IDENTIFYING THE Gnostics AND THEIR LITERATURE

Any effort to identify the Gnostics in antiquity has to begin with Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons. He wrote Detection and Overthrow of Gnōsis, Falsely So Called, also known as Against the Heresies, around 180. In this work, Irenaeus by no means sought to describe neutrally the various groups of early Christians of his day and their views; rather, he wanted to demonstrate that his version of Christianity was the only true one and that all others were diabolical errors. In the previous chapter we saw that by incorporating all the teachings and groups that he opposed under the single category of “false gnōsis,” Irenaeus set the precedent for thinking of ancient Gnosis or Gnosticism as a vast phenomenon made up of numerous sects and schools, whose teachings were extremely diverse and yet somehow all the same. It is this line of thinking that seems to have left modern scholars with one of two options: either “Gnosticism” was indeed a vast ancient religion or type of religion with a variety of representatives, or it did not exist at all.

Irenaeus presents a hostile account of “Gnostics” and other “heretics,” and he has led subsequent scholarship down unproductive paths. For these reasons, it may be tempting to set him aside and instead simply read and interpret on their own terms the surviving writings that came from the Christians that he and others like him sought to marginalize. That would be a sensible way of proceeding if Irenaeus could not be trusted at all, but in fact sometimes we are able to confirm his claims and descriptions (as we shall see below). If Irenaeus expected to persuade his readers that his case against competing forms of Christianity was right, then his account of these forms and their relationships to one another could not completely distort the actual situation that his contemporaries could observe. It is probable that the people and texts that Irenaeus
describes really existed and that the myths that he summarizes (and ridicules) really circulated, even if he has distorted the doctrines and practices that rival Christians drew from these myths. Irenaeus is the only author of the second century who provides any detailed account of the Christian diversity of his day. Anyone who hopes to reconstruct that diversity must make some attempt to gather some useful information from Irenaeus by separating what may be reliable from the bishop's distortions.

The term “gnostic”—gnōstikos in Greek—provides an opportunity for such a project because it was a positive term in antiquity (and remained so even after Irenaeus and other heresiologists had written works disparaging “Gnostics”). It is unlikely that Irenaeus introduced such an affirmative word as a label for Christians that he believed to be wrong and demonically inspired; rather, “Gnostic” must have already been circulating as a term of self-praise. Before Irenaeus wrote in 180 CE, the adjective gnōstikos (having to do with gnōsis) was not applied to people but to capacities, intellectual activities, or mental operations: a “gnostic” activity or capacity was one that led to or supplied gnōsis, that is, knowledge that was not merely practical but theoretical, immediate, even intuitive. Philosophers and other learned persons used the term “gnostic”; it was not a word that ordinary people would use every day.  

Bentley Layton has compared it to the modern English term “epistemological,” which is a learned adjective applied to abstract concepts and the like. To apply it to people or a group of people would sound strange: “the Epistemologicals” or “the Epistemological Association.” So, too, it must have sounded odd to call people “Gnostics” and a group of people “the Gnostic school of thought.” But this is what we find in early Christian writings, starting with Irenaeus.

We are interested in the term gnōstikos (Gnostic), not in the related word gnōsis (acquaintance, knowledge). Multiple religious and philosophical movements and teachers claimed to offer gnōsis, that is, acquaintance with God and higher truths. The Christian author of 1 Clement rejoiced that Jesus Christ had brought “immortal gnōsis,” and he prayed that the blessed person would have “the ability to declare gnōsis.” The Letter of Barnabas refers to Christian teaching as “the gnōsis that has been given to us.” Neither of these works contains doctrines that either ancient heresiologists or modern scholars would attribute to Gnostics or Gnosticism (rather, they are seen to represent proto-orthodoxy). They illustrate that an emphasis on gnōsis cannot be a defining feature of “Gnosticism,” for the claim to provide gnōsis was common and expected. To call people gnōstikoi, “Gnostics,” however, was not common, but innovative.

In this chapter I argue that this new usage came into being with a new social group, people we can call the Gnostics and the Gnostic school of thought (or sect or movement). I describe a method that scholars have developed to use the information that Irenaeus and others provide to collect additional data about this group from surviving ancient literature. The result does not give us much social information about the Gnostics, but it does produce a set of ancient writings that likely originated among a group of people who called themselves and were known as the Gnostics. This group corresponds to those whom modern historians have often called “Sethians” or “Sethian Gnostics.” Historians would do well, however, to abandon the qualifier “Sethian,” because it does not have a good basis in the ancient sources and its use opens the door to imagining other varieties of “Gnosticism.” Instead, we should simply call these Christians (and no others) the “Gnostics.” And so, in contrast to the positions of Michael Williams and Karen King, I do not think that we should give up the term “Gnostic” (although I remain leery of “Gnosticism”). On the other hand, I disagree with Birger Pearson, Christoph Markschies, and others who call a wide variety of early Christians and other ancient people “Gnostics.” We should recognize the limited nature of the Gnostic school of thought and not amalgamate other ancient teachers and groups with it, creating a wide-ranging entity called “Gnosticism,” which not even Irenaeus would recognize.

The Gnostics as a Specific Group in Irenaeus

In Irenaeus’s work we find the first application of the term gnōstikos to people, and although he can use the term in a way that seems to refer to a variety of people whose teachings he condemns (as we shall see below), he uses it more than once to refer to a specific, single group of Christians. In Book I of Against the Heresies, Irenaeus begins his description of Valentinus by saying that he “adapted the fundamental principles of the Gnostic school of thought to his own kind of system,” and he subsequently remarks that on a certain point Valentinus resembles “the Gnostics—falsely so called!—of whom we shall speak further on.” And indeed, later in the book, Irenaeus turns to what he calls “a multitude of Gnostics” and describes the myth that “some of them” teach (AH
and then a similar myth that “others” of them teach (AH 1.30–31). At the beginning of Book II, when Irenaeus summarizes what he said in Book I, he once again mentions “the multitude of the Gnostics” and the points on which they disagree (AH 2.1.1). In these passages Irenaeus refers to a group of Christians known as “the Gnostics,” and although their teachings do not always agree completely, he believes that they have enough social and doctrinal cohesion to be called a hairies. The term hairies originally had a neutral meaning: it designated a “school of thought” or a “sect,” but during the second century it acquired a negative meaning for Christians (“heresy”), a development that I shall discuss in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5. The important point here is that Irenaeus believes that the Gnostics form a specific group that can be differentiated from other groups. In particular, they differ from Valentinus and his school; Valentinus adapted some of the Gnostics’ ideas but was not one himself.

Tertullian of Carthage confirms Irenaeus’s view that the Gnostics differ from the Valentinians, but he does not see things precisely in the same way as Irenaeus. In two places he mentions the Gnostics and the Valentinians simply in tandem, as two distinct groups.7 Tertullian had read Irenaeus, and so he could simply be repeating the language of his predecessor. Yet Tertullian certainly has information about the Valentinians that he did not receive from Irenaeus, and so his testimony is not totally dependent on Irenaeus. In fact, he seems to imply that the Valentinians preceded the Gnostics intellectually, rather than the other way around, as Irenaeus would have it. At the end of his treatise Against the Valentinians, Tertullian remarks, “And so the sprouting doctrines of the Valentinians have now grown up into the woods of the Gnostics.”8 So Tertullian, too, understood “the Gnostics” to be a specific group, related to but distinct from the Valentinians.

Irenaeus’s insistence that the Gnostics are not really gnostic (“falsely so called!”), that is, that their teaching really does not supply acquaintance with God, indicates that even he recognizes gnôsis and being gnôstikos to be desirable things. Irenaeus does not say that these Christians called themselves Gnostics, but it seems almost certain that they did. Why else would he call this group by such a positive term and by no other? His dictum also suggests that “Gnostics” and “Gnostic school of thought” functioned as proper names for the group.

We know that some early Christians did call themselves “Gnostics”—and not always ones that came to be known as heretics. As far as we can tell, the earliest Christian who uses the term “Gnostic” as a positive self-designation in his own writings is Clement of Alexandria. During the last decades of the second century, Clement worked as a teacher and philosopher in one of antiquity’s largest and most intellectually vibrant cities. Although he was a younger contemporary of Irenaeus and shared Irenaeus’s opposition to Valentinian Christians and others, Clement’s spirituality was quite different from that of the bishop of Lyons. Not an ordained member of any clergy, Clement offered instruction in virtue and Christian philosophy to interested persons. He was a kind of Christian sage, who combined the activities and attributes that we would attribute to a teacher and a spiritual director. Those who studied with him, either as individuals or in groups, must have provided him with his financial support. It is in this context that Clement uses the term “Gnostic.”

Clement does not claim to be a member of a group called “the Gnostics” or “the Gnostic school of thought,” but he does use the term “Gnostic” for the ideal Christian. The Gnostic is the Christian who, through training in virtue and study of Christian writings, has advanced to a high level of acquaintance with God: “Our Gnostic alone—because he has grown up in these Scriptures and because he preserves the correct apostolic and ecclesiastical line of teachings—lives most correctly according to the Gospel. Sent forth by the Lord, he finds the demonstrations that he seeks in the Law and the Prophets. For to my mind the life of the Gnostic is nothing other than deeds and words that follow the tradition of the Lord.”9 In other words, the person who completes a long period of study with Clement, reading the books that he recommends and learning the doctrines that he teaches, can hope to become a Gnostic.

We learn several important things from Clement’s use of the term “Gnostic” for the spiritually advanced Christian. First, it was a positive term and not a term of denigration or abuse: Clement assumes that people would want to be known as or claim to be a Gnostic. Second, Clement did not come up with this term on his own; rather, he was claiming for his form of Christian teaching a term that others were using. In the quotation above, Clement pointedly refers to the ideal Christian that his instruction produces as “our Gnostic”; elsewhere he refers to “the Gnostic, properly speaking,” and he calls “falsely named” his competitors who claim to offer gnôsis but who really teach falsehoods.10 He says that the Christians who followed a teacher named Prodidus called themselves Gnostics, even though they certainly were not deserving of the name in his view.11 (Tertullian also mentions Prodidus as someone whose teachings
resemble those of Valentinus, but he does not use the term “Gnostic” for him.\textsuperscript{12} Clement’s use of the term emerged from conflict among rival groups of Christians. Certain Christians claimed to be Gnostics, and Clement responded by saying both that their use of this positive term was illegitimate (as Irenaeus did) and that the Christians who follow his teaching are the true Gnostics (as Irenaeus did not). Finally, when speaking of himself and his followers, Clement did not use “Gnostic” as a group name or a sectarian identification, but as a term for the ideal Christian. Similarly, the Stoics called the ideal Stoic “the sage” (\textit{bo sophos}) but did not call themselves “the Sages.” Asked to identify their philosophical allegiance, they would have replied “Stoic.” So, too, Clement called the ideal Christian “the Gnostic” but identified himself and his followers simply as “Christians.”

Clement’s evidence suggests that Irenaeus did not come up with “Gnostics” or “Gnostic school of thought” on his own, either; rather, he knew that this group of Christians applied it to themselves. Why would he have granted this term of praise to Christians he considered to be mired in hopeless error? The phrase “Gnostic school of thought” implies that, unlike Clement, these Christians did use “Gnostic” to identify themselves as a philosophical or religious movement; they belonged to “the Gnostic school of thought.” They were not Platonists or Stoics or Jews, but Gnostics. Did they also call themselves “Christians”? It is difficult to say when certain individuals or groups adopted the term “Christian” (Paul never did), but either the Gnostics must have claimed to be Christians as well or the manifestly Christian content of their teachings made them (false) Christians in Irenaeus’s eyes.

Unlike Clement, Irenaeus did not respond by adopting the epithet “gnostic” in some way for his own form of Christianity, but instead he derided the name as fallacious in the case of the Gnostic school of thought, and he repeated it sarcastically in reference to others. The Gnostics, he insists, are “falsely so called,” and he derides the Valentinians for trying to be “more perfect than the perfect and more gnostic than the Gnostics” (\textit{AH} 1.11.1, 5). In this latter remark, although he is still using “Gnostics” to refer to a specific group, Irenaeus likens “gnostic” to “perfect,” suggesting that the term can be used also as a more generally positive adjective, as Clement did. But Irenaeus uses it in this less precise way sarcastically and so can offhandedly call “gnostics” many Christians who are not members of the Gnostic school of thought but whose teachings are to his mind just as false, pretentious, and overly complicated as those of the Gnostics.

At several points in Books II, III, and IV (\textit{AH}), he concludes lists of heretical teachers with the phrase “and the rest of the gnostics.” For example, in Book IV he contrasts the Father of Jesus Christ, who is “the maker of heaven and earth,” with the “false father, who has been invented by Marcion, or by Valentinus, or Basilides, or Carcoprates, or the rest of the falsely called gnostics” (\textit{AH} 4.6.4). We can imagine that if he were a modern writer he would put “gnostics” in scare quotes, for the term functions here as a kind of shorthand for “intellectually pretentious but deluded false Christians.” In a similar instance in Book II, he speaks of “Saturninus and Basilides and Carcoprates and the remaining gnostics (\textit{gnostici}) who say similar things,” and then in the next sentence he mentions “Basilides and all who are falsely called knowers (\textit{agnoi}), who in fact say the same things under different names” (\textit{AH} 2.31.1). Here Irenaeus uses two different Greek words (now translated into Latin) in these two phrases: \textit{gnostics} in the first sentence is not a proper name for a sect, but can be put in parallel with another (also sarcastically used) term for know-it-alls (\textit{knowers}).

On the other hand, it seems that at times Irenaeus uses the phrase “the rest of the Gnostics” or “the remaining Gnostics” to denote the specific school of thought that he describes in Book I. For example, Irenaeus claims elsewhere in Book II that his argument can be used “against those who come from Basilides and against the remaining Gnostics, from whom they too [the Valentinians] received the basic elements of emissions and who were refuted in the first book” (\textit{AH} 2.13.8). Here Irenaeus distinguishes the followers of Basilides from the Gnostics he discussed in Book I and whom he identified as the predecessors of the Valentinians. Although his use of the adjective “remaining” or “rest of” may appear to us to mean that Basilides is included in this group, Irenaeus in fact differentiates Basilides from the group that influenced the Valentinians.

In any event, Irenaeus’s expanded and sarcastic use of the term “gnostics” for “pretentious, deluded pseudo-Christian intellectuals” does not contradict his use of the term in Book I (and elsewhere) to refer to a specific group of Christians, whose teachings Valentinus adapted and who almost certainly chose the term “Gnostic” for themselves. Their sincere use of this positive epithet for themselves inspired Irenaeus’s ironic and sarcastic use of it for other Christians whose teachings he found equally ludicrous and pretentious.
Collecting Information about the Gnostics

When Irenaeus discusses the Valentinians, the primary targets of his criticism in Against the Heresies, he not only describes their teachings but also gives information about them as a group. He tells his readers that they resemble an ancient school, with teachers and disciples, several of whom he names. And they do not separate themselves from other Christians; rather, many of them are members of the same congregations as followers of Irenaeus and his allies, and they try to persuade other Christians to join their study circles. Scholars have found that much of Irenaeus's description of the Valentinians matches what we find in Valentinian sources. Most likely Irenaeus was personally acquainted with Valentinians and had discussed with them their teachings.

Irenaeus does not provide this kind of social information about "the multitude of the Gnostics"; he reports only their teachings, which are not entirely consistent. In Book I (AH), he assigns certain teachings to "some of them [the Gnostics]" (Chapter 29) and other beliefs to two sets of "others" (Chapters 30 and 31). Irenaeus appears to indicate that these "some" and "others" belong to the single group of "Gnostics," although they hold somewhat different views. But later heresiologists who used Irenaeus's work decided that the bishop was describing three separate sects and assigned to them different names: "Barbêloïtes" (1.29), "Ophites" (1.30), and "Cainites" (1.31). More variations on these names appeared as authors inherited and adapted what their predecessors wrote. Irenaeus himself, however, used only the term "Gnostics" for the Christians that he describes in Chapters 29–31 of Book I. The teachings that Irenaeus attributes to the Gnostics consist predominantly of, first, mythological descriptions of God, other divine beings, and the creation of the universe and, second, retellings of the Genesis stories of creation, Adam and Eve, and the fall.

Because Irenaeus reports only mythology and biblical interpretation when he describes the Gnostics and gives no information about their organization or leaders, he probably did not know any Gnostics personally but relied on written sources and even hearsay for his information. For example, he claims that he has "collected their writings" on the topic of the creation of heaven and earth by a divine Womb (AH 1.31.2). We can identify two of Irenaeus's sources among surviving works from antiquity. First, his report of the cosmological myth that "some" Gnostics teach (AH 1.29) is nearly identical to the myth found in the first part of The Secret Book According to John, which survives in Coptic translations; second, he names one book produced by "others" of the Gnostics, The Gospel of Judas (AH 1.31.1). And so the information about the Gnostic school of thought that we can gather from Irenaeus consists of (1) a distinctive myth or sacred story and (2) literary sources that come from the group. These two kinds of information mutually reinforce one another: the Secret Book and the Gospel of Judas share the same myth with each other and with Irenaeus's report.

We can assign The Secret Book According to John (or Apocryphon of John) to the Gnostic school of thought based on Irenaeus's evidence. Irenaeus's summary of the myth taught by "some" Gnostics, which runs from a description of the ultimate God to the production of the ignorant creator god and the material universe (AH 1.29), parallels the first part of the Secret Book. Both tell how the "unnameable Father" or "Virgin Spirit" unfolded into a series of aeons beginning with one called Barbêlo and ending with one named Wisdom. These aeons include Christ and a set of four "luminaries," the fourth of which is Elêlêth. The Barbêlo is the aeonic source of salvation. Both Irenaeus and the Secret Book tell also how an impulsive act by Wisdom led to the generation of an ignorant, arrogant ruler who created the material universe in which we live. The two accounts differ in some details (for example, the precise names of the four luminaries), but there can be little doubt that Irenaeus had before him some version of the Secret Book.

Irenaeus subsequently reports the teachings of "other" Gnostics. They also parallel the subsequent narrative in the Secret Book, but much more loosely, and so appear to come from other sources (AH 1.30–31). Here the similarities include the name Ialdabôth for the first ruler, the double creation of Adam and Eve first as nonmaterial beings and subsequently with material bodies, the importance of Adam's son Seth as spiritual ancestor of the saved people, and the depiction of the flood of Genesis 6 as Ialdabôth's attack on humanity for its devotion to true divinity. In the next chapter I shall discuss the myth that the Secret Book and other writings share in some detail, but for now these basic items will serve as the skeleton of "the Gnostic myth."

It is likely that the Gospel of Judas to which Irenaeus refers is the Gospel of Judas that was discovered in the late twentieth century and first published in 2006, and thus we can assign that book to the Gnostic school of thought as well. In this case, however, there is less certainty than about the Secret Book. Irenaeus mentions Judas at the end of his
the source of salvation, and speaks of a divine “Self-Originate” with four attendants. Both call the divine paradigm of humanity Adamas and the saved human beings the descendants of Seth, and both give the creator god(s) the names Ialdabaoth and Saklas (among other epithets). In other ways, however, the two works differ: for example, Judas seems to give the higher divine beings a more direct role in the creation and organization of the material universe, although it still sees the material realm as flawed and destined for destruction. In Judas the important feminine characters of the Secret Book, including the Barbêlo, Wisdom, and Eve, play reduced roles. In addition, the Gospel of Judas depicts and argues against a fairly well developed, even “mainstream” Christian Church, with a clergy that both claims descent from the original apostles and presides at celebrations of the Eucharist with sacrificial imagery. This picture of Christian life may not match conditions of the middle of the second century, but instead may suit better the more developed Christian churches of the third century, long after Irenaeus.

To my mind, these objections are not conclusive. We should expect some diversity among the representatives of the Gnostic school of thought. After all, Irenaeus asserts that the two works come from different manifestations or branches of the same movement (“some” and “others”). And in fact, we shall find that some of the differences between Judas and the Secret Book correspond to variations on the myth found in other works. The social conditions that the Gospel of Judas implies may reflect only the local situation of the author and his community, not the general situation of Christianity everywhere. Or its organized Church with an apostolic priesthood may merely reproduce the claims of other Christians the author knows and not depict the reality of social life. The similarities between the Gospel of Judas and the Secret Book are more compelling than their differences. Both writings present their cosmologies as a revelation from Christ or Jesus to one of the disciples known from the New Testament gospels, Judas and John, respectively. They are both Christian; that is, they present their teachings as the true meaning of Christ and the salvation that he brings, just as Irenaeus claims that the Gnostics are a false Christian group. Indeed, the Gospel of Judas criticizes other Christians as vehemently as Irenaeus does. I am inclined, then, to attribute Judas to the Gnostics of the second century, and yet I recognize that there are reasons to be uncertain about this hypothesis.

Despite its distorted and polemical presentation, the evidence of Irenaeus connects two pieces of ancient literature and, more importantly,
the myth that they share to the Gnostic school of thought. This connection finds confirmation from Porphry (232/3–305), the third-century disciple of the great philosopher Plotinus (205–269/70). Christian heresiologists after Irenaeus also refer to the Gnostics, but in ways that reflect their dependence on Irenaeus’s account. Porphry, in contrast, presents his own independent report.13 He claims that around 250, while teaching in Rome, Plotinus came into contact with Christians who were “members of a school of thought” and whom Porphry subsequently identifies as “the Gnostics.” Porphry lists a number of the Gnostics’ writings (“revelations”), two of which—Zostrianos and The Foreigner (Allogenés)—were found at Nag Hammadi, and another of which—The Book of Zoroaster—is excerpted in The Secret Book According to John. Unlike the Secret Book, which presents a lengthy mythological narrative, Zostrianos and The Foreigner describe mystical ascents through the eternal realms of God’s creation. The transcendent realms of God, the Virgin Spirit, is nearly identical to that found in the Secret Book.

Together, Porphry and Irenaeus present a coherent description of a “school of thought” (hairetis) whose members were known as “the Gnostics.” Irenaeus narrates the myth of the Gnostics and names one of their works, the Gospel of Judas, which appears to have survived. In addition, the myth that he tells matches that in the surviving Secret Book According to John. Porphry’s account of the Gnostics, brief as it is, confirms Irenaeus’s assignment of the distinct myth found in the Secret Book to the Gnostic school of thought, and it adds three more literary works—Zostrianos, The Foreigner, and the excerpted Book of Zoroaster—to those that we can attribute to the Gnostics. The five ancient works that Irenaeus and Porphry associate with the Gnostics do not agree on all points, as Irenaeus suggests and as one would expect for a movement that endured and multiplied for at least a century. Yet they articulate or refer to the same basic story of God, creation, and salvation, which can be called the Gnostic myth. Moreover, these works show signs that they originate in a group with some sense of communal identity, including references to a baptismal ritual, a special group of saved people (“immovable race,” “posterity,” “the incorruptible race of Seth”), and other Christians as misguided.

At this point it is possible to collect even more information about the Gnostics by looking for other literary sources that contain or assume the Gnostic myth. Scholars have been able to identify several of these, most of which were discovered at Nag Hammadi. The pioneer in this effort was Hans-Martin Schenke, who already in 1974 argued that a number of ancient works and heresiological accounts, in his words, all “presuppose the same Gnostic system.” Because this system gave prominence to Seth as the ancestor of saved human beings, he called the viewpoint that they shared “the Sethian system” and the religious community that they reflected “Gnostic Sethianism.” In addition to The Secret Book According to John, Schenke included in his text group not only Zostrianos and The Foreigner, as we would expect from Porphry’s evidence, but also from the Nag Hammadi discovery The Revelation of Adam, The Reality of the Rulers, First Thought in Three Forms, The Three Tablets of Seth, The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, and three others.14 As Schenke proposed, scholars usually refer to these works as “Sethian” and to the people who composed them as “Sethians.” In 1995, however, Bentley Layton pointed out that the evidence of Irenaeus and Porphry suggests that we would do better to call them simply “the Gnostics.”

Critics of Schenke’s work rightly argued that the “Sethian system” is not very systematic: the various works and accounts in Schenke’s text group do not always agree on every point.16 But “system” was a poor choice of words on Schenke’s part: what his texts share is not a system of doctrines, but a sacred story or myth. In the case of a myth, some diversity is to be expected. When people in a religious community retell and pass on the group’s myth and traditions, they seldom do so without introducing new episodes or characters, eliminating or combining others, and making other revisions. It is up to both adherents and observers to determine when a myth has been altered so much that it has become a different myth and reflects a different religious community. In Irenaeus’s opinion, although the Gnostics did not always agree with each other completely—“some” taught certain things, and “others” taught some different things—they still shared the same overall myth and formed a single religious community that he could distinguish from others (including the Valentinians).

This approach to identifying “Gnostics,” and hence “Gnosticism,” uses the particular myth that Irenaeus attributes to the Gnostic school of thought and that appears in the literature he and Porphry assign to it to identify additional literature that emanated from that group. This procedure differs from the typological approach that we examined in Chapter 1 because it does not define Gnosticism in terms of abstract doctrines or
general attitudes, such as a lower creator god, anthropological dualism, emphasis on mystical knowledge, salvation by gnōsis, and the like. Similar doctrines and attitudes can appear in quite different religions and reflect different myths, and members of a religious community may draw from the same myth different doctrinal conclusions. Adherents of the same religious group may argue, for example, about the status of the body in the spiritual life or how salvation is achieved, but they will share an authoritative story to which they will refer in support of their views. Rather than concepts or general moods, it is that story, the community’s myth, that we should seek as basic to a religious group’s identity. Christians today disagree strongly about a wide range of issues, but they all share the same basic story of the creation, the fall, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the future kingdom of God. They express and summarize this shared story in statements like the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Christians infer strikingly different doctrines from that story, creating at times very different theological systems, and they disagree even about details in the story (for example, the role of Mary, Jesus’ alleged descent into hell, and so forth), but it is devotion to that narrative that sets Christians apart from other religious people. The Gnostic Christians of the second and third centuries lived at a time when Christians did not yet share a single story other than that of the Jewish Scriptures (even if some Christians, like Marcion, rejected that story). Rather, they were inventing new stories from the traditions that they had received; the Gnostic myth was one distinctive attempt to tell the story of God and humanity in light of the Jesus event, an attempt sufficiently different from rival Jesus stories to set them apart as a distinct school of thought. In contrast, this myth is completely absent from The Gospel According to Thomas, which can be readily understood without any reference to the Gnostic myth. Thomas may teach salvation by gnōsis and reflect a dualistic anthropology, but it is not Gnostic.

If shared concepts or attitudes are insufficient to assign different texts or teachers to the same religious group, so, too, are simply the same mythic characters or motifs when the overall myth is otherwise not the same. For example, the appearance of Jesus and his mother Mary in the Qur’an does not mean that Islam and Christianity are the same religion, only that they derive from a shared cultural context and that they arose in interaction with one another. By this principle, we are able not only to include certain works in our set of Gnostic texts but also to exclude others that would otherwise appear to be likely candidates. A good example is an untitled work from Nag Hammadi that scholars now call On the Origin of the World. Among its prominent characters is laldabaōth, the ignorant and arrogant creator god who is a key figure in the Gnostic myth, and it features other characters and incidents with clear parallels in Gnostic works. But in other, more important respects, the myth that it tells differs considerably from what one finds in The Secret Book According to John and related books. These differences are so fundamental that most scholars conclude that we are not dealing with a Gnostic work (in the restricted sense that I am advocating). The author of On the Origin of the World probably wrote in the early fourth century, and he borrowed from a wide range of earlier Christian literature to create his own myth, which he hoped would demonstrate a particular philosophical point. He shows no interest in the identity or practice of a religious community and was probably not an adherent of the Gnostic school of thought, or if he was, he was not very concerned to maintain its distinctive traditions (at least in this work).

This approach concludes that most of the works that were found at Nag Hammadi are not Gnostic because they lack the Gnostic myth even if some include certain of its characters or motifs in otherwise quite different stories. Most scholars recognize that the works in the Nag Hammadi codices, which were copied in the second half of the fourth century, represent a variety of religious traditions, including Valentinianism (e.g., The Gospel of Truth and The Tripartite Tractate), Thomas Christianity (e.g., The Gospel According to Thomas), and Hermeticism (e.g., The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth). Yet many still understand the hoard of manuscripts to be a “library” of books that come from “Gnosticism.” In fact, however, we do not know whether the collector or collectors of the Nag Hammadi codices were (despite occasional reports to the contrary), nor is it clear whether the books made up a library when they were created. It may be possible to detect the interests and concerns that motivated someone to include certain works in a single codex and in a certain order. But the interests and religious commitments of fourth-century readers should not be confused with those of the works’ authors and earlier readers, who lived in the preceding centuries. Like other manuscripts from antiquity, the codices contain works all of which appealed to the collector(s), but which represent diverse theologies and original social and religious contexts. By the procedure adopted here, we can identify a minority of the works as coming originally from the Gnostic school of thought of the second and third centuries.
This myth-oriented method of collecting works that originated among the Gnostics differs significantly, then, from the typological approach. It does not extract ideas, characters, or motifs from their mythic contexts and then study them in isolation, nor does it rely on general concepts or spiritual attitudes that may flow from any number of different sacred narratives (for example, an emphasis on gnosis rather than faith). Rather, it looks for a shared myth of origins, fall, and salvation (and, we shall see, a shared ritual as well), which could serve to establish and to maintain the unique identity of a distinct religious movement over time.

Scholars debate precisely which ancient works reflect the distinct Gnostic myth and so should be attributed to the Gnostics. For example, Bentley Layton has proposed that the Nag Hammadi work Thunder: Perfect Intellect came from the Gnostics because it has close parallels with other works in the text group and with related heresiological accounts, but other scholars have disagreed with him. I have argued that a work that Schenke included in his Sethian system, the so-called Untitled Treatise in the Bruce Codex, should not be considered part of the group because, although it shares some important parallels with Gnostic works, its myth differs too much from what we find in the Secret Book and the other writings. It resembles On the Origin of the World in this respect. Mark Edwards, rather than following the method developed by Schenke and Layton and followed here, augments the reports in Irenaeus and Plotinus with the testimony of Hippolytus (more on this below). He comes up with a set of Gnostic works that includes not only the ones I have mentioned, but also a Treatise on the Omega by Zosimus of Panopolis and the account of the Naassenes given by Hippolytus. Alastair Logan also includes the Naassenes among the Gnostics. Tuomas Rasmus supplements the so-called Sethian works with works that he calls "Ophite," including On the Origin of the World, to create a broader, overlapping category that he designates "classic Gnostic." We have seen that some scholars, like me, believe that The Gospel of Judas should be included, especially in light of Irenaeus's evidence, but others disagree, pointing to the differences between its cosmology and that of the other Gnostic works. Doubtless there will always be debates about a few individual works, but there is a large scholarly consensus about most of the works in the group.

Debates like this one and the scholarly uncertainty that they indicate do not call into question the existence either of the shared myth or of the Gnostics who adhered to it. Historians typically disagree about whether to assign certain writings to specific individuals and whether to classify specific texts, individuals, and groups as belonging to religious movements. For example, no one doubts that the apostle Paul or the Church Father Athanasius of Alexandria really existed and wrote works that survive today, but scholars disagree about whether to attribute to them some of the works that survive under their names. Moreover, scholars can assign to an ancient author like Evagrius of Pontus works that survive but not under his name or even that bear the name of another person because the style and content clearly indicate that Evagrius was their author. When they discuss the assignment of texts to specific individuals, historians look for a high degree of coherence in style and content; we do not expect the same person to write in strikingly different styles or to hold directly contradictory ideas unless these differences can be persuasively explained. Attributing works to a religious movement that lasted decades or centuries, as the Gnostics did, does not require such a high degree of coherence, but more agreement than we would expect simply for Christian works of the second and third centuries. The ancient identification of the Gnostics as a hairesis, a school of thought, suggests that they would have shared key doctrines that they would defend against those offered by other schools, but that they need not have agreed on all points. It is no surprise, then, that scholars differ about how much consistency to expect among the various works of a group like the Gnostics, which is neither a single author nor an entirely separate religion but a movement or school within a wider religious network. At the conclusion of this chapter, I list the works that most scholars attribute to the Gnostic school of thought.

It may be possible to add even more data to our study of the Gnostics by looking for accounts of similar myths in heresiologists other than Irenaeus, but their dependence on Irenaeus and the vague nature of the other sources for their information makes this step more problematic. For example, Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, a zealous heresy hunter of the fourth century, describes several groups whose myths appear to be variations on that of our Gnostics. Epiphanius gives them several names: "Sethians," "Arcanists," "Borborites," and others, as well as "Gnostics." He cites the titles of literary works that these Christians use (a Gospel of Eve, for example), but none of them appear to have survived. Most famously, Epiphanius attributes to the Gnostics strange practices, including ritualized sex, abortion, and cannibalism, and he claims to have firsthand knowledge of their licentious behavior. Scholars disagree about
whether and how to use this material to understand the Gnostics. It seems most likely that Epiphanius’s reports of ritual atrocities are an instance of a general religious tendency to attribute to the Other perverse opposites of one’s own rituals, and his accounts of the myths and assignments of them to groups may be his own imaginative attempts to make sense of literary works whose true origins he did not know. There may be some real information to be found in Epiphanius, but in general we are on a safer ground sticking to Irenaeus’s and Porphyry’s accounts and the primary sources that they permit us to gather.

The approach to the Gnostics that I have outlined here has not received the support of most working scholars. Nearly all of them recognize that the works that this procedure collects probably do come from some distinct religious tradition, which they call “Sethianism” or “Sethian Gnosticism.” Even the scholars who have been most critical of the category “Gnosticism” accept the hypothesis of such a set of writings with a common myth. Michael Williams, for example, says that the “interconnections” among the Sethian works “cannot be denied.” Karen King has carried out an extensive comparison of “Valentinian” and “Sethian” mythologies. Interpreting The Secret Book According to John, she invokes other Sethian works to shed light on problems of exegesis and ritual in that book. But King and Williams object to calling the Christians who produced these works (and no others) “Gnostics.” Far more scholars, like Birger Pearson and Marvin Meyer, want to include many more works than the ones gathered here under the category “Gnostic” or “Gnosticism.”

Because scholars recognize the shared mythology that ties these works together, the most important objections to this procedure focus on the use of the self-designation as Gnostics as the starting point. Critics point out, first, that none of the works that this procedure collects and assigns to the Gnostics in fact claims to come from the Gnostics or the Gnostic school of thought and, second, that Irenaeus and others mention other persons and groups as calling themselves Gnostics. Let us examine each of these objections. I emphasized above that it is unlikely that Irenaeus would have assigned to this group the name “Gnostics” or “Gnostic school of thought.” Rather, “Gnostic” was a positive term and so was almost certainly the group’s own designation for itself; this self-designation justifies our use of the term for them. It seems strange, then, that none of the literature that is supposed to have come from this group (The Secret Book According to John and the other works) uses this term as a means of self-identification. Instead, as we shall see, these works identify the chosen ones, the saved people, with such names as “the immovable race,” “the seed of Seth,” and “Those People.” I agree with Layton’s response to this objection:

The answer lies in the fact that the name Gnostic was the name par excellence of the members of the haeretic [school of thought], their most proper name. As such, its function was not to convey information about what they were like, but rather to express their distinctiveness as a group; not to say what they were, but who they were. The claim to supply (or have) gnosis was absolutely banal, but the use of Gnōstikos as a proper name was distinctive. Now, the works in the Gnostic mythographic corpus are pseudopigraphic and mythic in literary character, disguising their real author, audience, and place, date, and reason of composition. They do not speak of second- and third-century school controversies (as do the testimonies of Irenaeus, Porphyry, or Epiphanius), but rather of primordial, eschatological, and metaphysical events and relationships. In such compositions, there is no context in which a second-century school name such as Gnōstikos might naturally occur. Thus, the absence of the proper name “Gnōstikos” in the mythographic corpus is not a significant absence.

The Gnostic texts are mythological works that describe the structure of the divine realm, the creation of the universe, and the first generations of humanity, and most of them purport to come not from recent authors but from authoritative figures from the past, such as Adam, Zoroaster, and the apostle John. We should not expect such writings to use terminology that served to identify members of a specific religious or philosophical group in the second century.

Analogies might help to make this point clear. Birger Pearson notes that many scholars (but not all) believe that the community of Jews that lived at Qumran can be identified as the Essenes that observers such as Josephus describe, and yet none of the literature found there identifies its producers or users as Essenes. Instead, the Qumran works, also eschatological or biblical in nature, use terms such as “children of light” to describe saved people. Consider likewise a modern congregation of Lutheran Christians. The sign outside their church building would almost certainly identify the community as “Lutheran,” and individual members might answer “Lutheran” to the question, “What religion are you?” in order to distinguish themselves from other Christians. One would probably find, however, that the term “Lutheran” does not appear in many
forms of the literature that the community produces and uses (for example, sermons, worship books, biblical commentaries, Sunday School materials). Instead, members of the community call themselves “brothers and sisters,” “people of God,” “children of God,” or just “Christians.” Religious groups use different self-designations for different purposes. Especially in situations in which the community wishes to make its message potentially available to a wide range of people and wants to promote the universality of its claims, it will use terms that are more inclusive and less explicitly sectarian. To the extent that “Gnostic” functioned as the name of a specific school of thought, it would have been less desirable to use it in literature that presented the Gnostic message of salvation to all interested persons.

The case of Clement of Alexandria illustrates that the members of the Gnostic school of thought that Irenaeus discusses were not the only ancient Christians who called themselves “Gnostics,” and this is a second important objection to this approach to studying ancient Gnostics. Irenaeus reports that the followers of a Christian teacher named Marcellina “call themselves gnostics” (AH 1.25.6). Hippolytus, who wrote his heresiological treatise in the early third century and made use of Irenaeus’s work, claims that the Naassenes and the followers of a teacher named Justin (not Justin Martyr) called themselves gnostics. Why then, scholars rightly ask, should we not call these Christians the Gnostics as well but instead reserve the title for Irenaeus’s “Gnostic school of thought”? After all, Irenaeus does not say that his “Gnostics” called themselves that (even though I have argued that they almost certainly did). And if multiple and diverse ancient people and groups were calling themselves Gnostics, how can we separate one such group out as the only people to whom we should give the name? Indeed, we have seen that some proponents of the restricted use of “Gnostic” that I advocate include the Naassenes in the Gnostic school of thought, even though their myth as Hippolytus describes it differs considerably from that of Irenaeus’s Gnostics.

In response, we should notice that, in contrast to our Gnostics, Irenaeus and Hippolytus identify Marcellina and the Naassenes primarily in other ways. Irenaeus says that Marcellina belongs to the school of Carpocrates, and Hippolytus repeatedly calls the Naassenes the Naassenes. Here is how Hippolytus introduces the Naassenes: “So the priests and promoters of the teaching [that Hippolytus is about to describe] have been first those who have been called Naassenes, so named in the Hebrew language—for the snake is called ‘naas’—but subsequently they have called themselves ‘Gnostics,’ asserting that they alone have acquaintance with the profound matters.” Hippolytus suggests that “Naassenes” is the group’s primary name, and they later called themselves “Gnostics” as a claim to having unique knowledge. Irenaeus, however, called the group that we are considering only “the Gnostic school of thought,” making that designation their exclusive one. The phrase “the Gnostic school of thought” indicates a sectarian designation (as in “the Lutheran Church”), comparable to “school of Carpocrates” and “the Naassenes.” It seems probable, then, that Marcellina’s followers and the Naassenes used the term “Gnostic” as Clement did, as a claim to the achievement of an ideal Christian character, not as the name of their groups. And in fact, Hippolytus tells us that the Naassenes considered themselves “the only true Christians” and shared certain of their teachings only with “the perfect gnostics.” Justin’s disciples, he says, “call themselves ‘gnostics’ in their own way, as if they alone have drunk from the amazing acquaintance of the Perfect and Good.”

Ironically, when Irenaeus and Hippolytus say that people called themselves “gnostics,” this may indicate that the term functions as a secondary claim to perfection rather than as a sectarian self-designation. Perhaps, as in the case of Clement, they used the self-praising epithet “gnostic” in response to its original use by the Gnostic sect. It is not the Gnostics who are really gnostics: we are! The use of the term “gnostic” in this way—as a term for the ideal or true Christian, the one whose acquaintance with God has been perfected, rather than as a sectarian self-designation—continued long after the Gnostic school of thought had probably faded away. In the last decades of the fourth century, the ascetic theologian Evagrius Ponticus called the Christian monk who had reached the most advanced stage of the ascetic life “the Gnostic.” Despite the efforts of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and others, the positive connotation of the term “Gnostic” never disappeared.

By noticing that Irenaeus uses the term gnostic not only in a sarcastic or ironic way to refer to any and all “heretics,” but also in a precise way to refer to a specific group of Christians, we can begin to gather evidence for the ancient school of thought whose adherents called themselves and were known as the Gnostics. Irenaeus and Porphyry tell us about the myth that the Gnostics taught, and they summarize and even name literature that the group produced. With this information, it is possible to identify from the surviving works of antiquity those that reflect this myth.
and thus likely came from the Gnostics. We may also be able to identify other groups that Irenaeus and Epiphanius describe as referring to the same school of thought, but at this point things become much less certain. In the outline below, I have summarized the evidence for the Gnostics that this method collects. With each step, the reliability of the procedure lessens, and for my part I am confident using only the information given in sections I, II, and III. As for the works listed under III.B, I am inclined to see the Gospel of Judas as coming from the Gnostics and the Untitled Treatise in the Bruce Codex as not; I am uncertain about Thunder—Perfect Intellect.

A large number of scholars recognize the grouping of texts and testimonies that I have listed as providing evidence for a religious tradition or community in antiquity, and they have come to call this tradition and the texts “Sethian.” Fewer scholars, however, have agreed to the larger claim of this chapter: that we can call these texts and the community from which they came “Gnostic,” and that we should not use this term as a sectarian title for any other ancient groups or texts. On the one hand, most scholars wish to continue to use the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” for a wide range of ancient teachers, groups, and texts, including these. On the other hand, critics of this approach wish to avoid the term “Gnostic” altogether or are not persuaded that it is legitimate to give it to this group. Both of these positions have much to commend them, but my approach recognizes what Irenaeus and his colleagues admit, despite their polemical distortions: there really were Gnostics, but not everyone who believed in a lower creator god, attributed cosmic disaster to Wisdom, or offered gnōsis of the ultimate God was one of them.

Evidence for the Gnostic School of Thought

I. Significant descriptions by contemporary observers
   Irenaeus, Against the Heresies, Book I, Chapters 29–31 (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 163–181)
   Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, Chapter 16 (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 182–184)

II. Surviving ancient works attributed to the Gnostics by Irenaeus and Porphyry
   The Secret Book According to John (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 23–151)
   Zoëstrianos (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 121–141)

III. Surviving ancient works that reflect the Gnostic myth found in I and II
   A. Works that have wide scholarly agreement
      The Revelation of Adam (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 52–64)
      The Reality of the Rulers (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 65–76)
      First Thought in Three Forms (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 86–100)
      The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, or The Egyptian Gospel
         (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 101–120)
      The Three Tablets of Seth (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 149–158)
      Marsanes (Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, 629–649)
      Melchizedek (Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, 595–605)
      The Thought of Nōrea (Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, 607–611)
   B. Works that scholars dispute
      Gospel of Judas (Meyer, Nag Hammadi Scriptures, 755–769)
      The Thunder: Perfect Intellect (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 77–85)
      The Untitled Treatise in the Bruce Codex

IV. Reports of other groups that may reflect the Gnostic myth
   Irenaeus, Against the Heresies, Book I, Chapter 24, Sections 1–2
     (Satorinos) (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 159–162)
   Epiphanius, Against Heresies, Chapters 25–26 (Gnostics or Borborites), Chapter 39 (Sethians), Chapter 40 (Archontics)
     (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 185–214)

The Foreigner (Layton, Gnostic Scriptures, 141–148)
Book of Zoroaster, excerpted in the long version of the Secret Book
Gospel of Judas (but see III.B below)