shared Adam's spiritual nature.

[49] *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories*, esp. 1-28; 'Critical Gnostic Interpretations of Genesis', in: E. GRYPEOU and H. SPURLING (eds), *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, Jewish and Christian Perspectives 18 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 75-86.

[50] BG 45.9; NHC II 13.20 (God's Spirit moving upon the waters); BG 58.17; NHC II 22.22 (Adam's sleep); BG 59.17; NHC II 23.3 (Adam's rib); BG 73.4; NHC II 29.6 (the redemption of Noah).

the creation and the earliest history of humankind. The same applies to their frequent use of the divine ego proclamations in Exodus, Deuteronomy and Isaiah, often quoted in close connection with a Gnostic creation story. But where the Biblical information differed from their favorite theological, cosmological and/or anthropological convictions they did not hesitate to correct, to reject and even to ridicule the Biblical accounts. Gnostic authors used Biblical stories because *and insofar as* they confirmed their preconceived ideas.

3. It is only natural to suppose that at a certain moment in time their negative ideas about the Biblical God and his creation would bring Gnostics into conflict with Jews and/or Christians who were faithful to the Biblical God. Indeed many texts witness to the Gnostic position in polemical debates with non-Gnostics[51].
4. Gnostics were convinced that Christ was a messenger of their Supreme God. It is a plausible assumption that their polemics were directed first of all at Christians who after the revelation of Jesus Christ continued to worship and to praise the Biblical Creator God (identified with the cosmic Demiurge by Gnostic myth-tellers).

[51] Clear instances are such texts as the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX 29-74), the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII 70-84), and the recently published *Gospel of Judas* (Cod. Tchacos 33-58).