THE MYTH AND RITUALS OF THE
GNOSTIC SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The Gnostic myth was a bold attempt to explain the origin and fate of
the universe and to proclaim human salvation through a combination
of the Jewish Scriptures, Platonic mythological speculation, and (it
seems) revelatory meditations on the structure of the human mind. The
somewhat different narrations of the myth often strike the modern reader
as exceedingly complex, even comically so. Important divine characters
have strange names—Barbelô, Éléth, Ephésêkh, and others—and relate
to one another in obscure ways. Highly philosophical vocabulary—
argot, really—fills Gnostic writings. Appreciation of these works as reli-
giously compelling, and thus of the Gnostic school of thought as an
attractive religious option among Christian groups, requires that we look
for the message of salvation that the Gnostic myth means to communi-
cate (even if we cannot figure out whether, say, in The Holy Book of the
Great Invisible Spirit the Moirothea is indeed the same character as
Plēsitha).

Although the sheer intellectual enjoyment of cosmological speculation
must have contributed to the exuberant complexity of Gnostic myth-
making, we must not imagine that the Gnostics were just playing mind
games. In recent decades scholars have recognized that ancient philo-
sophical schools did not engage in philosophical discourse about the na-
ture of God and other high doctrines for purely intellectual reasons;
rather, they were communities in which individuals learned a way of life
based on shared principles and teachings. Philosophy sought to make
people more virtuous, in fact, happier, for ancient intellectuals agreed
that no person could be truly happy without being virtuous.³ There is no
reason to think that the Gnostic school of thought differed from its con-
temporaries in this respect. We can assume that their teachings also had

a therapeutic purpose: to reconnect the human intellect with the source
of its being and to ameliorate its condition of attachment to the body
and its passions. For the Gnostics, as for their fellow Platonists, the in-
tellect provided the link between humanity and the divine because our
intellect is modeled after and provides a means to connect with the intel-
lect of God. And so the Gnostic myth provides a map, so to speak, of the
divine intellect, and it explains how, despite our life in the body and op-
opposition by demonic powers, our intellect still provides us with the op-
opportunity to contemplate God. Divine revelation in Christ made this
message available, and Gnostic ritual provided a basis for mystical as-
cent to knowledge of God.

This chapter surveys the key features of the Gnostics' myth and their
rituals of baptism and mystical ascent. It discusses also how Gnostics
differentiated themselves from other Christians and recent theories as to
the origin and social character of the Gnostic sect. I do not attempt here
a detailed discussion of any of these topics; rather, I wish to situate the
basic teachings of the Gnostics within their ancient context and to dis-
cern the compelling features of their message. Given how little evidence
survives, there is much that we will never be able to know about the
Gnostics, but when one examines the evidence that comes from the
Gnostic school of thought on its own, it is possible to discover an em-
phasis on saving knowledge of the divine, made possible through Christ.
What often passes as the primary characteristics of "Gnosticism"—
dualism, alienation, esotericism, and the like—do not appear nearly as
central as the Gnostics' conviction that God had acted to save people
from the machinations of the evil forces that surrounded them.

God and the Divine Realm

According to the Gnostics, the ultimate God—"the Father of the en-
tirety" or "the Invisible Spirit"—is unknowable and beyond description.
One should not even think of the Invisible Spirit as divine because "it is
superior to deity" (Ap. John II 2:35–36). On the one hand, only negative
adjectives can describe the Invisible Spirit—immeasurable, invisible, un-
limited, and so on—but even these are not negative enough: "It is not
corporeal, it is not incorporeal . . . Indeed, no one can think of it" (Ap.
John II 3:22–26). On the other hand, because it is the source of all that
is, one can say some things: "It is life, as bestowing life. It is blessed, as
bestowing blessedness. It is acquaintance, as bestowing acquaintance."
But the Invisible Spirit does not have any of these characteristics; rather, it bestows them on all existing things less than itself (Ap. John II 4:3–8). One Gnostic author actually postulates a divine entity even higher than the Invisible Spirit, the Unknown Silent One (Marc. 4:19–24).

Despite the Invisible Spirit or Father of the entirety's remote serenity, it is essentially an intellect, and so its nature is to think, and this thinking results in the devolution of God into an “entirety” with a complex structure of “aeons.” The aeons are simultaneously actors, places, extents of time, and modes of thought. They mostly have names of ideal qualities, abstractions, or mental operations, such as Intelligence, Truth, Form, Afterthought, and Wisdom. The aeons that make up the entirety result from the Invisible Spirit’s knowledge or thought of itself. They are its thinking or its intellect, in all its complexity. They form also a spiritual realm, the equivalent of Plato’s realm of ideal forms. In Plato’s view, the material universe in which we live is an imperfect but very good copy of a spiritual realm of ideas or ideal forms that alone are real—that is, unchanging and eternal. Likewise for the Gnostics, only the entirety that the aeons constitute is truly real and eternal; the material world is a flawed imitation of the entirety and destined to perish.

Foremost among the aeons is the second principle, “the image of the perfect Invisible Virgin Spirit” (Ap. John II 4:34–35), which is the most immediate emanation from the ultimate God. The potential for any lower being to have gnōsis of the first principle rests in this aeon, which is called Forethought and, more obscurely, the Barbelô. The Barbelô itself can have constituent aeons. Usually there are three of these, called concealed, first-manifest, and self-originated. If the Invisible Spirit is the ultimate font of humanity and our salvation and yet cannot be named and described, then the Barbelô is the more immediate source of which human beings can speak. In The Gospel of Judas, Judas says to Jesus: “You have come from the immortal aeon of the Barbelô. But as for the one who sent you”—that is, the Invisible Spirit—“I am not worthy to say his name” (35:17–21). After the first principle and the Barbelô, different versions of the myth populate the divine realm in different ways, albeit with some recurring motifs, such as the number 24. But they all share the view that ultimately there is one single reality, yet the magnificently complex nature of this ultimate reality expresses itself in a multifaceted divine realm of aeonic emanations.

Several divine characters or structures appear in similar ways even within narrations of the myth that otherwise differ, suggesting that they lay at the heart of what Gnostics saw as distinctive about their teachings about God. For example, nearly all feature a triad of father, mother, and son at a very high level of the godhead. In The Secret Book According to John, the Barbelô conceives by the gaze of the first principle and begets a spark, the Self-Originate or Christ. Unlike other aeons, which emanate by becoming “disclosed,” Christ is “the only-begotten” of the Father and the Barbelô, who are then his father and mother (Ap. John II 6:10–18). According to First Thought in Three Forms, the “sound” of the Barbelô “exists as three compartments: Father, Mother, Son—a voice existing imperceptibly” (37:20–23). This motif becomes even more prominent in The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, which contains at least six triads of father, mother, and child, beginning with the Invisible Spirit, the Barbelô, and their “thrice-male child.” Although it can take different forms, a family of father, mother, and son lies at the center of the Gnostic conception of the divine. Even if Gnostic writers had a negative view of sexuality, they nonetheless saw the human family as “an imperfect image of divine reality.”

In several versions of the myth, the character designated “Self-Originate” or “Christ” or both is a central figure within the entirety, functioning as a kind of pivot from the supreme beings the Invisible Spirit and the Barbelô to the remaining aeons. Four aeons called luminaries often attend or surround this figure. For example, we have met the Self-Originate or Christ of The Secret Book According to John, whom the Father and the Barbelô beget. According to this work, “the invisible Virgin Spirit established the Self-Originate as true god over the entirety, and subordinated to it [the Self-Originate] all authority and the truth that was in it [the Spirit]” (Ap. John II 7:22–26). In First Thought the aeons praise Christ, who is “the only-begotten” and “the perfect child” and who establishes four eternal realms and their luminaries (38:16–39:12). Zòstrianos calls the lowest level of the Barbelô “the self-originating aeon” and places the four luminaries within it (Zòs. 19:6–16; 29:1–20). The Gospel of Judas calls the Self-Originate, as it does many of the divine beings, “a great angel” and “the god of light”; it is attended by four angels, and it brings into existence the lower aeons (47:16–48:21). The Self-Originate or Christ serves as the transitional figure from the primal triad of the Invisible Spirit, the Barbelô, and himself, to the numerous aeons that make up the entirety of the divine realm.

The four luminaries that attend the Self-Originate (along with the archetypal human beings that often dwell with them) are perhaps the most
distinctive characters in Gnostic myth. In the Secret Book the four luminaries—Harmonzēl, Óroiaēl, Daueithai, and Êlēlēth—stand before the Self-Originate or Christ, and each of these is actually the lead aeon in a set of four aeons (Ap. John II 7:30–8:28). These four luminaries, bearing the same names, appear also in First Thought, where they receive additional names and are called “the eternal realms.” Here, too, they are closely linked with Christ, who “established” them while they are said (perhaps mistakenly) to have “engendered” him (38:30–39:13). The luminaries play a similar role in the Holy Book, which gives them consorts, attendants, and even consorts to their attendants (IV 63:8–65:5).

As we have seen, The Gospel of Judas calls the Self-Originate “a great angel,” and so too are his four attendants: “And for his sake four angels came into being from another cloud, and they came into being for the attendance of the angelic Self-Originate” (47:21–26). One or more of the four luminaries appear in other works as well. If the Self-Originate or Christ serves as a kind of pivot between the Invisible Spirit and the Barbēlô on the one hand, and the subsequent aeons on the other, the four luminaries provide the focal structure for the subsequent aeons, which in the Secret Book number twelve.

More significantly, the four luminaries are key aeons because they provide realms or dwelling places for the divine archetypes of ideal humanity, which are transcendent versions of the earliest and later human beings. If, as Genesis claims, human beings were made according to a divine “likeness” (Genesis 1:26), and if, as Plato teaches, our world is a copy of the spiritual world, then it makes sense that the entirety would include divine archetypes of human beings. These include Adamas, the heavenly archetype of Adam, who resides with or in Harmonzēl, and his son Seth, who resides with or in Óroiaēl. These first two archetypes are clear enough, but the third and fourth archetypes are collective and somewhat more obscure. The seed or posterity of Seth resides with or in Daueithai. This seed of Seth probably refers to the descendants of Seth who lived during the primeval era of the early chapters of Genesis, because the fourth luminary, Êlēlēth, plays host to the archetypes of people who appear to be saved human beings of later historical periods, perhaps the contemporary Gnostics themselves (Ap. John II 8:28–9:24). According to the Holy Book, “the offspring of the great Seth repose” in Daueithai, while “the souls of the offspring repose” in Êlēlēth (Gos. Eg. III 6:17–22; IV 77:16–20). The Secret Book describes the latter group as “those who were not acquainted with the fullness and did not repent at once, but held out for a while and then repented.” Unlike the posterity of Seth, they were “engendered beings” who nonetheless “glorified the Invisible Spirit” (Ap. John II 9:19–24). Perhaps these souls are “engendered” as offspring through the ritual of baptism, which I shall discuss below. Finally, in The Reality of the Rulers, it is Êlēlēth who appears to the heroine Nōrea. Nōrea’s “offspring,” the luminary tells her, “exist immortal in the midst of dying humankind,” but they will not appear until “after three generations,” when “the true human being, within a modeled form, reveals the existence of [the spirit of] truth, which the Father has sent” (Hyp. Arch 96:19–97:1). This may be a reference to the incarnation of Jesus. All of these passages suggest that Êlēlēth is the luminary of the archetypes of the contemporary Gnostics and other saved human beings. And so there are four divine archetypes of humanity: Adam (Harmonzēl), Seth (Óroiaēl), the primeval descendants of Seth (Daueithai), and the contemporary Gnostics, the present-day seed of Seth (Êlēlēth).

The structure of the entirety may be complicated—there are usually many more characters than I have named here—but it possesses a serene stability, sometimes based on gender complementarity: most of the aeons exist in male-female pairs that subordinate femininity to a masculinity that is purported to be beyond gender. On the one hand, as perfect, uncreated emanations of the ultimate principle, the aeons do not possess gender, or they exist beyond gender. The Barbēlô, for instance, is called “the mother-father” and “the thrice-androgynous name” (Ap. John II 5:6–9). On the other hand, in Greek many of the aeons’ names have a grammatical gender—“truth,” for example, is alēthē, a feminine noun—and so are referred to with feminine pronouns. And thus they seem, at least superficially, to have a gender, and some versions of the myth either assert or hint that the aeons have “consorts” of the other gender. Both the Secret Book and Irenaeus report that intellect (masculine) is paired with prior acquaintance (feminine), and will (masculine) with eternal life (feminine)(Ap. John II 7:11–13; AH I.29.1). The pairing of aeons and the use of androgyny as a term of praise suggest a complementarity of the genders, which gives the entirety stability and, it might seem, a measure of gender equality. Nonetheless, the ultimate principle still seems to be a “father,” and the Barbēlô is praised not only as “the thrice-androgynous name” but also as “thrice-male” (II 5:8), a term of praise that appears more than once in Gnostic works. One might say that in Gnostic myth the divine transcends gender by incorporating femininity into a more basic or dominant masculinity.
In at least one version of the myth, it is the violation of gender complementarity by the aeon Wisdom that precipitates the creation of a flawed material world. According to the Secret Book, Wisdom is the last of the twenty-four aeons and thus the most distant, so to speak, from the Invisible Spirit. When Wisdom (in Greek, Sophia) produced a thought on her own, without the consent of her male consort, the result was an imperfect thought or pseudo-aeon, the first “divine” being that does not belong to the entirety of immortals. Wisdom cast this misshapen product of her thinking outside the entirety and named it Ialdabaôth. Ialdabaôth, also called Saklas and other names, is the misguided creator and ruler of this material universe, that is, the God of Genesis. Similarly, The Reality of the Rulers claims that Wisdom “wanted to create something, alone without her partner” (Hyp. Arch. 94:6–7), and the result was Ialdabaôth. In this view, then, Wisdom disrupts the gendered balance among the aeons of the entirety by thinking or creating independently, without her male consent, and this error results in the flawed created order. Here the entirety appears to have held within itself the potential for its own undoing: the increasing distance of the succeeding emanations from the first principle makes lack of harmony increasingly possible, to the point that such disharmony becomes actual when Wisdom attempts to think on her own. The transition from the spiritual entirety of blessed aeons to the material world of creatures appears to be a mistake, something that divine providence did not intend and, as we shall see, a problem that must be rectified. Wisdom later repents of her error and is restored to the community of aeons, even elevated to a higher position.

Other Gnostic works take a more positive view of the origins of the material universe, even though they still do not see it as desirable in comparison to spiritual reality; likewise, they do not cast Wisdom in as negative a light. For example, the Holy Book has the luminary Êléleh initiate the production of a material universe and its god by announcing, “Let something rule over chaos and Hades” (Gos. Eg. III 56:22–25). Here Wisdom plays an important role in the generation of matter and the emanation of rulers over it, but she does so neither solely on her own initiative nor as a mistake, but in concert with other immortal beings. First Thought in Three Forms seems to include elements of both of these views: on the one hand, it calls Wisdom “the innocent one,” and Ialdabaôth just appears as “the great demon,” without any error on Wisdom’s part; on the other hand, it portrays the higher aeons as forgiving Wis-

dom for the production of Ialdabaôth. The Gospel of Judas likewise does not mention Wisdom at all in the generation of Ialdabaôth; rather, Ialdabaôth appears to come into being by an act of divine will. Here “Saklas” names yet another ruler (51:8–15). The Gnostics, then, held a range of views about the origin of the material universe and its ruler, but they all agreed that Ialdabaôth, the god of this world, is arrogant and ignorant, and his realm is one of darkness and corruption.

The myth, then, emphasizes the transcendence of the ultimate God and the corresponding unfolding of God into lower, mediating divine principles, the lowest of which does the work of creating the material universe. These ideas are not unique to the Gnostics; rather, they are at home in the discourse of Middle Platonism, a philosophical movement represented by figures like Philo of Alexandria, who lived in the first century, and Alcinous, Numenius, and Justin Martyr, philosophers of the second century. Philo was a Jew; Justin, a Christian; and Alcinous and Numenius, adherents of traditional Greek and Roman religions—but they all agreed that it is too simple to identify the god who created the world in which we live with the ultimate divine principle. These thinkers looked for guidance on the world’s origin to Plato’s dialogue Timaeus, in which a divine being called “the craftsman” (demiurge) creates the visible universe as a copy of the eternal forms. The craftsman creates lower gods, who then assist him, and the universe that he creates and in which we live is the best possible image of the perfect spiritual world.

In the Timaeus Plato does not mention a god that is higher or more abstract than the craftsman, but later Platonists concluded that there must be such a higher God. After all, if the craftsman created this world in imitation of a higher one, who created the higher world? Moreover, in another dialogue, Parmenides, Plato speaks of an ultimate divine principle, “the One,” which is beyond any description and cannot be said even to exist in the way that we normally think of existing. The craftsman of the Timaeus, as divine and powerful as he is, does not appear to be as remote and abstract as the One. During the first and second centuries CE, intellectuals, especially admirers of Plato’s thought, became increasingly sensitive to the distance between the changing material nature of our world and the ideal of an unchanging, wholly spiritual existence, of which the One would be an extreme representative. If the ultimate God is utterly transcendent, unchanging, and immaterial, as the ideals of Plato suggested, then some sort of mediating divine principle(s) between that God and this created order appeared necessary.
Ancient thinkers drew on a variety of traditions to understand this mediation, and they employed several metaphors to describe the unfolding of the ultimate God. In addition to Plato’s works, Philo turned to the Jewish Scriptures to understand the nature and complexity of God. The ultimate God, he believed (and echoing the Parmenides), is best understood simply as “the one that is,” as indeed God said to Moses from the burning bush: “I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14). Philo concluded, then, that the divine names that appear in the Bible, like “God” and “Lord,” must refer not to God himself, but to powers or aspects of God, in the cases of “God” and “Lord” his creative and ruling faculties, respectively. God is therefore somehow not just one, but three. This is why God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre in the form of three men (Genesis 18:1–2). Most people can perceive only the lower powers of God, but the purest and most learned human intellect might be able to apprehend the Existent alone by itself.  

“God” and “Lord” are not the only powers of God that Philo identified; they are merely the “senior” ones. According to Genesis, God created the universe by speaking: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). It is God’s voice that brings the world into existence. Thus, Philo designates as the Word (logos) of God the divine principle that mediates between the ultimate God and the created world. The Father of All has established “his chief messenger,” the Word, “to stand on the border and separate the creature from the Creator.” Jews like Philo also saw God’s Wisdom as a mediating, creative figure. In Proverbs, Wisdom, a feminine figure, claims that God created her first among all things, and she assisted him in the creation of the universe (8:22–31). “I came from the mouth of the Most High,” Wisdom announces in Sirach (24:3), laying the foundation for Jews and Christians to identify Wisdom with the Word of God.

The Christian teacher Justin Martyr, whom we shall study at greater length in the following chapter, agreed that a lower divine principle mediates between God and the creation. He not only identified God’s Wisdom with God’s Word, but identified both with Christ. Christians had, of course, already made this move: Paul called Christ God’s Power and Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24), and one of his disciples claimed that “in him [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Colossians 1:16). The Gospel of John identified Christ as God’s Word, through whom “all things came into being” (John 1:1–3). Following these precedents, Justin agreed with the Gnostics and Philo that the ultimate God, the Father, is really unnameable: titles like “Father” and “God” and “Lord” just refer to what God does, not who God is. And so the ultimate God has a Son, “another god,” the Word (logos), who gives order to the universe and reveals the ultimate God to human beings. The Father and the Son are “distinct in number, but not in mind.” Because the Father is remote from us, it is the Word who appeared to people like Abraham and Moses in the Bible. Not only this, but God has another emanation, the Spirit. Philo and Justin would have agreed that it was not the ultimate God who in Genesis appears to people and mediates divine revelation, but some lower emanation of him.

Philosophers like Alcinous and Numenius did not use the Jewish Bible as Philo and Justin did, but they, too, discerned mediating principles between the highest God and the created world. Numenius distinguished between the craftsman god, whom most human beings are able to recognize, and “the first God” or “first mind,” who not merely participates in the Good, but is the Good; the first God is associated not with becoming, but with pure being. Like the Gnostics, Alcinous taught that God’s thinking constitutes the realm of true spiritual reality: “The forms are eternal and perfect thoughts of God.” He, too, distinguished between “the primal God” or “primary intellect” and a lower god he called “the intellect of the whole heaven.” Alcinous described the ultimate God in terms very similar to those in which the Gnostic works The Secret Book According to John and The Foreigner describe the Invisible Spirit: “He is neither genus, nor species, nor differentia, nor does he possess any attributes,” and so on. Moreover, Alcinous agreed with the Gnostics that the ultimate God does not directly rule the universe in which we live, rather that multiple “other divinities, the daemons, whom one could also term ‘created gods,’” administer the world beneath heaven.

In comparison to these thinkers, the Gnostics appear to stand out for two reasons: their divine mediating principles are numerous and complex, and their craftsman god is ignorant and even malicious. Certainly, the Gnostics’ divine entirety is far more complicated and thickly populated than what Philo, Numenius, or Alcinous imagined, but their numerous eternal beings only extend closer to the ultimate God the multiplicity of divinities that characterized all ancient views of the cosmos. No ancient person (even one who was a Jew or Christian) was a monotheist in our sense, that is, someone who believes that one and only one God exists. Instead, ancient “monotheists” simply believed that a single High God stood atop a hierarchy of gods, daemons, and other spiritual beings.
Neither were the Gnostics alone in their multiplication of divine aspects of the ultimate God. Christians such as Basilides and the Valentinians also imagined a complex godhead with multiple aeons, and like the Gnostics, they concluded that the god who created this world was more imperfect than Plato's craftsman god. The Gnostics' understanding of God was certainly distinctive, but it lay within the range of speculative thought during their time. And finally, the complexity of the Gnostics' God matches the complexity of the human mind, which reflects God's rationality. If human beings are to understand their true nature, reform their lives, and achieve the knowledge of God for which they were created, then they can only benefit from a detailed map of the divine intellect as possible.

The Gnostics are sometimes called dualists, but this can be a misleading description of their thought. To be sure, the Gnostics drew a sharp contrast between the material world in which we live and the spiritual realm of the immortal aeons. Our world changes, subjects us to fate, suffering, and death, and obscures our knowledge of God; the matter that constitutes it is destined for ultimate destruction. True reality, in contrast, does not change, exists in stability and harmony, and is eternal. But strictly speaking, dualists posit two eternal and opposed ultimate principles, from which the opposing realms of matter and spirit originate, and the Gnostics do not teach this. Ultimately, there is only one Invisible Spirit, and everything that exists has its origin in it. Indeed, the Gnostics are even less dualistic than Plato, who appears to have imagined that a formless material principle, the receptacle of being, always existed alongside God and constituted the stuff to which the craftsman gave order. The Gnostics, in contrast, imagined even the material world as originating from the entirety (at least in the works in which they are explicit on this point). This lower universe is not completely foreign to the divine realm; rather, the entirety is its source. And so the myth does not suggest that Gnostics should utterly "reject" the material world (how could they?), but that they should understand that this world came into being for a reason even if it is ultimately not humanity's true home.

The Material World, Biblical History, and the Possibility of Gnōsis

The unfolding of the single divine reality into the complex structure of the entirety took place before the beginning of time, or rather, it happens outside of time, before or apart from Genesis 1:1. Clues to this process appear in the Bible, however: it seems that the mythic unfolding of God and the error of Wisdom take inspiration from the first three chapters of Genesis as well as from Plato. For example, Wisdom is certainly a kind of Eve figure—sinner, penitent, and mother. Genesis comes more explicitly into view as the Gnostics describe the creation of this world and the first human beings. In contrast to the spiritual entirety, the Gnostics understood this world to be "corporeal darkness, . . . animate chaos and desirous femininity" (Zós. 1:11–13), yet the enlightened person could experience divine stability and eternity through a process of mystical contemplation, which we shall explore below. Such first-hand acquaintance (gnōsis) with the ultimate, indeed sole, reality could only be a rare and fleeting experience for those few intellects able to transcend their present condition of imprisonment in a material body, which was troubled by the passions and enslaved to fate in a universe controlled by demonic powers.

The portion of Gnostic myth most obviously based on the Jewish Bible explained how the human intellect found itself in this unhappy situation, how the potential for reunion with the divine has persisted from the origins of time, and how the immortal beings have acted to rescue human beings in Jesus. Gnostics read the opening chapters of Genesis as a confused account—muddled by its uncomprehending author, Moses—of how the divine potentiality came into this world and how it has survived the various attempts of the demonic forces to seize or eliminate it. As we have seen, the Gnostics differed on precisely how the material universe came into being and how Wisdom was involved in it, but in any case the result was a distorted thought, a contemptible false version of divinity named Ialdabōth and identified as both the "craftsman" (de- miourgos) of Plato's Timaeus and the "God" of Moses' Genesis. While Plato's craftsman god created this world as the best possible copy of the eternal forms, Ialdabōth formed the material universe as a highly imperfect copy of the spiritual entirety of which he had a dim memory. He exemplifies the self-deception of ignorant beings, vainly announcing to all who would listen, "For my part, I am a jealous god. And there is no other god apart from me" (see Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 4:24; 6:15; Isaiah 45:5). As a Gnostic author remarked, the god of Israel (that is, Ialdabōth) here unwittingly testifies to the existence of a higher God, "for if no other one existed, of whom would he be jealous?" (Ap. John II 13:5–13).
The depiction of the god of Genesis as ignorant, foolish, and even malicious may be the feature of Gnostic mythology that most offended other ancient Christians and still puzzles modern readers. We have already noted that philosophically inclined Jews and Christians agreed that the creator god in Genesis resembled the craftsman god of Plato’s Timaeus and was not the highest God, but the Gnostics took a much less positive view of this divine being. Their view most likely developed from passages in the Bible that portray God as ignorant and wrathful. The god of Genesis, after all, walks in an earthly garden and must ask where Adam is (Genesis 3:8–9); he concludes that his creation of humanity and animals was a mistake and decides to destroy all people, except for a single family and a few beasts (6:5–22); and he later annihilates entire cities by raining sulfur and fire down upon them (19:24–25). Such passages troubled many pious readers of the Bible in antiquity; some learned interpreters argued that these events are not literally true, but have spiritual meanings; others attributed these actions to a lower, less perfect manifestation of God, his “presence” or his “word.”

The Gnostics solved this problem simply: this god is as ignorant, vain, and hostile to human beings as he appears. Therefore, he must not be truly divine, not truly God, but Ialdabaoth. Moses failed to recognize this fact, and thus Genesis, which he wrote, provides only a partially reliable account of creation, Adam and Eve, and their progeny.

Despite his imperfection, Ialdabaoth was able to create the universe thanks to the “great power” that he took from his mother Wisdom (Ap. John II 10:20–21). Wisdom’s power generates hostility between human beings and Ialdabaoth, and the return of this power to the entirety is the goal of divine providence. Ialdabaoth does not rule the universe alone, but leads a set of demonic powers, called rulers, authorities, and the like. The Gnostics found the number, names, and characteristics of these rulers grimly fascinating, and one Gnostic author devoted his treatise to demonstrating “the reality of the rulers” and their threat to human beings, about which Paul warned Christians in his letter to the Ephesians: “Our contest is not against flesh and blood; rather, the authorities of the world and the spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Ephesians 6:12; Hyp. Arch. 86:20–27). The Secret Book According to John provides the most extensive discussion of the rulers and lists of their names. Here the rulers are heavenly authorities, associated with the stars and planets, and astrological fate constitutes much of their power over human beings. The rulers thwart our potential virtue and knowledge of God by controlling our choices astrologically. One version of the Secret Book preserves an excerpt from the otherwise lost Book of Zoroaster, which names the ruler who made each part of the human body, perhaps so that Gnostics can bind or invoke the ruler when they need to heal that body part. Knowing the names and hierarchies of the rulers may have been one way for Gnostics to resist their evil influences.

The power that Ialdabaoth took from Wisdom came into humanity when Ialdabaoth created Adam and was tricked into blowing his spirit into him. Humanity’s resulting upright stature and aspirations toward the higher reality brought it into conflict with the cosmic rulers. The exact sequence of events at this point varies among the Gnostic works that retell the story of Adam and Eve, although they all base their accounts on Genesis. Gnostic authors, however, do agree that the original human being was created in two steps, first spiritually and then materially. First, Ialdabaoth and the rulers create a spiritual human being in imitation of the image of the divine human being that is displayed to them from the entirety above. This “animate” Adam is made, as Genesis would have it, “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). But subsequently the rulers consign this spiritual human being to a material body, and they create Eve as Adam’s partner, or they divide the originally androgynous human being into the male Adam and the female Eve. The idea of such a two-stage creation of humanity is not unusual among early Jewish and Christian authors, for it helped them to make sense of the two accounts of the creation of humanity found in the first two chapters of Genesis (1:26–30; 2:4–25). Modern biblical scholars hypothesize that the author(s) or compiler(s) of Genesis combined two originally separate accounts of creation, but ancient interpreters did not have recourse to this theory. Many of them, like the Gnostics, concluded that Genesis 1 recounts the creation of an androgynous, perhaps entirely spiritual human being (“male and female”), whom God subsequently divided into male and female beings with material bodies (“dust”). Despite this agreement on humanity’s double creation, Gnostic works differ in how they trace the survival of the divine power through this process of creation and subsequent “fall.”

In The Secret Book According to John, the entrance of Wisdom’s power into Adam enables him to stand upright. Adam’s upright stature indicates his attraction to higher, spiritual realities, which brings him into conflict with Ialdabaoth and the rulers who created him. Because Adam lives in a physical body whose passions obstruct virtue and knowledge of
God, and because the rulers seek to prevent his acquaintance with the divine, Adam requires help from the entirety. He receives this help in the form of luminous Afterthought, a manifestation of Wisdom, who instructs and enlightens human beings. This female revelatory principle becomes active and manifest when Eve is created and separated from Adam. The rulers attempt to rape the spiritually endowed Eve, but the spiritual principle abandons Eve’s material body before they do so, and their intercourse with the merely fleshly Eve results in the births of Cain and Abel. Intercourse between Adam and Eve produces Seth, the spiritual ancestor of those with acquaintance. The rulers manage to cast humanity into a state of ignorance of true spiritual reality, and they harass people with the flood and the temptations of sex and precious metals. The period of human oblivion will come to an end when God’s spirit returns to rectify the lack of acquaintance and to facilitate the return to the entirety of the spiritual power dispersed in humanity.

In contrast to the Secret Book, The Revelation of Adam attributes loss of acquaintance to the separation of Adam and Eve, and it more firmly ties the survival of the spiritual power to a specific “race” of people. According to this work, when Adam and Eve still exist together as a spiritual androgynous, the female revelatory principle is able to teach Adam “an account of acquaintance with the eternal god” (Ap. Adam 64:12-14). The rulers, however, separate the male and the female, and the glory of acquaintance departs from them and enters “the seed belonging to great aeons” (65:3-5). Adam, now lacking acquaintance, then receives a revelation from higher beings, which he shares with his son Seth. This revelation explains how the flood of Genesis 6 and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 will be failed attempts of the rulers to destroy the “other race” or “Those People,” who will descend from Seth and possess the possibility of acquaintance with the entirety. Adam looks forward to the arrival of a savior, “That Human Being,” whose appearance will lead to the destruction of the rulers and the human beings whom they have led astray and the salvation of all “Those People” who have acquaintance with the eternal God.

The Reality of the Rulers places the rulers’ erotic attraction and violent hostility to the female spiritual principle at the center of its version of Genesis. When the eternal beings shine down an image of incorruptibility from above, the rulers become “enamored” with it. They create Adam in order to entice and trap the image, but their human form remains immobile. The spirit from above enters Adam and enables him to move. When the rulers create Eve, the spiritual principle, coded as feminine, passes into her, and the rulers soon become enamored of Eve as well and attempt to rape her. But the spirit escapes from Eve into the tree of life (Genesis 2:9) and eventually into the snake, whose instruction to the human beings to eat from the tree of acquaintance with good evil results in their awareness of their lack of acquaintance. The appearance of a female character named Nôrea, a sister of Seth, brings humanity’s gradual improvement in knowledge of spiritual matters. This improvement provokes the rulers to cause the flood and to attempt to rape Nôrea, who finds rescue and receives revelations from the luminary Elêlêth. This work looks forward to the arrival of a savior, “the true human being,” who will bring final salvation to Nôrea’s offspring and destruction to the rulers.

From these three examples one can see that gender is a prominent theme in the Gnostic myth and, just as in the divine realm, operates in complex and ambiguous ways in the primeval era that the Gnostics imagined. For example, the rulers’ erotic attraction to the spiritual principle drives the action in The Reality of the Rulers. Curiously, Ialdabaôth and the rulers who lust for a spiritual principle coded female and embodied in women such as Eve and Nôrea are described as both “bes-tial” and “androgy nous,” and androgy nous denotes origin in the material realm (Hyp. Arch. 87:29; 94:18–19). Their attempted rapes demonstrate the violent nature of the desire to possess the image of incorruptibility. Eve and Nôrea both resist the rulers, but the work devalues women in the flesh (the fleshly Eve is raped, while the spiritual one escapes) and instead places worth in a purely spiritual existence. The active, saving work of female characters like Afterthought and Nôrea and the depiction of the divine instructing principle as feminine do not tend to disrupt the superiority of the masculine within the overall Gnostic worldview.

Moreover, these stories present strong connections among violence, aggression, ignorance, and sexual desire. The Secret Book explains that sexual intercourse originated in Ialdabaôth’s rape of Eve, in whom Ialdabaôth (in one version) “sowed a seed of desire.” And thus follow the sexual reproduction of embodied human beings, their reception of the rulers’ misleading “counterfeit spirit,” and their existence in the “cave” of the material world (Ap. John II 24:26–33). Later Ialdabaôth sends his angels to seduce other human women and to introduce them to precious metals and the “great anxieties” that lust for such posses-
beings. The Gnostic works that I just mentioned certainly do not have a high opinion of the body (a "prison"), nor do they consider Jesus’ body to be an essential part of the savior, who “puts on” the human Jesus like a garment that he or she can easily remove. These works, however, do not appear to deny the reality of Jesus’ body, for the rulers can chastise his flesh. Indeed, the Gnostic work Melchizedek condemns Christians who claim that Jesus was not really born or did not really eat, have flesh, and suffer: Jesus did all these things, the author asserts (5:1–17). The Gnostic savior truly did become incarnate.

Like other Christians, Gnostics lived in an in-between time: final salvation and revelation had come in Jesus, but the consummation of the end times that his arrival initiated had not yet come. The rulers were still in charge of this universe, and human beings still needed to be awakened to their true nature and the reality of the spiritual realm. Gnostic literature makes this message of awakening available to readers, although Gnostic witnesses perhaps differ on how many readers are prospective Gnostics. For example, The Revelation of Adam seems to suggest that Gnostics form only a small portion of present-day human beings. In biblical antiquity they were limited to the “other” race of “Those People,” and at the end of time “the peoples” of the earth acclaim the seed of Seth and lament their own complete destruction: “Indeed, now we know that our souls are going to die with death” (83:8–84:3). In this respect, the Revelation echoes the views of early Christians like Paul, who imagined salvation only for the relatively small number of God’s elect and the damnation of all others.

On the other hand, The Secret Book According to John contains an extensive discussion of human salvation. It envisions a conflict within and among human beings between the spirit of life, which originates in the entirety, and the counterfeit spirit, which the rulers create to lead human beings astray. Human beings who fall victim to the counterfeit spirit do not die forever, but their souls reincarnate, perhaps multiple times, until they attain acquaintance and salvation. Only apostates, “those who have gained acquaintance and then turned away,” appear destined for eternal punishment (Ap. John 25:16–27:31). This view resembles that of the third-century Christian theologian Origen, who believed that over countless ages of time God would eventually lead all fallen souls back to himself, perhaps even the soul of Satan.

The Gnostic myth, then, is a story of return. An original state of fullness, harmony, and acquaintance in the entirety falls into lack, discord,
and ignorance, and yet the original state of perfection will be achieved once again, thanks to the work of the immortal beings. That which the entirety lost will be recovered. So, too, Adam and Eve once enjoyed acquaintance with the ultimate God, the gift of the power that Ialdabaôth unwittingly passed on to them, but their descendants have fallen into ignorance and oblivion, having forgotten their true origin and having mistaken Ialdabaôth and his rulers for genuine divinities. And yet this lack among human beings will be filled as well, for the story of Genesis is the story of how the Barbêlo aeon and others preserve the spirit of life among human beings, despite the rulers’ continued efforts to seize it and destroy human beings. The first step in achieving moral reformation and religious insight is a correct diagnosis of the human situation. The Gnostic myth takes seriously the ills of this life—the passions that hinder our virtue, the material body that obstructs our knowledge, and the fate that constrains our choices—but it is ultimately a message of hope, of reformation and salvation through Jesus, the incarnate savior.

The Gnostics and Other Christians

Although surviving Gnostic literature is primarily pseudepigraphic mythology, allowing little room for overt references to contemporary persons or events, it does exhibit several strategies by which the Gnostics differentiated themselves from other groups that also drew on the biblical tradition. Because Gnostics differed from their competitors precisely on how to appropriate the biblical narrative in the wake of the Jesus event, most of these strategies revolved around the interpretation of the Bible. The Gnostics claimed authority for their readings primarily by appealing to sources of special divine revelation. In the Secret Book, “the savior” Christ reveals the existence of the higher entirety and the true meaning of Genesis to the disciple John “mystically” in a post-ascension appearance (II 32:2). More typical is a revelation told by a character in the biblical narrative—Adam (Ap. Adam), Seth (Gos. Eg.), or the exclusively Gnostic character Nôrea (Hyp. Arch.); after the manner of other Jewish apocalypses of this period, the revelation is purported to have been written down and preserved secretly until the present crucial eschatological moment. In writings such as these, no contemporary Gnostic teacher claims his or her own interpretive authority or superior education in biblical exegesis: readings are true because a divine being or divinely inspired person from the past spoke them. An apparent exception to this
name of the sect was the “Gnostic school of thought” (gnōstikē hairesis), a self-promotional designation that identified it as that school of thought capable of supplying “knowledge” (gnōsis). We know of other groups who called themselves a hairesis (“school of thought”): adherents of the medical school of thought associated with Herophilus called themselves “the hairesis of Herophilus,” and the Jewish author Josephus proclaimed that he followed “the hairesis of the Pharisees.” But the Gnostics’ terms for themselves as the ideal religious people were racial or ethnic: “the immovable race,” “the seed of Seth,” “Those People.” On one level, this language reflects the Genesis narratives that the Gnostics used as the basis for their mythological works. Genesis tells stories of genealogical descent and of conflict between good and bad siblings (like Cain and Abel), and thus readers from antiquity to today have used these stories as maps for thinking about the interactions of the saved and their opponents throughout history. Augustine of Hippo, for example, used the stories of Genesis as the basis for The City of God, his own tale of two cities, that of God and that of this world. The Gnostics stand in this tradition, with The Revelation of Adam, as we have seen, taking this mode of interpretation to the greatest detail among Gnostic works.

More generally, the Gnostic vocabulary of race reflects the wider ancient practice of using ethnic or kinship language for groups that shared the same religious practices and seeing religious practice as part of the definition of a nation or kinship group. Ancient people lived in a world full of gods, which they associated with different ethnic groups; different peoples had different traditions of worshiping their own god or gods. The Jews were no different: they worshiped specifically the God of Israel. As Paula Fredriksen has put it, in antiquity “gods run in the blood,” and “cult is an ethnic designation,” while in turn “ethnicity is a cultic designation.” And so the language of ethnicity, race, and kinship came naturally to people when they spoke of their religious communities. Christians other than the Gnostics frequently claimed that they represented a “new race.”

Opponents of the Gnostics such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, however, charged that the Gnostics and the Valentinians used such language literally. They argued that the Gnostics considered religious identities to be predetermined and fixed: Gnostics, as the offspring or seed of Seth, were saved “by nature”; all other people, destined for destruction “by nature.” Salvation or damnation was genetically determined, we would say. So the fourth-century heresiologist Epiphanius describes the teachings of “the Sethians,” whose myth seems to be the Gnostic myth. Many modern scholars have accepted this interpretation. But in general the use of ethnic or kinship language to speak of religious identity in antiquity did not necessarily imply such deterministic beliefs: ancient people could imagine persons moving from one “nation” to another. People could turn away from their ancestral gods to the god of another people and even become part of their new ethnicity. As we have seen, several Gnostic texts appear to assume that people can choose to become a Gnostic and to apostatize after they have joined the sect. The Revelation of Adam appears to take a highly literal approach to genealogical descent in the Bible: the descendants of Noah’s son Shem represent Jews; those of Ham and Japheth, the Gentiles; while the primeval Gnostics form their own ethnic group, “Those People,” “the undominated race.” And yet even here the prospect of conversion appears in the 400,000 people who leave the descendants of Ham and Japheth and “enter some other land and sojourn with Those People who came into being out of great eternal acquaintance . . . The shadow of their [Those People’s] power will guard those who have sojourned with them for all evil deeds and all foul desires” (Ap. Adam 73:13–24). The 400,000 are made descendants of Seth, members of the undominated race, by adoption, which was regularly practiced in antiquity and served as a common metaphor for conversion.

The Gospel of Judas stands out from the other surviving Gnostic works because its narrative takes place not in the primordial era of Adam, Eve, and Noah, but during the ministry of Jesus, and it explicitly condemns rival Christian groups as vehemently as Irenaeus or any other heresiologist. Although the disciple Judas is far from perfect and appears destined to play a negative, if essential, role in the drama of salvation, he alone among the disciples knows Jesus’ true origin in the Barbêlo and receives from Jesus a revelation of the true facts concerning God, creation, and the future. The other disciples ignorantly celebrate the Eucharist in honor of their false god, and Jesus accuses them of leading numerous people astray, bringing them not to gnōsis and life, but to ignorance and death. They are priests sacrificing human beings on the altar of their own immorality and lack of knowledge. In this case, the Gnostic author is explicit about his views of other Christians: they are wrong.

Gnostic authors, then, were aware of other believers in Jesus whose views differed from theirs. In response, they presented their ideas as
correct interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures, which divine and authoritative figures had revealed to them. The Gnostics identified themselves with Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, and used the narratives of Genesis to identify themselves as the unique possessors of the true gnosis of God. They were the seed of Seth and the immovable race.

Ritual: Baptism and Mystical Ascent

A person did not have to be born to other descendants of Seth to become one of the chosen ones. Rather, one of the most distinctive features of the sect appears to have been its ritual of baptism, which incorporated one into the seed of Seth or immovable race and facilitated ascent to contemplation of the divine.\textsuperscript{36} According to The Revelation of Adam, the “seed” that will be saved consists of those who “will have received his name”—that is, Seth’s name—“upon the water” (83:5–6). Two Gnostic writings (First Thought in Three Forms and The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit) contain fairly extensive, albeit highly stylized and symbolic, depictions of this ritual, and others refer to some of its distinctive elements and presiding divinities or remark on its centrality to salvation.\textsuperscript{37} In The Secret Book According to John, for example, Forethought describes how she has saved human beings who were in “the prison of the body,” unaware of their divine origin and destiny. She calls a person out of “heavy sleep,” encourages him or her to “follow your root, which is myself, the compassionate,” and warns against the machinations of the demonic rulers. “And,” she proclaims at the climax, “I raised and sealed that person, with the light of the water of five seals, so that from henceforth death might not have power over that person” (Ap. John 31:3–25). The “water of five seals” refers to the distinctively Gnostic form of baptism, which one recognizes by its “five seals.”

What happened at this baptism? Oblique, symbolic references in First Thought in Three Forms suggest a series of ritual actions, which we can tell from other sources were followed by a hymnic response (48:1–49:6). In this work, First Thought—that is, the Barbēlō—says that first she has “stripped off” from the candidate chaos, darkness, and other elements of this world; the person is subsequently “clothed in shining light” and “dressed in a robe belonging to the robes of light.” Likewise, The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit refers to the “armor of loveliness and light” that the baptized person dons (Gos. Eg. IV 79:14–16). As in other forms of Christian baptism, the removal of clothing required for washing in water symbolizes the removal of an old state of existence, and special new clothing represents a transformed state. As First Thought in Three Forms presents the ritual, it seems that the person is “washed in the wellspring of the water of life” after putting on the ritual robe. Both of these steps, stripping/clothing and washing, take place under the direction of divine beings who are called “enrobers” and “baptists,” respectively. Additional steps follow, which also have presiding divinities, but their actual forms are less easy to discern. The baptized person is given “a throne from the throne of glory” by “the enthroners,” and then “the glorifiers” glorify the candidate “with the glory of the kinship.” Finally, “those who catch up” take the person “into the luminous places of that person’s kinship”—a reference perhaps to some form of mystical ascent and contemplation.\textsuperscript{38} This description ends with a reference to “the five seals,” which come from “the light of the mother, First Thought,” the Barbēlō.

Although the five seals are the most distinctive feature of Gnostic baptism, scholars do not know what they were, but there are some plausible ideas.\textsuperscript{39} In First Thought in Three Forms, there are five steps in baptism that also have sets of presiding divinities—enrobing, washing, enthroning, glorifying, and catching up to luminous places—and so it is possible that these steps are the five seals. Alternatively, when Forethought in the Secret Book refers to “the water of the five seals,” perhaps she refers to five baptisms in the water (that is, five separate immersions or washings). Non-Gnostic Christian works also speak of “sealing” in connection with baptism, most often referring to anointing with oil. Oil placed on a person, sometimes in the shape of the cross, marked the baptized as belonging to Christ and sealed him or her against malevolent powers. Five seals might, then, refer to five instances of anointing, perhaps corresponding to the five baptismal steps that appear in First Thought, or to the five senses and their associated body parts (eyes, ears, hands, mouth, nose), or to the five organs that corresponded to faculties of the soul (two eyes, two ears, mouth). On the other hand, there are few explicit references to the anointing of human beings in Gnostic works. The author of The Reality of the Rulers does say that the final savior, “the true human being, within a modeled form,” will “anoint” the saved people “with the ointment of eternal life” (Hyp. Arch. 96:33–97:4), and the visionary Gnostic in Zôstrianos reports being anointed during his mystical ascent (63:22). Of course, the anointed one (Christ) is a significant figure in the divine realm. But otherwise, anointing of human
being is not a prominent theme. In the end, the precise nature of the baptismal five seals remains a mystery.

Whatever the five seals were in practice, in The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, “the five seals” refers also to divine beings in the eternal realm (IV 66:25–26), although it is not clear which ones. In fact, the Holy Book recounts the Gnostic myth in a way that is useful to communal worship, as a prelude to an actual baptismal ceremony. Modern Christians in liturgically oriented churches may compare it with an Easter Vigil and its series of biblical readings that tell the history of salvation, interrupted by Psalms and canticles, and which culminate in baptism. In addition to incorporating the five seals into the spiritual fullness, the narrator in the Holy Book pauses several times in his narration of divine emanations to allow the incorruptible beings to give praise to those that are higher than they, and thus the work is filled with short hymns of praise and growing lists of divine beings worthy of glory. Those hearing the Holy Book being read could have joined in these hymns of praise. The Holy Book’s history of salvation culminates in the Great Seth’s incarnation in Jesus, through whom he “established the holy and the baptism that is higher than the heavens” (IV 75:10–17). The work concludes with a lengthy hymn in praise of Jesus and expressing gratitude for the benefits of baptism: “For this reason, the fragrance of life is within me: For it has been mixed with water to serve as a prototype for all the rulers” (III 67:22–24). The Gnostic myth may strike the modern reader as a complex and highly intellectual approach to God, but the Holy Book closely connects the myth to a ritual that be-stows salvation and communicates a religious disposition of heartfelt praise and gratitude.

Although it involved water, was instituted through Jesus as the Great Seth’s incarnation, and promised that its recipients “shall not taste death,” Gnostic baptism appears to have shared few features with the versions of baptism that one finds in other early Christian sources. For example, there are no references to baptism “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” as in the Acts of the Apostles (e.g., Acts 8:16) or “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” as in the Gospel of Matthew (28:19) and the Didache (7:1–3), a church manual from around 100 CE. The central characteristic of Gnostic baptism was the mysterious five seals, and it took place under the guidance of a distinctively Gnostic cast of divine beings, led by Mikheus, Mikhar, and Mnésinous. The Gnostics contrasted their water baptism with those of competing groups: others, they said, have “defiled the water of life” (Ap. Adam 84:17–18). They did not present their rite as a more advanced or more mystical version of a more generally available baptism. It was their peculiarly distinctive rite and must have had its own developmental history.

Likewise, Gnostics appear to have differed from other Christians by not observing a Eucharist or any other ritual meal that commemorated the death of Christ. After all, it was not primarily through his death that Jesus saved human beings, but by incarnating the savior (whether Forethought or the great Seth), awakening people to their true divine identity, and bringing the means of acquaintance with God. In fact, the Gnostic author of The Gospel of Judas severely criticizes the Eucharist as a ceremony that offers praise to Ialdabaoth, the god of this world. The sacrificial victim that other Christian leaders offer on their altars is not bread or the body of Christ, but the people that they lead astray into ignorance and death (39:18–40:1), “Stop sacrificing animals!” Jesus commands his wayward disciples, referring to the animals that symbolize their deceived Christian followers (41:1–2). Instead, the Holy Book associates baptism with the crucifixion of Jesus (as, of course, Christians like Paul did as well). According to this work, the great Seth established baptism “by the living reason-born Jesus, whom the great Seth put on (like a garment). And he nailed down the powers of the thirteen aeons and made them inactive; at his instigation they are fetched and they are removed” (Gos. Eg. IV 75:11–21). The phrase “nailed down” suggests that the crucifixion was the means by which the great Seth, incarnate in Jesus, defeated the lower powers.

Baptism, then, seems to have been the Gnostics’ central and defining ritual, and it is possible that a Gnostic may have experienced baptism not simply a single time as an initiation into the group, but multiple times as a means to increasingly higher knowledge of God. The composition of The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit as a mythic narration leading to baptism may suggest that baptism was a repeated ceremony, but even more intriguing is the Gnostic work Zöstrianos. This book tells the story of an ancient figure named Zöstrianos, who experiences a mystical journey through ascending aeons of the entirety until he reaches the Barbelo aeon and attempts to contemplate the Invisible Spirit. As he reaches higher levels of abstraction and knowledge, Zöstrianos undergoes repeated baptisms, in which he is washed with the waters that belong to each aeon. In fact, he is baptized five times into the self-originate aeon alone. After the fifth baptism, he “became divine” (Zös. 53:15–19).
Remarks such as a reference to Mikheus and Mikhar as “the powers that preside over living waters” (6:9–10) indicate that Zōstrianos is experiencing the same Gnostic baptism that we find in First Thought in Three Forms and The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit. Some interpreters conclude, then, that a Gnostic would have been baptized multiple times, perhaps facilitating or commemorating advances in his or her knowledge of Gnostic teachings and contemplative insight. Other readers, however, cite Zōstrianos’s multiple baptisms in spiritual aeons as evidence that baptism for the Gnostics was primarily if not exclusively a metaphor for the acquisition of acquaintance with God and other divine beings. And indeed, The Revelation of Adam explicitly identifies acquaintance (gnōsis) with baptism: the author says that the content of his book “is the secret acquaintance of Adam that he delivered to Seth and which, for those who are acquainted with eternal acquaintance through the agency of the reason-born beings and the incorruptible luminaries who emanated from the holy seed, is holy baptism” (Ap. Adam 85:22–29).

In this view, the Gnostics may not have observed a physical ritual of baptism at all, but instead promoted the gnōsis that they offered as the mystical equivalent of baptism.

I am inclined to think, however, that the Gnostics did in fact practice their ritual of baptism. For example, the Holy Book makes the most sense as a work that would have been ritually performed, and the criticism of other believers who have defiled baptismal waters suggest that the Gnostics quarreled with others over actual ritual activity involving water. Still, the meaning and value of baptism for them must have lay in the mystical acquaintance with God that it bestowed. The authors of the Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians in the New Testament could speak of the baptism that Pauline Christians practiced in grand, cosmological terms, suggesting, for example, that it raised Christians to sit with Christ “in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6). So, too, Zōstrianos portrays Gnostic baptism as both the means to and the metaphor for mystical ascent to contemplation of the aeons.

The Gnostics believed that the human intellect could experience gnōsis, that is, acquaintance with God, within this mortal life, however fleetingly. They portrayed this experience primarily as an ascent to higher knowledge that was both intellectual and cosmic.40 Intellectually, the Gnostic could ascend by contemplating increasingly abstract levels of existence, starting by understanding one’s own existence and that of other lower divine beings, advancing to the contemplation of higher aeons, ultimately the Barbelô, and attempting to gain some imperfect acquaintance with the ineffable first principle, the Invisible Spirit. This form of ascent can be traced back to Plato’s Symposium, which encourages the educated man to ascend to contemplation of Beauty itself by loving and understanding increasingly more abstract objects of desire (from the body of a single beautiful boy, to the beautiful body per se, to the beautiful soul, to the principles that govern the soul, and so on to Beauty itself). Because Plato believed that erotic desire and intellectual knowledge go together, a man’s desire for a beautiful body can be transformed into love for a beautiful soul and then into intellectual enjoyment of ideas. Plato presented the final vision of Beauty itself as coming to the contemplative person gratuitously—“all of a sudden”—and yet after a long period of intellectual effort.41

Cosmically, Gnostic texts portray the intellects of human heroes (Zōstrianos, Marsanes, and “Foreigner” in works named for them) as leaving their bodies and journeying upward through the heavenly realms, guided and instructed by angels or other heavenly beings. Here the Gnostics are indebted to Jewish apocalypses such as 2 Enoch that similarly describe pious figures being guided through heavenly realms by one or more angels and eventually gaining a vision of God himself. In the case of 2 Enoch the hero’s righteousness in following the Jewish Law and remaining faithful to the God of Israel qualifies him for his special ascent and tour of the heavens, and he returns from his experience to exhort others to righteous living and fidelity to God. The combination of these two traditions—Platonism’s intellectual ascent through increasing abstraction and apocalyptic Judaism’s cosmic ascent through heavenly realms—is a distinctive feature of Gnostic mysticism. (A Platonist example of a heavenly journey may be seen in Cicero’s description of Scipio’s dream.)42 Gnostic authors assert both that the human intellect has the capacity to understand increasingly abstract levels of being and ultimately God and that divine revelation and guidance is necessary for such human contact with the ultimate principle.

In Zōstrianos, then, the hero engages in a process of study and contemplation that requires his own effort and mental concentration, and he follows a series of angels and other divine beings who guide him upward into the heavenly realms. As Zōstrianos himself tells the story, “by means of intellect” he was able to turn himself away from material things and toward spiritual realities, and he engaged in a program of asceticism, philosophical study, and teaching (1:10–27). Such a program
is both necessary and insufficient for acquaintance with God: it helps Zöstrianos to see the “pettiness” of ordinary embodied existence and to formulate questions about higher reality, but it leaves him “anguished and depressed,” still seeking the “realm of repose” beyond “the perceptible world” (2:24–3:28). At this point the “angel of acquaintance” appears to Zöstrianos and invites him to pass through the lower realms and ascend to the entirety. The hero abandons his physical body, boards a luminous cloud, and undertakes a complex upward journey in which he meets several divine revealers, undergoes repeated baptisms, and gains knowledge of increasingly abstract levels of reality, up to the Barbēlō. At the apex of his journey Zöstrianos seeks to understand the Invisible Spirit itself, but this act is described as “reckless” (128:19–129:1), not so dissimilar from Wisdom’s original failed attempt to think on her own. The act may be “reckless” because ultimate acquaintance with the Invisible Spirit must come, as in Platonic mysticism, not by human initiative, but “all of a sudden,” as a gift. In any event, Zöstrianos then descends and returns to his physical body. Like the Jewish hero Enoch, Zöstrianos then preaches the message of moral reformation and acquaintance to other people (130:13–132:5). In this account, Zöstrianos gains mystical contact with the divine through his own ascetic and intellectual efforts and through revelation from divine beings, but falls short of ultimate gnōsis with the highest God.

The roles of divine guidance and revelation and human effort and capacity are not at odds in Gnostic mysticism because the human intellect possesses the same structure as that of the divine entirety. The human mind is a kind of miniature representation of the aeons that emanate from the ultimate God, as in fact we share in the spiritual essence that somehow passed from the entirety through Ialdabaōth to us. For this reason, the Gnostic could also contemplate God by contemplating his or her own intellect, as does the hero of The Foreigner. The Foreigner, literally, “One of Another Kind,” is a mythical human being, perhaps even the ancient human Seth, whom the Bible identifies as “another seed,” that is, not of the same kind as Abel (Genesis 5:3). In the fourth century, Epiphanius claimed to know Christians (“Archontics”) who called Seth “the Foreigner.” In any event, our Foreigner writes to his disciple Messeos (perhaps a pun meaning “Middle Man” or “Intermediary”) and describes his own mystical ascent to the Barbēlō aeon and the series of revelatory discourses that he received from the eternal being Iouēl. Unlike Zöstrianos, the Foreigner does not experience baptisms in the aeons that he visits, and the revelations that he receives concern only the highest aeons, particularly the Barbēlō. When the Foreigner reaches the highest aspect of reality below the Invisible Spirit, Iouēl concludes his discourses with a promise that the Foreigner will receive a revelation of the Unknownable One after a period of one hundred years (56:21–27).

Rather than being discouraged by this news, the Foreigner spends the next century preparing himself through interior deliberation, and his work is rewarded when he is taken up out of his body to “a holy place,” where he can see the eternal beings and aeons of which Iouēl had spoken one hundred years earlier (57:27–58:38). Now eternal beings instruct the Foreigner to practice a form of mystical ascent that must have been more realistic than a heavenly journey for an actual Gnostic of the second or third century. The Foreigner learns that he must turn within himself and contemplate sequentially the structures of his own mind through increasingly abstract stages of interior “withdrawal” (59:10–60:12). An allusion to such a practice occurs in Zöstrianos, which states that the saved person can “withdraw inward. For such a person becomes god and has withdrawn into god” (44:20–22). Zeke Masur has called this mental withdrawal an “act of contemplative self-reversion”; human beings can perform it because some stamp or remnant of the Invisible Spirit’s initial act of self-knowledge, which resulted in the emanation of the entirety, persists in the human intellect. As he performs this self-contemplation, the Foreigner gains acquaintance with aspects of the Barbēlō aeon (blessedness, vitality, and reality) by understanding himself—“as I really am!” He discovers the Barbēlō as “that which existed within me” (60:13–61:8). He then receives a vision of the Invisible Spirit—in a sudden, gratuitous way, as in Plato’s Symposium—but his desire to understand or to grasp the ultimate God is met with a speech that describes at length the unknowable nature of that God (61:8–67:37). Ultimately, the Foreigner learns that he paradoxically understands the Invisible Spirit by not comprehending it. As an eternal being tells him, “Do not [attempt to] comprehend it: for this is impossible. Rather if, through a luminous thought, you should happen to understand it, be uncomprehending of it” (60:8–10). Ultimately, the Foreigner ascends to acquaintance by journeying through his own intellect, and he receives gnōsis of the ultimate God as a gift.

The account of Marsanes’ ascent in the work of the same name is highly fragmentary. Like Zöstrianos and the Foreigner, Marsanes ascends through such aeons as the Barbēlō to a nondiscursive vision of the
The Myth and Rituals of the Gnostic School of Thought

Gnostic mysticism left a legacy that extended far beyond the Gnostic school of thought. According to Porphyry, *Zostrionos* and *The Foreigner* were among the works known to the great philosopher Plotinus and his students. Plotinus devoted many of his seminar meetings to disproving the ideas of these works, and one of his students, Amelius, composed a (now lost) forty-chapter refutation of *Zostrionos.* The ongoing research of Zéke Mazur suggests not only that Plotinus rejected Gnostic ideas, but also that much of Plotinus's own account of how one achieves mystic union with the One is indebted to Gnostic teachings about mystical ascent. Plotinus's work in turn influenced numerous later Christian mystics, including Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius.

The Origins and Character of the Gnostic School of Thought

Having examined Gnostic myth and ritual, albeit briefly, we can consider more sociological questions that interest modern scholars, such as how the Gnostic sect originated. Every ancient observer of the Gnostics (including the non-Christian Porphyry) identifies them as Christians, and nearly all of their surviving writings contain distinctively Christian symbols or references, such as Christ, Jesus, and the apostle Paul. Irenaeus and his fellow Christian heresiologists claimed that the Gnostic sect originated as a false offshoot from true Christianity, but, as we shall see, this claim itself functioned as a powerful strategy of self-differentiation, and few modern scholars believe that there ever was a single true form of Christianity, from which other forms, like the Gnostics, deviated. In the twentieth century some historians of religion argued that an ancient myth about a Primal Man and a divine redeemer originated in eastern regions such as India and then traveled west into the Mediterranean basin through Persia. This original Gnostic myth was neither Jewish nor Christian, but when Jewish, Christian, and pagan intellectuals encountered it, they adapted it to their own traditions. Scholars eventually abandoned this hypothesis for two reasons. First, they grew dissatisfied with understanding a religion or a myth by tracing its motifs back to their alleged origins: religious people borrow from other traditions all the time, and this borrowing in and of itself does not explain why and from where new religious movements arise. Second, many of the sources that historians used to reconstruct the ancient Gnostic "redeemer myth" turned out to be later than the Gnostic texts themselves, sometimes several centuries later.
Instead, many scholars today believe that the Gnostic myth arose among disaffected, philosophically inclined Jews even before they learned about Jesus or Christianity; subsequently, Gnostics added Christian elements like Jesus to their beliefs. It is important to be precise about what this hypothesis of a Jewish origin for "Gnosticism" claims. Certainly all of the earliest Christian groups originated among Jews: Jesus was a Jew, as were all his disciples, and the proclamation of a messiah and son of the God of Israel would make sense first of all only among Jews. Even the mission to the Gentiles was the work of Jews like Paul. But this is not what the hypothesis of the Gnostic sect’s Jewish origin means. Rather, the proponents of this theory argue that Jews created the basic Gnostic myth before they had heard of Jesus (even if they may have done so after Jesus’ death and the birth of faith in him). The Gnostic myth, according to this view, was a development among Jews independent of any proclamation of Jesus as the savior. Gnostics added references to Jesus to the myth as they became aware of and interacted with Christians.

As evidence for the Jewish origin of the Gnostic sect, scholars point to Gnostic literature’s intense interest in Genesis and a few other books of the Septuagint and comparatively little use of the emerging New Testament. Many of the Gnostics’ interpretations of Genesis find parallels in Philo and later rabbinic literature, and Gnostic works do not talk much about Jesus, who is subordinated to Seth. Jesus, it is argued, appears to be tacked on as the savior. As we have seen, he is not always explicitly identified as the human being who embodies the savior, and he is variously seen as the incarnation of Forethought/First Thought or the great Seth. Scholars argue, too, that certain Gnostic writings were originally not at all Christian, but then Christianized later. For example, most of The Secret Book According to John has no mention of specifically Christian figures and concepts; instead, Christ, the disciple John, and other elements from the Christian Gospels appear only in a brief frame story at the beginning and the end of the book. It is suggested that the Christian frame story was added to an originally non-Christian work. Scholars also claim that The Revelation of Adam has no Christian features at all. According to this view, the original Gnostics were Jews who turned against key elements of their tradition, and subsequently the Gnostic school of thought became increasingly Christian.

Why would ancient Jews have decided that the God of Israel, the God of their Bible, was actually the evil and ignorant Ialdabaôth and that Moses was a flawed and confused author? Scholars have suggested that some Jews may have become disillusioned with the promises of God after Jews suffered defeats by the Romans in the wars of 66–70 and 132–135 CE. After the second of these wars, the Romans expelled the Jews from the holy city of Jerusalem, which they reorganized as a pagan city called Aelia Capitolina. Alternatively, perhaps some Jews wanted to distance themselves from Jewish tradition after Jews in Alexandria and other cities rose up in defense of their rights and were brutally crushed in 115–117. All of these experiences may have caused thoughtful Jews to experience a “crisis of history.” Was it still possible to trust in the God of the Bible? Jewish intellectuals may also have become increasingly embarrassed by the God of Genesis, who walks around in an earthly garden and displays such human characteristics as ignorance (“Adam, where are you?”), anger, and regret. Platonist philosophy convinced them that a truly perfect God would be remote, entirely spiritual, and beyond all emotions—hence, the Invisible Spirit, who exists beyond the realm of the imperfect creator Ialdabaôth.

The hypothesis that the Gnostic school of thought originated in Judaism apart from Christianity has some attractive features. It accounts for the ambivalent authority that Gnostics granted to the Septuagint, and it avoids Irenaeus’s model of heretical deviancy (at least from Christianity). But it is not convincing for several reasons. First, many of the parallels to Gnostic exegesis in Jewish literature come from writings that must be dated to centuries after the Gnostics. Second, it is not certain that writings such as the Secret Book did pass through a literary history of Christianization, and we have seen that even The Revelation of Adam appears to refer, albeit obliquely, to the sufferings of Jesus (77:4–18). The argument that certain Gnostic literary works lack “Christian” features and do not dwell on Jesus enough presupposes a certain view of what is genuinely Christian or how early Christians ought to write and measures Gnostic literature against that presupposition. One thinks of the Letter of James in the New Testament, which similarly displays few “Christian” characteristics. Instead, like James, Gnostic writings demonstrate that Christians expressed their beliefs in diverse ways. Plus, works like the Secret Book and The Revelation of Adam seek to retell the stories of Genesis, and so their authors may have purposefully avoided explicit references to Jesus. The Gospel of Judas is undeniably Christian and, along with the Secret Book, is one of the earliest datable Gnostic works. Its long revelation from Jesus to Judas, dealing with
creation and the primeval period, similarly lacks distinctively Christian characters.

There are no signs in Gnostic literature that its authors were disillusioned with the God of Israel due to political catastrophes, and the example of Philo shows that commitment to Platonism and a Platonic view of God need not lead to considering the God of Genesis demonic. One must ask whether it is plausible to imagine Jews deciding that the God of the Bible is wicked, not merely subordinate to a higher principle, solely out of disillusionment of any kind. The Fourth Book of Ezra, an originally Jewish work of around 100 CE, wrestles with the problem of God's justice in the wake of the political misfortunes of the Jews: Ezra complains bitterly, but the work asserts God's judgment and love for Israel, as inscrutable as his ways of showing these may be. It seems more likely that reconceiving the God of Israel as the wicked and foolish Ialdabaoth required also the proclamation of some new insight that called into question the value of the Torah while also drawing from it, as can be seen in, say, the letters of Paul or the Fourth Gospel. Finally, the clear distinction between Judaism and Christianity assumed by much current scholarly discussion probably did not exist in the early decades of the second century; rather, this was one of the distinctions that authors such as Justin Martyr were seeking to create. The Gnostics may in fact exemplify the nonexistence of the categories “Judaism” and “Christianity.” For them Jesus made a difference, but not the same kind of difference as he did for other Christians.

When I and other scholars argue that the Gnostic school of thought originated as a Christian movement, we are not endorsing Irenaeus's model of early Christian history. That is, we do not believe that Gnostics deviated from an originally singular and uniform Christianity, introducing innovations into the message of the original followers of Jesus. Instead, we imagine that the ministry, death, and resurrection appearances of Jesus fostered a variety of religious responses, which developed and interacted with each other in diverse ways. One of the responses to which Jesus gave rise was the Gnostic school of thought.

Historians debate as well what kind of group the Gnostics may have formed. Was their community a tight-knit band of committed believers, or a loose association of mystics, or what? Very few scholars dispute that the literary works that I have assigned to the Gnostic school of thought form some sort of literary tradition (which they have usually called “Sethianism”), but the writings give us very little social information about the people who might lie behind them. Irenaeus calls the group a “school of thought,” which may indicate merely a shared intellectual tradition, and he and other ancient authors give the names of prominent Valentinian teachers, but do not do so for the Gnostics. Porphry does supply some names of persons who might be Gnostics. For these reasons, some scholars have doubted that any group lies behind these writings at all: instead, isolated individuals with mythological and cosmological interests wrote and read these works. The shared motifs and characters indicate merely that the writers borrowed from and elaborated on earlier texts. Another proposal is that the Gnostics resembled what modern sociologists call an “audience cult.” Like modern persons devoted to UFOs and other paranormal phenomena, Gnostics may have gathered occasionally to discuss their ideas and produced and read works that engaged with one another, but they did not look to Gnostic literature or a Gnostic community as their exclusive or primary mode of religious identity.

At the other end of the spectrum, some historians envision a robust independent religious group with a full ritual life and complex development over centuries. Based on a close analysis of the writings and the detection of layers of editing and revisions in some of them, John Turner has proposed a literary history of Gnostic works and a corresponding social history of the community in which they were produced. He imagines a group that emerged from originally separate circles devoted to Barbēlo and Seth; later joined with Christians who shared their interests in cosmology, biblical exegesis, and baptismal rituals; and then, as proto-orthodoxy gained strength, moved apart from Christianity and became more explicitly Platonist. Elements of Turner's reconstruction seem very plausible—especially the later turn away from other Christians to more engagement with Platonist circles—but most scholars have been reluctant to be so precise about the history of the Gnostics.

Even if the evidence for a full-fledged social description and history of the Gnostics is lacking, there are several reasons to think that the Gnostic school of thought, at least at certain points in its history, consisted of a fairly well-defined community of persons for whom the group provided their primary mode of religious activity. Many of the Gnostic works describe or allude to a shared ritual—baptism—and they describe adherents with peculiar and distinctive terms—“seed of Seth,” immovable race, “Those People.” The Revelation of Adam and The Gospel of Judas include polemics against other religious people, differentiating an
“us” from “them.” The Gnostics must never have been very numerous, however, and as we shall see, the religious climate among persons devoted to Jesus became increasingly distant from their unique combination of Jewish, Christian, and Platonist traditions. Other Christian groups sought a more distinctively “Christian” identity, one more clearly different from “Judaism” and from traditional philosophy.

In this chapter, I have tried to sketch the basic beliefs and practices of the Gnostic school of thought, using only the evidence that the procedure that I described in Chapter 2 gathers. In this effort I have had to omit numerous details and leave aside the many problems of interpretation and consistency among the sources that scholars of “Gnosticism” find both fascinating and frustrating. Why, for example, do Zephyrius and The Foreigner transpose two crucial constituent aeons of the Barbelo while agreeing on nearly everything else? Instead of exploring such detailed questions, we have seen that the overall Gnostic message is one of hope and salvation in Jesus, the incarnation of the divine savior, and that many of the Gnostic beliefs that modern people find most bizarre make sense both within the Gnostic worldview and within the spectrum of views that prevailed among intellectuals of the second and third centuries. The Gnostic myth, along with the rituals of baptism and ascent, represented a creative response to the life and message of Jesus of Nazareth. It was one attempt to craft a new religious movement out of the Jewish Bible and contemporary philosophy, in the light of the experiences of acquaintance that certain people had in the wake of Jesus’ appearance. In retrospect, we can see it as one attempt to invent Christianity, a religion about Jesus Christ.

More than this, the Gnostic myth was one of the earliest such inventions of Christianity. Karen King points out that, as far as we know based on surviving literature, The Secret Book According to John “was the first Christian writing to formulate a comprehensive narrative of the nature of God, the origin of the world, and human salvation.” Although the Gnostic myth surely developed in interaction with other claims about Jesus and the God of Israel, we should not understand it primarily as a reaction to or rebellion against some “mainstream” Christian thought, which did not exist in the early second century. Instead, the Secret Book set the agenda for subsequent Christian theology. Confronted with the Gnostics’ compelling narrative, other Christian intel-