

# THEOLOGY UNBOUND

WORD IN THE WORLD  
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY GRADUATE JOURNAL OF  
THEOLOGICAL STUDIES  
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The purpose of this Journal is to engage theology in the issues and realities of contemporary religious life in a secular, pluralistic society undergoing fundamental institutional change. In doing this, we solicit papers not only from graduate students in theology but also from faculty members who wish to participate in our endeavours. Relevant work from other disciplines will be considered. Although our primary call is for papers, we also solicit personal reflections, stories, artwork, poetry, and any other material operative within the different modes of the theological project. Former graduates of the Theological Studies program are especially encouraged to submit material for consideration. Submissions should be made to: Word in the World, Annex D, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve West, Montréal, Québec, Canada, H3Q 1M8. We require two hard copies as well as an electronic copy of the paper. Please do not send originals. If you have an idea for a paper and wish to talk to one of our editorial staff, please visit us at [www.wordintheworld.ca](http://www.wordintheworld.ca) or email us at: [witw@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:witw@alcor.concordia.ca). We reserve the right to determine the suitability of each paper for the Journal. Editorial modifications may be made for language, space considerations, or for thematic unity, although we are always careful to maintain the integrity of the author's work.

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# DEDICATION: VAUGHN THOMASSIN

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**T**his issue of Word in the World has been respectfully dedicated to an unsung member of the previous journal committee who unfortunately lost his battle with cancer this past year. **Vaughn Thomassin's** contributions to Word in the World were invaluable, to say the least. Vaughn was involved with the editing process of the last issue of the journal and he made a few artistic contributions as well. Vaughn aided in the area of design and contributed the graphic for Jean Daou's article. He also assisted with the very tedious task of proof reading the final texts - not a glorious job but one for which he did not hesitate to generously offer his time. What is remarkable about Vaughn is that he contributed all of these things to the journal out of the goodness of his heart, which is what made him such a special person.

Honour his memory by generously donating to:

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# WORD IN THE WORLD

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*AwaDembele-Yeno*



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# WORD FROM THE CHAIR

Calogero A. Miceli

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As Chairperson of Word in the World, it is my pleasure to present to you our latest issue: 'Theology Unbound' Volume 3, Number 1.

With this issue, Word in the World enters into a new phase of its history. Since our last issue, the reins of the journal have been passed down from one committee to an entirely new one. Along with the transition have come great strides of improvement and great successes. Following in the steps of our predecessors, the 2009-2010 Journal Committee continues to build upon the legacy, history, and tradition that is Word in the World.

We have, in the past year, continued the efforts of the previous committee to bring the journal to a higher level of sustainability. In order to achieve this we have printed fewer copies of the journal, used only recyclable materials, and have brought our issues to a new eco-friendly platform via the internet. Our new website **[www.wordintheworld.ca](http://www.wordintheworld.ca)** is an extraordinary achievement for the members of this committee and we hope that it will ensure a more sustainable journal as well as allow open access of our articles, making them available to a wider audience.

Along with all of these achievements, the new committee has also reached out to

other academic journals, namely *Scriptura: Nouvelle Série*, an academic journal based at l'Université de Montréal and *KannenBright: Concordia University Undergraduate Journal of Theological Studies*. KannenBright has recently begun to grow as a journal within the department of Theological Studies at Concordia University. Having two academic journals stemming from the same Theology department at Concordia University is a testament to the high level of academic integrity of the students and this department. We wish both *Scriptura* and *KannenBright* much success.

The future of Word in the World looks bright and with each new committee the journal continues to grow and blossom. I have no doubt that this academic journal will continue to publish peer-reviewed academic articles on a yearly basis for many years to come.

Finally, I would like to thank the entire Word in the World Executive, Robert Smith, Elisa Pistilli, Matte Downey, Lily-Catherine Johnston, and Colin Babin for their dedication and hard work. Also, I would like to thank Jean Daou and Sara Terreault for their wisdom and guidance throughout the entire process. All of your help was invaluable for this publication.

On behalf of the entire Word in the World Committee, I would also like to extend a

word of appreciation to all those who have contributed to this journal and made this issue possible. A special thank you to the following for their generous financial support: *Concordia Council on Student Life (CCSL), Concordia University Alumni Association (CUAA), Concordia University Graduate Student's Association (GSA), Department of Theological Studies, Theological Studies Graduate and Undergraduate Associations (TSGSA & TSUSA), and the School of Graduate Studies.*

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The Executive Committee would like to take this opportunity to thank the people who contributed their time and expertise so that this issue would come to fruition. Special thanks go to:

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# EDITORIAL

Elisa Pistilli

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This issue of Word in the World was inspired by a graduate conference organized by the Theological Studies Graduate Students Association (TSGSA) “Theology Outside the Classroom” held March 26 & 27<sup>th</sup> 2009, at Concordia. The conference was conceived as a way to open the discussion between students in theological studies and other disciplines.

We at Word in the World (WITW) feel that the conference was the recited embodiment of our journal’s role in the Concordia Community; rendering it the perfect place to harvest great thoughts on the open communication between Theology and the other fields of study one can adopt in a University setting. The team came up with the title *Theology Unbound* as a metaphor for the limitlessness to the interplay between disciplines and genres that lend themselves to theological interpretation.

This issue begins with an excerpt directly from that 2009 conference by **David K. Goodin** who examines the theological groundwork for a reformulation of today’s economic market. The next two articles deal with the origins of Gnosticism in relation to biblical interpretation and one of the Nag Hamadi discoveries—with special attention to *the Apocryphon of John*. In her article **Lindsey Sandul** argues that the origins of it can be mapped back to pre-Christian era. Similarly **Robert Smith**

examines the Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian precursors that influenced Gnosticism as is especially evident in the *Apocryphon of John*. Finally **Melanie Perialis** examines the influence of pre-existing art practices –pagan and Judaic—on early Christian art found in Roman Catacombs.

Next we have two reflective contributions showcasing the indiscriminate nature of a theological approach. **R. Joseph Capet** involves the reader in an interaction with a sculpture in the New York Public library and **Martha Elias Downey** offers a unique and inspiring exchange with Psalm 127. A short story by **Martin Sartini Garner** follows in which the reader is invited to observe a bible study group from an insider’s perspective.

Capping off this issue are four poems; each poet—**R. Joseph Capet**, **Mary Gedeon Harvan** and **Sam Logiudice**—offers a personal perspective on scripture and spirituality that truly takes “Theology Outside the Classroom.”

The WITW team is very proud to offer this issue to our community, and we hope you enjoy reading and interacting with it as much as we enjoyed producing it!



*Drakensburg*

*Martha Elias Downey*

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# GOD OF THE MARKET PLACE: JOHN STUART MILL AND MAXIMOS CONFESSOR ON ECONOMIC VIRTUE

15

David K. Goodin

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It is a curious happenstance of history that, when ethics are spoken of in a public forum today, it is now necessary to frame the arguments within an appeal for consensus before an audience of radically separated individuals whose only obvious association with their fellows is through economic life. Very few of us think of ourselves as part of an interdependent community where each person has direct and immediate moral obligations to everyone else. Rather, people now have to be convinced to act one way or another, and usually such decisions are measured against the relative costs to one's own self in terms of time and money. In countless daily scenarios personal ethical identity is becoming increasingly 'economic' along these lines. Worse and all too often a disquieting internal dialogue accompanies such reflections with questions like, *what's in it for me?* Or, *why should I care?*

Clearly and most thankfully, not everyone is that cynical. Altruistic compassion, charity and philanthropy still define the best of us. Yet it is undeniable that the monstrosity Thomas Hobbes saw in the heart of humanity—an impulse for an exclusionary selfishness coupled with an inclination toward social indifference when it does not advantage one's calculated aims—has indeed clawed up from the depths of our nature and now reveals itself all too often in society.

Greed is good. This was the unabashed motto of the business elite of the 1980's, and now even among ordinarily decent upright citizens Hobbes' monster tries to make itself unnoticed within their moral conscience. It disguises itself as libertarianism and proudly proclaims its radical individualism as birthright to the divine Image. Just as God is sovereign over Himself, it says, so each rational mind is also the sole and unqualified master over him- or herself.

This idea was promoted by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who declared that "over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."<sup>1</sup> Mill also went on to proclaim that government should be restrained from imposing itself upon personal liberty, excepting only to guarantee the physical protection of others in civil society.<sup>2</sup> No other moral claims can be made on a citizen. Rather, each person is solely responsible for their greater wellbeing; they are to be the author of their own lives—for better or worse. While this may seem theologically

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<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 1991) 14.

<sup>2</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 15. He gives here examples such as requiring persons to give evidence in a court of law when needed, to provide for a common defence, and to save another's life whenever it can be said that it was "obviously" in that person's direct and immediate ability to effect.

benign,<sup>3</sup> Mill's libertarianism manifests itself today as an inclination to measure personal moral responsibility to others against what are perceived to be the harsh economic realities governing a society of such individuals. Utilitarianism is a 'me first' system of ethics that sets forth a first principle of self-chosen happiness, and sees its upshot as allowing for the greatest good for the greatest number of people in a society of free citizens happily co-existing with whatever forms of enlightened or base hedonism appeals to them. But when Mill's utopian vision became married to economics, human life itself was devalued and the societal pathways to personal prosperity began to be closed-off to an increasing number of citizens.

It will be helpful to now move from abstract commentary to a concrete illustrative example. Case in point of this economic measure of human life can be found in the difference between the public health advisories that define 'maximum contaminant level guidelines' for drinking water safety, and the actual legally enforceable standards for water quality. In the United States up to 5 parts per billion (ppb) of the carcinogenic pollutant Benzene is allowed to be present in the drinking water, yet the non-enforceable public health guideline for the same pollutant is *zero* ppb—a recommend level based solely on medical research on the adverse health effects associated with this

carcinogen.<sup>4</sup> The difference between the legal standard and the health guideline arises from the cost of monitoring and treating the public water supply versus the expected increased occurrences of cancer caused by the Benzene. An 'acceptable risk' trade-off has been calculated to balance public health concerns against impacts to the overall economy. This is true face of the economic utilitarianism today—the greatest good for the greatest number, just not everyone. Some people will die of cancer, sure. But others will prosper economically, and most other people will be able to dodge the 'statistical-bullet' of having a little extra Benzene in their water supply. It is just one of the countless trade-offs that define life in the modern world. This kind of utilitarian moral calculus is found not only with national policy-makers but also with those citizens who vote their pocketbook and not what their moral conscience tells them. The cycle thereby perpetuates itself.

It might be asked at this point whether this is just the difference being drawn here is between theological idealism and just being realistic. Exposing the historical legacy behind the development of the modern moral conscience such as the kind that would consider this particular question is what in fact frames much of this essay. In brief, what this paper seeks to reveal is that the Western moral conscience derives from a misbegotten social experiment in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England, and that the invented social institutions of that time have altered and damaged the moral conscience of modern society. People are not naturally Hobbesian. Rather, the origin of the cynicism that sets one person apart from another is not true human nature but a decidedly unnatural cultural invention

<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Orthodox Christian theology presents the Image of God as Trinitarian, in that God's personhood is always relational; see Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001) 178. The human person is called to reveal and fulfill the birthright of the Image within a community of persons, or as stated by Gregory Baum: "Christian individualism is thus essentially social" (Gregory Baum, *Karl Polanyi on Ethics and Economics* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996] 32). Mill's conception of an exclusive dignity apart from communitarian responsibility is therefore decidedly unchristian.

<sup>4</sup> The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), "National Primary Drinking Water Regulations—May 2009," Environmental Protection Agency, <http://www.epa.gov/ogwdw000/consumer/pdf/mcl.pdf>.



now plaguing society. At the heart of this social experiment were particular conceptions of the 'Laws of God and Nature' that formed key justifications for the self-regulating market to organize society. This is what destroyed the previous social institutions that had brought people together in communities of interdependence and mutualism. The market in turn inculcated into the public psyche foreign ideas of competitive exclusion and economic isolationism from one's neighbours. This is the modern economic era as we know it today.

For this very reason, the historical foundations of the modern market economy need to be brought to the fore and critically examined. Only then can these very same ideas about the Laws of God and Nature now operating at the heart of the modern market economy be reviewed and revised, only then may ethical arguments regarding improving human welfare be presented in public forums without being dismissed out of hand as hopelessly sentimental and idealistic by the public at large. And so this is where this essay necessarily begins.

### Historical Origins

Economists would say they no longer look back to the religious foundations of the market economy set forth by John Stuart Mill, taking from him only his utilitarian ethics which were actualized into the prevailing social reality. Yet in this case it is not possible to separate the chaff of history from the wheat. The religious foundations that were used to ground economics as a form of applied social ethics are still operable in the market economy today. The theology at the heart of this system must be reordered if the social ethics promoted in a market economy are to be redirected to the true betterment of human welfare. To this end a competing view of the natural and social

economy by Maximus Confessor (580-662 CE)<sup>5</sup> will be brought forward to challenge Mill. But first, the history of the development of the modern market economy must be outlined.

The problem of reconciling collective human behaviour with what were presumed to be the Laws of God and Nature became a particular problem after the age of monarchs. The utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill would come to dominance as the solution to this problem for the sole reason his philosophy alone had a means of implementation to carry it into widespread popular acceptance. This came about when William Stanley Jevons proposed 'marginal utility' as an extension of Mill's utilitarian ethics in his 1863 treatise, "A General Mathematical Theory of Political Economy." With this development, the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill became a central ideological foundation supporting the new self-regulating market system that was radically transforming society in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Mill, while generally considered agnostic or at least rather hostile to the idea of super-naturalism, nevertheless did make a direct appeal to religious sensibilities when he declared that, "if it be a true belief that God desires, above all things, the happiness of his creatures, and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other."<sup>6</sup> This understanding of natural theology would become the ideal for society itself, and it was translated into economic reality through the marginal utility dynamic that drives Adam Smith's 'free hand' of the market. Such an analogy conjures the image of the Hand of God distributing

<sup>5</sup> He is sometimes identified as Maximus the Confessor, or Maximus Confessor.

<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1979) 21.

divine plenitude and blessings to those of proper virtue through collective (but impersonal) human agency, as well as a stern Hand to rebuke those without the personal fortitude to be hard workers. Succinctly put, economic utilitarianism is applied theological ethics—pure and simple. It is an ordering of society to accord with what Mill presumed to be the natural law. Worse, this particular utopian vision actively promoted a “new creed [that] was materialistic and believed that all human problems could be resolved given an unlimited amount of material commodities” extracted from nature.<sup>7</sup> This is the modern consumerist economy which continues to cause so much damage to the biosphere.

Mill gave a means to reconcile the apparent theodicy of the natural and social worlds, as well as an easy way to rationalize away personal economic decisions that cause further harm to people and nature. Both would become de-personalized as abstracted commodities of labour and land aggregated in the marketplace. In the transformative alchemy of economic efficiency, it could be imagined that the greatest good for the greatest number of people would in fact happen in the long run. The concept of a market society allows people to look past the present evils of dehumanizing poverty and biological impoverishment to a hopeful utopian vision of some future perfect society. This project to ‘improve’ society continues overseas and is greatly furthered by globalization. Developing nations are each brought into the formal economy by liquidating their natural resources for marketable commodities to exchange for consumerist goods; traditional livelihoods and culture are being destroyed to create an indigenous labour force for furtherance of the same.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001) 42.

This reveals a subtle but very ominous change to utilitarian theory. It is no longer the greatest good for the greatest number, but rather what is perceived to be the greatest good for the global economy itself that is now the principle criterion and ultimate arbiter for all these decisions affecting lives at home and abroad. We have surrendered our collective wills to the God of the Marketplace.

### Understanding Social and Economic History

A few words must be said of a central figure in the following discussion. Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) was a renowned economic historian and cultural anthropologist. Curiously though, his name is reviled by some economists today.<sup>8</sup> The underlying dispute hinges on whether ‘market-less’ societies have ever existed in history, and is ostensibly about human nature itself. Are we first and foremost the self-interested, calculating animal *Homo economicus*? Or are we communitarian and social beings who look to our relationships with others as the primary orientation in life? The problem is that, if Polanyi is right, much of economic science rests on dubious premises about basic human motivations. While a full technical discussion regarding the former point is beyond the scope of this paper, the conception of human nature as a social being is at the very core

<sup>8</sup> In examining this debate, Tandy and Neale (1994) find that the central issue is most often not what Polanyi actually said, but *how* he said it—it is for the most part a question of style and nuance. Polanyi created essays that sought to persuade an audience of both academics and the general public to accept a particular interpretation of facts. And so, “many of his interpretations appear as unqualified statements when such phrasings as ‘probable’ or ‘more likely than’ would have been more suitable for his audience” of economists (David Tandy and Walter Neale, “Karl Polanyi’s Distinctive Approach to Social Analysis and the Case of Ancient Greece: Ideas, Criticisms, Consequences” in *From Political Economy to Anthropology: Situating Economic Life in Past Societies* [Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994] 10f.).

of what is argued herein.<sup>9</sup> And so, and in brief, it should be kept in mind that the scholarship that has emerged since the time Polanyi wrote does suggest that he was indeed right to challenge a very narrow conception of the human person as merely a solitary profit-oriented animal. Rather, developing social relations and prestige among peers is indeed a foremost concern in the personal psyche. The point of contention as to whether all interpersonal relations can or should be classified as a type of (or are somehow analogous to) a marketplace calculus of exchange and gain is another and an exceedingly esoteric debate altogether.<sup>10</sup> Again, and in view to the following debate on the modern market society, even harsh critics of Polanyi take contention, not with the history itself, but whether the pre-history to the self-regulating market of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was not still some kind of 'market' in another way; the underlying

point about the social role of communitarian reciprocity and redistribution is not in dispute.<sup>11</sup>

### The Birth of the Modern Market Society

The emergence of the modern self-regulating market has roots going back to the peasant revolts that swept through Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. After exceptionally bloody repression against the agrarian workers by the upper classes,<sup>12</sup> the social chaos eventually settled over the next century into new institutions—some of which were designed to make life more tolerable for the working classes. One such new institution was founded under the 1662 Settlement Act in England. This legislation bound peasants to the parish in which they lived: the Church of England thereby became directly responsible for the social welfare of all through a local parish tax. While perhaps not ideal in every respect, no one was allowed to starve and the local parish priest would provide individualized assistance to all the varied social problems that arose within the parish.<sup>13</sup> Community itself became the basis of social organization, and it worked—at least for awhile.

What changed was a growing wave of industrial mechanization and sheep.

<sup>9</sup> Here, Polanyi's views on Aristotle and Ancient Greece are foundational to the arguments presented in this essay. Ian Morris (1994) concludes that Aristotle "was waging a rear-guard action, defending the idea of the polis as a community of equals at a time when other, larger and more hierarchical, social systems were becoming dominant in the eastern Mediterranean" (Morris, "The Community against the Market in Classical Athens" in *From Political Economy to Anthropology: Situating Economic Life in Past Societies* [Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994] 53). Morris finds that the social dynamics described by Polanyi were therefore correctly assessed as being indicative of a time when the economy was indeed embedded in social relations, and not the other way around.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Colin Duncan in defence of Polanyi highlights that the modern concept of money functioning as a intermediary in marketplace exchanges covering all goods and that allows for equivalences to be established between use-values "has greatly mislead economists" (Colin Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture between Humankind and Nature* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996] 165, see also 3f.). As such, the mere existence of money in traditional or archaic societies was not enough to presume that a price-setting market actually exists the way economists presume (164f.). In addition, the economic concept of 'surplus' of goods breaks down in traditional societies where social prestige may outweigh other productive use or market exchanges of goods (Duncan and Tandy, *From Political Economy to Anthropology: Situating Economic Life in Past Societies*, 3f.).

<sup>11</sup> Hejeebu and McCloskey, for example, argue that "Polanyi's passion for the non-market ways of reciprocity, redistribution, and [Aristotelian] householding led him to unreasonable skepticism about the scope of markets" prior to the invention of the self-regulating market for land and labour, yet they still readily concede Polanyi was right about several aspects of this history. See Santhi Hejeebu and Deirdre McCloskey, "The reproving of Karl Polanyi." *Critical Review* 13/3 (1999) 297-9, 309.

<sup>12</sup> See André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005) 4-28. The scale and savagery of the persecution is almost beyond imagination; Biéler notes that ten thousand peasants were massacred in Swabia and eighteen thousand in Alsace alone (24).

<sup>13</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 82.

Under pressure of the mercantile economics and the advantages of international trade, wealthy landowners were inclined to dispossess the agrarian peasantry living on their properties, and instead enclose arable land exclusively for sheep pasture. Wool for the growing textile industry was much more profitable to the land owners than the agriculture produced by their former tenants.<sup>14</sup> Some of the now landless peasants could find employment in local textile mills, but the rest were unable to provide for themselves and so it fell to the Church of England parish system to provide for them. The working poor however did not find a better life at the mills. The Speenhamland Law of 1795 had to be established to subsidize wages to ensure the employed could at least afford bread for subsistence, yet this in turn only encouraged their employers to lower wages further knowing public assistance would make up the difference. And so in the period from 1696 to 1818, the rates of pauperism increased twentyfold.<sup>15</sup> To solve both problems and relieve the growing economic burden upon the parishes, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 ended Speenhamland welfare and allowed for the free movement of labour across England. This greatly facilitated the Industrial Revolution by creating a wage-setting national labour market determined by industry itself. But this was no utopia of personal freedom. Polanyi described what resulted this way:

[I]t was an improvement on the grandest scale which wrought unprecedented havoc with the habitation of common people. Before this process had advanced very far, the labouring people had been crowded together in new places of desolation, the so-called industrial towns of England; the country folk had been dehumanized

into slum dwellers; the family was on the road to perdition; and large parts of the country were rapidly disappearing under the slack and scrap heaps vomited forth from the 'satanic mills' [of the Industrial Revolution].<sup>16</sup>

New social problems emerged from this social experiment of a 'parish-less' labour market including an alarming increase of poverty and starvation even while unprecedented wealth was being created for the business and land owners. How this could be explained away by the newly wealthy beneficiaries of the Industrial Revolution was by an appeal to a primitive form of naturalism that legitimized the social consequences of unregulated commerce and trade. Joseph Townsend (1739-1816) in his *Dissertation on the Poor Laws* proclaimed that starvation was simply the laws of nature working for the improvement of society, with poverty being the very means to achieve that proper end: "hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection, to the most perverse. In general it is only hunger which can spur them [the poor] on to labour."<sup>17</sup> Poverty was equated with proof of an anti-social disposition—it became morally wrong to be poor. The utilitarian Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) would concur and likewise see hunger as the only proper, and indeed the only "scientific and economical" remedy for poverty in society.<sup>18</sup> The poor simply had to better themselves without public assistance no matter how low the wages. The unemployed, according to this logic, were seen as wilfully refusing to work for available wages—they would be sent to Bentham's hellish Panopticon workhouses

<sup>14</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 38ff.

<sup>15</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 118.

<sup>18</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 122.

for 're-education' in proper social virtues.<sup>19</sup>

Adam Smith (1723-1790) in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* also upheld the social virtues of poverty, noting that not only do the 'industrious poor' labour more and produce better quality commodities,<sup>20</sup> but that poverty also creates a culling effect upon the lower classes such that society achieves a natural balance between the upper and working classes:

A half-starved Highland woman frequently bears more than twenty children, while a pampered lady is ... generally exhausted by two or three ... [yet] in some places half the children die before they are four years of age ... this great mortality, however, will everywhere be found chiefly among children of the common people, who cannot afford to tend them with the same care as those of better stations ... in civilized society it is only among the inferior ranks of people that the scantiness of subsistence can set limits to the further multiplication of the human species ... the liberal reward of labour, by enabling them to provide better for their children, and consequently bring up a greater number, naturally tends to widen and extend those limits [on population].<sup>21</sup>

This notion of a cruel but beneficial naturalism working itself out in economic society would become embraced by some religious thinkers. The Evangelical Christian Hannah More (1745-1833) wrote a series of religious stories to provide moral guidance for the working poor, *The Cheap Repository Tracts*. Her books would uphold the virtues of hard

work and taught the poor to accept their lowly condition in stride. As one such moral lesson concludes, "this story ... may teach the poor that they can seldom be in any condition of life so low as to prevent their rising to some degree of independence if they choose to exert themselves, and there can be no situation whatsoever so mean as to forbid the practice of many noble virtues."<sup>22</sup> The ultimate responsibility for raising a person out of poverty therefore resided squarely with the individual—and even then only marginally so. People were urged to focus on spiritual benefits of hard work and to accept their place in society as God's will. Liberation Theology would have to wait for more than another century to emerge and try to rid world of such pious but mistaken acquiescence to economic repression.

The common wisdom had coalesced around the idea that any direct relief to feed the poor was a grievous social ill. Such thought can be traced to thinkers like Daniel Defoe (c.1659-1731) who declared that giving alms to the poor was not charity for it only took away their motivation to work, and employing them in public works projects would in turn ruin private business.<sup>23</sup> This economic worldview abandoned the poor to work-out their spiritual salvation and material sustenance through the Laws of God and Nature in the marketplace, or simply starve. The desperate working classes were thus forced to flee from the jobless rural countryside to the cities of the Industrial Revolution which had become "demographic black holes" to devour them—lethal industrial pollution, epidemics from overcrowding, and malnutrition from poverty had caused

<sup>19</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 122, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 75.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 70f.

<sup>22</sup> Cited from Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 179.

<sup>23</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 114.

death rates to exceed the natural increase.<sup>24</sup>

The truth is that the greatest good for the greatest number under such market forces *necessarily* does not include everyone. There must be winners and losers in such a system. Mill's natural theology would become a key justification to explain away the new social ills such a market economy; the natural law was simply perfecting the human herd by eliminating the immoral and weak. The question before us now is how much of this ideology of radical individualism, naturalistic competition, and the abandonment of communitarian wellbeing to market forces is still present with us today.

Modern economics goes largely without question—economics is seen as simply the way the world really works. While the horrendousness of this primitive naturalism as a social ideal is self-evident to the reader, it is still the case that some Free Market fundamentalists and neo-liberal economic purists vehemently decry market interferences like social security programs, worker safety regulations, environmental protection legislation, and socialized medicine. Very fortunately they have not had their way, at least not entirely. The inherent malevolence of a Free Market has been greatly mitigated, through not entirely eliminated, through protectionist regulations and legal impositions upon the market. Social safety net exists in Western nations (to varying degrees) as a consequence of democratic action to restrain market forces in the name of human dignity. Polanyi referred to this as a 'double movement' of social protectionist

measures against market forces—examples of which include the formation of worker unions and the creation of legislative restrictions on employers (e.g., a minimum wage, maternity leave, child labour laws, windfall profit taxes, etc.). Polanyi considered the double movement essential to alleviate some of the worst injustices in a market economy. Yet under the name of trade liberalization and increasing efficiency, market fundamentalists often succeed in removing the same regulatory protections today. The good of the economy itself is held up as justification.

Some of the inherent ill-effects of the globalized market are now being displaced overseas in developing nations and hidden away in sweatshops populated by migrant workers. And here, just as it was in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England, it is not only economic exploitation that is the sole cause for the depreciation of human life. Rather, as Polanyi concluded, it is also "the disintegration of the cultural environment" through the commoditization of land and labour that destroys the prior social relations in society of interdependence and reciprocity.<sup>25</sup> He also warned that "where such methods were forced upon a helpless people [in developing nations] in the absence of protective measures, as in exotic and semicolonial regions, unspeakable suffering ensued."<sup>26</sup> Quite regrettably this too continues today in a neo-colonialism of globalization—a subject to be covered in an upcoming section.

Truly, the Free Market cannot be said to represent the Laws of Nature and God. As a system of applied social ethics that once claimed such authority, its theological grounding needs to be

<sup>24</sup> John R. McNeill. "Social, Economic, and Political Forces in Environmental Change," in *Sustainability or Collapse? An Integrated History and Future of People on Earth*, eds. Robert Costanza, Lisa J. Graumlich, and Will Steffen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007) 324.

<sup>25</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 164, 165-169.

<sup>26</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 223.



reformed. It is revealing that the barbaric social Darwinism of the self-regulating market came from religiously minded persons, not the Church itself. Accordingly, the insights of a real theologian, in this case Maximos Confessor, can have particular resonance as a counter-narrative to the misbegotten utopian ideal of a market society.

### Maximos Confessor on the Natural Law

Maximos Confessor is a saint of both the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church. While perhaps best known for his Christology which defended the view that Jesus has a fully human will in kenotic harmony with His divine will, Maximos was as a systematic thinker who discussed a great variety of other important subjects. Of interest to us here are his views on the cosmological aspects of God's plan for redemption, which in theological terms happens to be called 'the divine economy.' *Oikonomia* in Patristic writings describes the operation of the divine will in creation and redemption.<sup>27</sup> A literal translation of the Greek means 'household management' which explains why the same term appears both in the theological writings and economics texts—God's 'household' in this case is creation itself. For Maximos, the centerpiece of the divine economy is a naturalistic *eros* operating as a cosmological force in both society and the natural world. This force reveals itself as an embedded attraction and affinity for certain behaviours and modes-of-being. Today we would say *eros* is synonymous to what are now called natural instincts, and is the social inclination behind human nature.

Maximos writes that the redemptive economy for the world is made operable

through *eros* manifested in three progressive laws: the natural law, the scriptural law, and the spiritual law.<sup>28</sup> The natural law exists to provide for the enjoyment of being (*to einai*) for all creatures through their natural instincts. The scriptural law, on the other hand, opens the door for higher wellbeing (*to eu einai*) for those creatures with a rational nature—which is to say, humankind. The possibility for eternal wellbeing (*to aei eu einai*) is then made possible through the spiritual law. Maximos presents these three laws working cooperatively in human society such that what can be learned naturally (*phusikos*) through the law of nature allows for reason to overcome the sensual attachment to self-love, and thereby leads to the proper enjoyment of being in community with others.

It is noteworthy that Maximos is presenting a similar natural inclination for people to form associations with others just as described by Hobbes, but here the original state of humanity is not an evil and brutish monstrosity as he would have it. Maximos also differs from Hobbes in that society is not stagnated at the point of rational self-interest to form social contracts for survival. Rather, Maximos then points to the next evolution of *eros* in society: the scriptural law. The Bible opens the door to what can be learned spiritually (*pneumatikos*) through the scriptures, which then leads to a higher wellbeing than merely commodious coexistence. This then sets the stage for the final evolution of *eros* that allows a person to become deified (*Theikos*) and

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion see Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of the summary that follows, see Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003) 167-171 (*Ad Thalassium* 64). See also "Fifth Century of Various Texts" by Maximos Confessor in *The Philokalia*, Volume II (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1981) 262-264 (Aphorisms 9-14), 280-284 (Aphorisms 84-100).

'the equal of angels' through the spiritual law of Grace (Luke 20:36). This reveals another important distinction to the conceptions of natural theology by Hobbes and Mill. Personhood is not an individualistic and private affair, but socially actualized and achieved. Maximos also does not cast aside the unfortunate ones for the sake of the greater good of society. Instead, he describes the three laws of the divine economy working together to open up a path for ever-greater wellbeing within society as a whole. No one is necessarily left behind by a cynical utilitarian calculus.

Maximos writes that each law of the redemptive economy has its respective role to play in deification. Creation manifests an overall *harmonia* of creaturely interaction and coexistence through the natural law. Yet death and predation fights against the divine economy at the level of individual beings—that is until the *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all things to their proper Edenic order (Acts 3:21; cf. Romans 8:23). But there is one creature that does not 'naturally' create a harmony with others: humankind. Through improper exercise of free will, many people do "not move in accord with the Logos" and instead willingly obeys the carnal law—which Maximos writes is the inclination toward disobedience and death resulting from the original sin.<sup>29</sup> It is the carnal law that fights against the other three laws of the divine economy.<sup>30</sup>

For human beings, each law or the redemptive economy has its own proper discipline (*agoge*) to overcome the effects of the carnal law. The natural law can only be realized through the Golden

Rule—which is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matthew 7:9-12). While itself scriptural, Maximos writes that the Golden Rule is an *agoge* speaking to rational self-love and a cooperative fear born out of the prospect of retaliation.<sup>31</sup> From this meagre beginning, the full scriptural law can lead to a higher mode-of-being in mutual love. The *agoge* of the scriptural law is that people are called to love their neighbours as themselves (Matthew 19:19, et al.).<sup>32</sup> The Golden Rule is transcended by the full revelation of the scriptures, growing and transforming itself into a more selfless kind of neighbourly love. A person capable of this higher love has manifested spiritual growth and progressive development toward God through the scriptures. But there is still one final step in the perfection of human nature to its intended and deified end. This is through the spiritual law, which calls upon a type of love beyond the vicarious self-love as seeing your neighbour as yourself. This law proclaims that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for the sake of another (John 15:13).<sup>33</sup>

Through Grace, the mere natural inclination for self-love (*eros*) has at this stage been entirely transcended and transformed by the spiritual law. Grace brings the person fully into a likeness to God from merely an inherited image. The spiritual law is what allows for martyrs to achieve the highest development of kenotic humility in imitating Christ—or as stated in the words of Ignatius of Antioch, to 'attain God' by partaking of a Eucharist wherein one's own body becomes the wheat of God's bread in the *anaphora* unto Him.<sup>34</sup> But, and this is the very key to

<sup>29</sup> Maximos Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 58 (*Ambiguum* 7).

<sup>30</sup> Maximos Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 55 (*Ambiguum* 7); *Philokalia* II 265 (Aphorism 20).

<sup>31</sup> Maximos Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 167-169; *Philokalia* II 262-3 (Aphorisms 9-10).

<sup>32</sup> *Philokalia* II 263 (Aphorism 11).

<sup>33</sup> *Philokalia* II 263-4 (Aphorisms 12-14).

<sup>34</sup> Epistle to the Romans 4:1-2.



divine economy, the spiritual law is not limited or restricted to just martyrdom. It also expressed through an un-quenching thirst for compassion and justice for all of God's creatures, humans and non-human alike.<sup>35</sup>

Maximos describes the three progressive laws in terms of an Irenaeus type of soul-building and the very means for the collective realization of the *eschaton* of the redemptive economy for the world as a whole. Soul-building takes place in three metaphysical dimensions in that "the great city of God, the Church ... [is made manifest in that] the entire orderly arrangement of the Church is encompassed in these three laws, having its length in virtue, its width in knowledge, and its depth in the wisdom of mystical theology."<sup>36</sup> Stated another way, the collective expression of the Church comes by way of individual soul-building from bodily virtue (*ascesis*), by the knowledge gained in cataphatic contemplation (*theoria*), and by wisdom revealed in apophatic revelation (*theologia*). Each soul therefore develops a dimensional volume in relation to spiritual progress—a calculable metric to measure greatness of each saint. The eschatological City of God takes its dimensional manifestation, as it were, 'brick by brick' of souls measured in these three spiritual dimensions.

Maximos' vision of the ongoing construction of the heavenly City of God

provides an image for seeing how the three laws of the redemptive economy operate for social justice in the present world. The true Laws of God and Nature are such that humankind's teleological purpose can only be fulfilled in a *polis* in fellowship with others. In contrast to Mill's natural theology behind modern economic theory in which only the greatest good for the greatest number can and *should* be provided for, the true Christian position is that people are called upon to act as moral agents to raise up the least of our brethren—all of them. Maximos' economy is not competitive. It is based on virtue. Nor is it exclusionary. It is communitarian. And yet Maximos is not being idealistic. He echoes real-world lessons reflected in traditional economies and social realities, a subject explored by Karl Polanyi to criticize the unnaturalness of modern market societies.

### Historical Lessons on Economy and Society

Polanyi argued that the ancient Greeks made a distinction between marketplace generated wealth (*euporia*) and wealth generated from personal excellence (*ousia*).<sup>37</sup> Merchants (*euporoi*) were typically strangers in the city, coming and going with seafaring trade (*poreia*). Aristotle considered commercial trade for this sort "hucksterism" (*kapelike*) since wealth was made 'unnaturally' through surcharge.<sup>38</sup> Real wealth was made through the substance (*ousia*) of the man through personal excellence, and social power (*exousia*) expressed through the

<sup>35</sup> An illustrative example is found with St. Isaac of Syria (7th Century CE), who wrote: "What is a charitable heart? It is a heart which is burning with charity for the whole of creation, for men, birds, for the beasts, for the demons—for all creatures ... a heart which is softened and can no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain, being inflicted upon a creature. This is why such a person never ceases to pray also for the animals." Cited from Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976) 111.

<sup>36</sup> Maximos Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 169-170.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Polanyi, "Aristotle Discovers the Economy" from *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi* (New York: Anchor Books, 1968) 93-108. For an expanded discussion, see David K. Goodin, "Social Insecurity and the No-Avail Thesis: Insights from Philosophy and Economic History on Consumerist Behaviour," *Ethics, Place and Environment: A Journal of Philosophy & Geography* 13/1 (March 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Polanyi, "Aristotle Discovers the Economy," 101.

same. Prices were to be set through measures that ensured social justice and reciprocity.<sup>39</sup> Naturally, this idea of wealth included physical treasure in the common sense, but was also inclusive of honour and prestige among peers.<sup>40</sup> Athens promoted a vision of the *metrioi*, a unified and balanced “core” of like-minded citizens not given to extremes in either emotion or wealth.<sup>41</sup> The mentality was not of scarcity and exclusionary competition, but rather strengthening the entire community through social power aimed at mutually enriching *philia*—a word which in this context is “best translated as ‘balanced reciprocity’.”<sup>42</sup> As such, the more wealthy citizens would engage in a particular type of philanthropy called *anti-peponthos*, which was a willingness to alleviate another’s burdens and suffering by making them one’s own concern.<sup>43</sup> This would strengthen the social bonds of the community and enrich the *ousia* of both persons. This ensured Athens could survive as a secure military power. In fact, the military phalanx was used as a social metaphor encouraging interdependence and solidarity among the Athenian citizens.<sup>44</sup> The ethic was not survival of the fittest, but that the city was only as strong as its weakest person; each citizen must therefore be made stronger and more interdependent in every way so that the entire community could thrive.

While the *philadelphia* of ancient Greece was born of militaristic realities, we find a

similar conception of an interdependent community with Maximus Confessor. He also noted that people possess different abilities; whether measured in terms of intellectual or physical gifts at birth, or wealth and power attained in later life, inequalities do in fact exist. But this disparity does not mean that certain people are entitled to exploit their gifts for selfish advantage over their neighbors in society. Rather Maximus says we are meant to come together in complementary inter-relationships such that “rather than magnify ourselves over others in view of the inequality all around us, we should by prudent consideration even out the disparity of our [common human] nature, which is in its own right equal in honor, by filling others’ deficiencies with our own abundances.”<sup>45</sup> Maximus goes on to say that “perhaps it is even the case that the present inequality is allowed to prevail in order to display our inner rational capacity for preferring virtue above everything else.”<sup>46</sup> Humanity was intended to exist as a singular whole, a true community formed from disparate people united together by a common *philadelphia*. In the proper expression of Trinitarian personhood, the community comes together to raise up the least of the brethren, thereby enriching the *ousia* of all through social virtue. The divine economy is thus revealed in a *polis* through a common currency of compassion. Nevertheless, his was not a call for ecclesial rule over society. Rather Maximus is in keeping with the Orthodox position regarding the separation of Church and State: a secular authority is required to look after the physical wellbeing of society through civil defense and law enforcement, and the Church is

<sup>39</sup> Polanyi, “Aristotle Discovers the Economy,” 107f.

<sup>40</sup> Polanyi, “Aristotle Discovers the Economy,” 93.

<sup>41</sup> Morris, “The Community Against the Market in Classical Athens,” 56.

<sup>42</sup> Morris, “The Community Against the Market in Classical Athens,” 56.

<sup>43</sup> Polanyi, “Aristotle Discovers the Economy,” 96.

Morris also notes that “rich citizens who flaunted their wealth and refused to follow proper norms of behaviour could be brought down through prosecutions” (56).

<sup>44</sup> Morris, “The Community Against the Market in Classical Athens,” 57.

<sup>45</sup> *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* 78 (Ambiguum 8).

<sup>46</sup> *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* 78 (Ambiguum 8).

needed to challenge the State for the cause of social justice for all.<sup>47</sup>

### Globalization and Ethics Today

In contrasting these alternate insights on the Laws of God and Nature there are two scenarios to consider in the modern context. The first is the effects of the international market forces on traditional societies in developing nations. The second is reforming the economy in developed nations to promote social justice and ethics at home. The discussion will approach each of these issues in turn. We will begin by once again returning to some important lessons from the ancient world.

Aristotle warned that money was meant to be only an intermediary for facilitating social justice in the exchanging goods.<sup>48</sup> It becomes 'unnatural' when money is used to breed (*tokos*) more wealth through usury.<sup>49</sup> Aristotle considered it preserve to pretend that an inert metal like gold can reproduce like a living organism through interest. Rather, wealth must instead arise through an interdependent community,<sup>50</sup> by which he meant personal initiative and enterprise, not foreign investment and debt servicing. Likewise, for Plato, the

biggest threats to society were overpopulation and foreign trade since both lead to social strife.<sup>51</sup> He said that economic development in particular was detrimental for it "fills a country with merchandise and money-making and bargaining; it breeds in men's minds habits of financial greed and faithlessness."<sup>52</sup> His warning is still pertinent today, yet his solutions for these problems were for the most part heavy-handed and ethically inapplicable. Plato's utopia was also isolationist and stagnant. Wherever possible, when considering these lessons from ancient societies, Western philanthropy must proceed in ways that promote quality of life over mere economic growth, and we should be asking what *kind* of economic growth is actually being promoted.

One look at the landmark 2006 film *Manufactured Landscapes* shows the dire ecological and human consequences of unbridled economic expansion upon the biosphere.<sup>53</sup> The push for globalization has been about creating export markets within nations without formal economies. The moral and ethical 'good' of poverty alleviation, modernizing health care, and access to worldwide consumer products are all held up as justification. But these are two different things which have been uncritically conflated in the rhetoric. Are all these moral and ethical 'goods' necessarily tied to the creation of export markets? No—this is only one way to finance such secondary aims. This

<sup>47</sup> For further discussion, see David K. Goodin, "Just War Theory and Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Theological Perspective on the Doctrinal Legacy of Chrysostom and Constantine-Cyril," *Theandros* 2/3 (2005), <http://www.theandros.com/justwar.html>.

<sup>48</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* V.5.10.

<sup>49</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006) 107; *Politics* I.10.

<sup>50</sup> A fascinating modern expression of such a community-building and zero-interest modern economic arrangement is discussed by Colin Duncan: the Local Exchange Trading System (LETS). These are alternative local currency systems that facilitate indirect barter exchanges within a community, not just between two people. One upshot of a LETS economy, Duncan notes, is "a liberating effect on the self-esteem of many individuals who indeed may have nothing of value to offer from the perspective of the conventional, 'outside' economy" (Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture*, 171).

<sup>51</sup> Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 48; *Laws* 373, 622.

<sup>52</sup> Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 48; *Laws* 704-7.

<sup>53</sup> Historian Clive Ponting provides an unblinking assessment of economic activity upon human lives and the environment in his book, *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin, 2007). See in particular the section on World Bank, IMF and WTO activity to overrule environmental protection laws in the name of Free Market ideology (132f.), as well as the chapters entitled "The Rape of the World" and "The Threat to Global Systems."

distinction then raises the question whether the primary aim of globalization is the export market or Western philanthropy? Obviously, if philanthropy was the true aim, then all these good things could be distributed to such underprivileged societies by different means, even outright gifts. The other aim of improving economic life within these nations could be achieved through developing an internal (non-export) subsistence economy through small scale water improvements (using and augmenting indigenous knowledge wherever possible), village-scale electrical and other technically grants (e.g., solar ovens for cooking, 'micro' wind- and hydro-power stations for specific communal industries, etc.), educational assistance to develop indigenous experts in science and engineering, promoting local seed banks, etc. Philanthropy and economic improvement are two different things: they are best kept separate to ensure the social empowerment needed for the demographic transition to a stable population in balance with regional carrying capacity. This way cultural identity, protection of national resources, and ecological sustainability are placed at the forefront. Consumer goods can then be brought in by import markets, all the while preventing destructive export markets from depleting natural resources.<sup>54</sup> Food security *must* come through a domestic capacity to feed the local population, not the questionable idea of importing food stuffs from international markets that can be disrupted, or through international demand set prices out of reach for the poorest in that society.

<sup>54</sup> A good model for how indigenous communities can administer and develop natural resources for export with true sustainability is found with the Menominee Tribe in Wisconsin, USA. See Ronald L. Trosper, "Indigenous influence on forest management on the Menominee Indian Reservation" *Forest Ecology and Management* 249 (2007) 134–139.

Tying philanthropy to globalization can become pretence for allowing exogenous actors to extract natural wealth from vulnerable societies, all the while saddling them with impossible debt under full cost recovery. The benefit to the affected nations will be to the merchant classes, which are likely to grow, though the lion's share of profit will always be to the financing foreign interests who seek access to those natural resources.<sup>55</sup> The labour force itself, realized in part from displaced subsistence farmers, will have mixed benefits depending on the social safety nets established against the capriciousness of the Free Market. Yet even so, the loss of previous cultural relations to land and

<sup>55</sup> A case study is offered here in support of this point. In the African nation of Gabon, even after its independence from France in 1960, French firms continued to hold "the lion's share ... nearly 70% of total foreign investment" in Gabonese development projects, particularly those benefiting French interests such as the petroleum firm Elf Aquitaine—see James Barnes, "The Bongo Phenomenon: Power in Gabon," in *Culture, Ecology, and Politics in Gabon's Rainforest* (Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) 324f. Direct control is not required for powerful nations to get what they want. Rather, "Neocolonialism 'allows' de facto control of a territory over which de jure legitimacy has been lost. It is clearly a neo-colonial model that the French applied to retain their various possessions without losing the economic benefits of the colonial relationship" (Barnes 322). Worse, in 1994, 41% of Gabon's public sector budget was being set aside for foreign debt servicing, and the World Bank and IMF continue to urge Gabon to restructure their economy—see WWF International, "Resource Use in Gabon: Sustainability or Biotic Impoverishment?" in *Culture, Ecology, and Politics in Gabon's Rainforest* (Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003) 27. This is all performed even though Gabon has no crises of overpopulation nor does it have explosive birth rates (WWF International 10). Investment in human development such as literacy and education programs is low, and Gabon ranks at the bottom of the Human Development Index (which measures citizen wellbeing in terms of quality of life) for the 174 countries surveyed in 1999 by the UN Development Program (WWF International 23). This is because "Gabon, like many other developing countries, borrows heavily to finance economic growth and is now deeply in debt, with limited means to meet its obligations to private and government lenders. The result has been an increase in natural resource exploitation and export to finance debt repayment" (WWF International 34). Gabon is now being pressured to open up its export markets for its old-growth forests, oil and mineral extraction even further.

community is a 'value' not easily measured by economists simply looking at new-found purchasing power of this new labour force.

The modern social experiment that gave birth to the self-regulating market was seen as a way to transform evil humanity into a socially virtuous society through a direct appeal to what were then seen as the Laws of God and Nature—a project now extended internationally through globalization. Maximos Confessor stands in opposition to the implicit social Darwinism of the modern market economy, a system where the greediest victors are free to exclusively enjoy the spoils of their conquests while the losers are left to starve and die—and sometimes literally as they once did in Adam Smith's day. Most thankfully, human population is not 'managed' as viciously as it was then, yet there is undeniably still something of that perverse mentality in the rationale used to justify that little extra Benzene in the public drinking water supply. The privileged classes, after all, can afford expensive home water treatment systems.

This may seem a petty example. But it is indicative of the utilitarian calculus that occurs around the world, including at the United Nations (UN). In 2002, legal experts at the UN identified access to clean drinking water as a Human Right under *existing* international covenants (General Comment 15—The Right to Water).<sup>56</sup> However, this decision has been met with strong opposition by the member states. By recognizing water as a Human Right under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, disenfranchised local and indigenous people would be empowered legally to resist the destruction of their communities

caused by globalization. The Covenant, which entered into force in January 1976, identifies the family as the fundamental group unit of society (Article 10), not higher levels of abstraction such as the nation itself (which obscures the impacts to individual families).<sup>57</sup> Member states would rather see water as a 'basic need' that can be supplied by large-scale economic development projects through international actors such as the World Bank.<sup>58</sup> By opposing the identification of water as an extension of cultural Human Rights, government bureaucracies and international actors are empowered to politically marginalize those who will be displaced and have their subsistence livelihoods destroyed by capital-intensive projects like new hydroelectric dams benefiting industry and the World Bank creditors.

Here it must be recalled that the concept of Human Rights came up after the horrors of World War II when nation-states ignored their responsibilities to individual human beings (and indeed entire populations of people) in favour of what seemed to them as 'the good of the nation' as a whole. Human Rights were meant as a check to government power. Yet today an insidious economic utilitarianism has undermined the memory of the immoral decisions made by nations in the past, and now international actors are seeking to exploit natural resources such as water under the banner of philanthropy and the utilitarian mantra of the greatest good for the greatest number. Whether it is about the

<sup>56</sup> See Salman M.A. Salman and Siobhan McInerney-Lankford, *The Human Right to Water: Legal and Policy Dimensions* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Sneddon and Fox discuss how impacts to local persons become obscured when compared to geo-political institutions and vague abstractions such as the World Bank and "the good of the nation". See Chris Sneddon and Coleen Fox, "Rethinking Transboundary Waters: A Critical Hydropolitics of the Mekong Basin" *Political Geography* 25 (2006) 181-200.

<sup>58</sup> See Asit K. Biswas, "Water as a Human Right in the MENA Region: Challenges and Opportunities," *Water Resource Development* 23/2 (2007): 209-225.

acceptable risk of drinking water quality that measures human health against economic costs, the rights of traditional societies to resist destruction of their culture under globalization, and every type of economic decision in between these scales of consideration, moneyed interests are being measured against real harm to individuals. Such a focus is inherently dangerous since the abstraction 'the greater good' is a matter of perspective while individual human beings and families are not. This ideological trope all too often becomes a means for the politically powerful to victimize the unaware or disenfranchised.<sup>59</sup>

### Economic Reforms in Western Society

In his analysis of the works of Karl Polanyi, Gregory Baum focuses on the damage done to the ethical conscience of people in Western society. An inner conflict now festers within people over the economic realities that they suspect in their hearts to be morally wrong:

A part of us ... contributes to the cause of the injustices committed by society, while another part of us, separated from the first and possibly unaware of it, is [also] the effect of these unjust conditions. These two parts stand against each other, they divide the soul, they cannot be synthesized, they produce internal division and ethical dilemma. The social conditions in which we live make us colonizer and colonized at the same time. Few ethicists have recognized the human condition thus.<sup>60</sup>

John Stuart Mill had a vision of a society in which the greatest good was achieved

for the greatest number of people—a vision that fit perfectly with the emergent social realities of a society organized by the Free Hand of the self-regulating market. The popularity of utilitarianism was undoubtedly due in part to a confirmation bias in which Mill's view on the distribution of divine plenitude matched and affirmed economic realities that were advantageous to the privileged classes, providing them with psychological assurance that their material 'blessings' over and against their fellows was indeed proper. This helped quiet the inner conflict described by Baum and Polanyi. People could imagine, or at least hope, that in the long run what was happening somehow accorded with God's divine plan for society. They could tell themselves that all this unpleasantness was simply the Laws of God and Nature working their way through society for the common good.

These observations are not to unduly scapegoat Mill,<sup>61</sup> or to slander his ethics

<sup>61</sup> Mill is perhaps best described as a pessimist regarding the present state of his fellow human beings. "In the comparative early state of human advancement in which we now live, a person cannot, indeed, feel that entireness of sympathy with all others [as required for true utilitarian morality, rather] ... this feeling [of compassionate sympathy] in most individuals is much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether" (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 33). This becomes the basis for why his system of ethics has as its first principle personal happiness since this selfish inclination is universally present in all individuals (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 30). Yet Mill saw this as a starting point only, a means to advance society to a time when true compassionate unity was possible. "If we now suppose this feeling of unity [is] to be taught as a religion, and the whole force of education, of institutions, and of opinions directed, as it once was in the case of religion, to make every person grow up from infancy surrounded by the profession and the practice of it, I feel that no one who can realize this conception will feel any misgivings about the sufficiency of the ultimate sanction for the happiness morality" (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 32). This has in fact happened, but the result has not been to produce a unified and compassionate society. Mill's thought experiment has instead been realized in today's consumerist society with its educational institutions aimed at producing a world-class labour force to further the advance of market

<sup>59</sup> For further discussion, see Sneddon and Fox, "Rethinking Transboundary Waters: A Critical Hydropolitics of the Mekong Basin," particularly the discussion between World Bank executive directors and local villagers facing forced displacement on page 195.

<sup>60</sup> Baum, *Karl Polanyi on Ethics and Economics*, 28.



with allegations of ulterior motives. Mill actually advocated such progressive ideas as an inheritance tax and other distributive mechanisms to ensure that even the lower classes of labourers could enjoy the affluence of society; he even warned of the dangers of an ever-growing economy destroying every last inch of wild nature for agriculture.<sup>62</sup> Rather, his philosophy became joined in an unnatural marriage when it was married to Adam Smith's Free Hand of the market through the bond of the marginal utility dynamic. Mill's philosophy was thereby stripped of its greater hopes and aspirations for society. It became merely a justification supporting the economic calculations behind the self-regulating market. What remained of his utilitarianism was only its ethical first principle of pleasure, an individualistic libertarian absolute, and a distorted worldview regarding the presumed Laws of Nature and God. This stripped-down utilitarianism would find a perfect home in a strange, unfamiliar industrializing world of upsetting social realities—it became a valuable ethical tool to, at least, try to achieve the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of these people, if not real justice for all.

This distorted ethical vision and primitive naturalism from 19<sup>th</sup> Century England continues to be the prevailing social reality influencing ethical conscience today. Even theology has been corrupted such that 'Biblical Capitalism' is gaining credence. John Schneider, for example, on one hand acknowledges that "the entire weight of historic Christian tradition seems to be against the integration of faith with the habits of

acquisition and enjoyment," but then argues that "we must have a distinctly Christian way to affirm the economic habits of acquisition and enjoyment of affluence as they necessarily exist within the culture of modern capitalism."<sup>63</sup> Such views, indeed, go against the very heart of Christian tradition. Even John Calvin, who some mistakenly think would vouchsafe Biblical Capitalism, echoes the very same communitarian mandate put forth by Maximus Confessor:

[God] could very well give each person plenty so that no-one would need help from anyone else, but He wants to test the love and fraternity we have together when we thus communicate with each other as He commands us to do: that is, that the rich should not be like wild beasts to eat and gobble up the poor and suck their blood and their substance—but should rather help them and look upon them with fairness, and not in order to say, "Oh! This is what I owe him; I gave him work and I paid him properly." But they should know that they owe every help to those who are needy and in want, each indeed according to their means. For otherwise that are like murderers if they see their neighbours wasting away and yet do not open their hands to help them. In this, I tell you, they are certainly like murderers.<sup>64</sup>

So how does these historical and religious insights on the laws of God and nature mean for reforming market societies today? While it is rather straight forward to recommend a 'do no harm' principle in preserving the social integrity of traditional societies in the face of globalization, Western society has been

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society, and with commercial advertising and popular culture directed to promoting mere consumption as a means to happiness. For further discussion on this subject, see David Orr, *Earth in Mind—On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 2004) 1-40.

<sup>62</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1982) 497.

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<sup>63</sup> John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002) 26.

<sup>64</sup> Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, 299 (Sermon XLIV on the Harmony of the Gospels; cf. Mathew 3:9f.).

wholly organized by market forces—and for nearly two centuries now. The pathway to re-embedding the economy to serve Western society is less clear. Karl Polanyi said the market needed to be reformed by getting rid of the fictitious commodities of land and labour from market forces, meaning that he wanted to restore self-determining power to human institutions for considering these vital cornerstones for human wellbeing. But Polanyi could not give concrete recommendations since such institutions had not yet been invented. He could only identify the example of worker co-ops established by Robert Owen (1771-1858). The Owenite Villages of Cooperation were business ventures centered around the social life of the entire community, and they made a profit too.<sup>65</sup> But besides this communitarian business model, Polanyi could only point to the power of worker unions to wrest wages from market forces—a project that was and continues to be vehemently resisted by market fundamentalists. The power of worker unions has also been compromised and greatly complicated by globalization and the existence of multi-national corporations.<sup>66</sup>

I will have to leave the specific recommendations for reforming the market to those economists that specialize in social justice through progressive taxation, distributive justice, and social reforms at the legislative level. Equally important will be the work of religious thinkers in challenging the theological and societal preconceptions that now bias ethical discourse, hindering the work of these progressive economists. I have sought here in this essay to establish a

theological foundation for beginning this important work.

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<sup>65</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 133-135, 178-180.

<sup>66</sup> For further discussion, see Ronaldo Munck, "Globalization and Democracy: A New Great Transformation?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 581, (2002) 10-21.



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*Awa Dembele-Yeno*

*Awa Dembele-Yeno is a translator with a great passion for photography or a photographer with a great passion for translation, she does not yet know how to define herself. Is it compulsory to define oneself anyway?*

# GNOSTIC BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: HOW JEWISH WERE THE GNOSTICS?

Lindsey Sandul

Since the discovery of the ancient codices at Nag Hammadi in 1945, the study of Gnosticism has changed dramatically. As new research is being conducted, the hypothesis that Gnosticism began in a Jewish *milieu* is becoming more plausible. Several scholars are of the opinion that any Christian elements within Gnostic literature are purely secondary additions to the basic Gnostic creation myth by a Christian scribe. In fact, many of the Gnostic codices found at Nag Hammadi have no basic Christian elements.<sup>1</sup> One of the most essential features of Gnosticism is that saving *gnosis* comes through revelation from a transcendent realm. This revelation must be mediated by a revealer who has come from the Pleroma in order to awaken people to knowledge of God and knowledge of the true nature of the human self. Gnostics can only be called Christians when they perceive Jesus Christ as being the divine revealer or bearer of saving *gnosis*. Usually, Jesus is understood to be the biblical figure Seth; literally, Seth puts on Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Gnostics also possess a different interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus. For example, because of their soteriology they see the divine revealer leaving the earthly Jesus on the cross. If Jesus is understood to be the Seth from Genesis then perhaps there

is a strong Jewish connection which would explain how the Gnostics came to adopt such biblical figures. The texts found at Nag Hammadi provide a new world of information and even more questions concerning this group who allegedly “invented myriad ways of evil.”<sup>3</sup>

The heresiologists, such as Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Pseudo-Tertullian, described the Gnostics in ways that do not always directly correspond to what is found in the Nag Hammadi Codices. The Church fathers were polemicizing against the Gnostics, and until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, this was the only information that scholars had concerning the issue of the identity of Gnostics and their place in the history of Early Christianity. Therefore, the only conclusions and definitions of Gnostics that could be made were based on these second to fourth-century writings. This information was not always reliable since the Church fathers wrote for a particular reason: to purify and protect the emerging proto-Orthodox Church from any Gnostic influences. The Nag Hammadi discovery gives scholars the opportunity to redefine the role and identity of Gnostics in the first centuries of Christianity. One

<sup>1</sup> For example, the *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VIII, 5); *Marsanes* (NHC X, 1); the *Thought of Norea* (NHC IX, 2); the *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5); *Allogenes* (NHC XI, 3).

<sup>2</sup> Seth is the third son of Adam and Eve, Genesis 4:25.

<sup>3</sup> The Gnostics According to St. Epiphanius, “Against the Gnostics also known as Borborites, 25.2.1”, Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday Press, 1995, 202.

hypothesis concerning the origins of Gnosticism is to understand it as a deviant form of Christianity. This definition was one of the first to be supported by scholars. It was strongly influenced by the heresiologists. Elaine Pagels explains that “some [scholars] reasoned that since these [Gnostic] gospels were heretical, they must have been written later than the gospels of the New Testament.”<sup>4</sup> There are many challenges to this thesis, since Gnostic thought can be seen as being highly influenced by other systems, most which predate Christianity. This includes Greek philosophy, Hellenistic mystery cults, Oriental connections (Iran, Babylonia, and Egypt), and Judaism. The most convincing argument is that Judaism is the *topos* for the emergence of Gnosticism. A close examination of the Church fathers can provide pieces of the puzzle. For example, Irenaeus wrote in his work *Against Heresies* 1.24.6: “The multitude, however, cannot understand these matters, but only one out of a thousand, or two out of ten thousand. They declare that they are no longer Jews, and that they are not yet Christians; and that it is not at all fitting to speak openly of their mysteries, but right to keep them secret by preserving silence.” Such a statement seems to indicate that Gnosticism was in alienation and revolt against Judaism, and did not begin within Christianity.

There are several more factors involved in determining if Gnosticism can be considered to originate from Jewish traditions. One example from Irenaeus is simply not enough evidence. In this article, it will first be argued that the Hellenistic-Roman world, in which Diaspora Jews found themselves, provided the most opportune locale for the beginnings of Gnosticism. This will then be confirmed by the presence of

Jewish motifs and traditions which appear in Gnostic literature. The *Apocryphon of John*, the *Testimony of Truth*, and *Melchizedek*, all of which come from the Nag Hammadi Library, will be examined in order to demonstrate how Gnostics used Jewish themes to create their own theology, cosmology, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology.

### **The Historical Context: Gnosticism and Judaism**

The origin of Gnosticism is a hotly debated issue. In the Nag Hammadi Library many texts explicitly demean Jewish Scripture. This may cause some to wonder if a Jewish sect could be responsible for the negative reinterpretations of Jewish Scripture found within Gnostic literature. There are good reasons to answer in the affirmative, even though Gnosticism is an apostasy to the Jewish faith. Many connections between Gnosticism and Judaism can be established.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish origin of Gnosticism is an important hermeneutical key to understanding some of the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt.

At the time of the Roman occupation of Egypt (circa 37 BCE), Alexandria was the home to approximately 500,000 to 1,000,000 Jews. The Ptolemaic monarchy was dismantled. Due to this new leadership there was a major shift in the socio-economic, political, and religious state of affairs which contributed to the emergence of Gnosticism among Diaspora Jews. The Jews lost many of their secular rights and privileges as the state changed from Ptolemaic rule to Roman rule. The society was more individualistic in nature, and Judaism was being viewed as an impediment from

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), xvi-xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Francis T. Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth: Jewish Elements in Gnostic Creation Myths* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 2. Fallon believes that there is a connection between Judaism and Gnosticism.

within. Especially in the higher social circles, being a Jew under Roman rule was a negative aspect and an encumbrance to one's way of life. Therefore, it can be argued that it is from this social condition that Gnosticism began to develop among Diaspora Jews. There was a radical change of consciousness primarily due to the new individualistic element within the society. Considering the high level of innovative reinterpretation of Jewish biblical traditions, allegorical interpretations, incorporation of Greek mythology and philosophy (Middle-Platonism), into their ideology of theogony, cosmogony, anthropogony, soteriology, and eschatology, it was most likely a higher class of educated Jews who developed Gnostic thought in its early stages. This provided the foundation for the community who used the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library approximately three centuries later.

These Jews sought to reinterpret their own sacred texts, as well as the cultural influences of the Hellenistic society in which they lived, in order to make sense of their particular negative situation. The Torah leaves many unanswered questions which could not always be satisfied by Jewish extra-biblical literature. They did not totally abandon their religious beliefs as Jews but adapted them to their new circumstances. Gnosticism was mainly brought about by interior conflicts. It was no longer favourable to be a Jew within their society, and for some this provided the perfect environment to re-evaluate their religious beliefs. The multicultural environment of Alexandria supplied their influences and inspirations for reinterpretations.

### What are Scholars Saying About Gnosticism?

Birger A. Pearson has been a scholar of Gnosticism for decades. He supports the idea that Gnosticism has Jewish origins. In his work, Pearson states "Gnosticism originated in a Jewish environment. The earliest attested mythological systems of "Sethian" or "Classic" Gnosticism are made up of innovative reinterpretations of biblical and Jewish traditions."<sup>6</sup> Pearson critiques the work of Moritz Friedlander, as he can be considered the first to suggest that Gnosticism originated in Judaism.<sup>7</sup> Pearson agrees with most of the ideas put forth by Friedlander, but highlights his disadvantage of writing prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library. Pearson's most prominent critique of Friedlander's work is his choice of sources. Pearson astutely makes suggestions for the improvement of Friedlander's arguments. According to Pearson, this important section from Philo's *On the Confusion of Tongues* 2f can be used to prove that a class of antinomian Jews was clearly present in Alexandria:

Those who are disgusted with their ancestral institutions and are always taking pains to criticize and find fault with the Laws use these and similar passages (Genesis 11:1-9) as excuses for their godlessness. These impious people say, "Do you still regard with solemnity the commandments as though they contained canons of truth itself? Look, your so-called holy books also contain myths such as those you ridicule whenever you hear them recited by others. Indeed, what is the need to collect the numerous examples

<sup>6</sup> Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Pearson is referring to Friedlander's book entitled *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus*. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 11-12.



scattered throughout the Law, as we might if we had the leisure to press the charges, when we need only remind you of those examples that are ready at hand?"<sup>8</sup>

Clearly there were Jews within this specific community who were doing more than simply reinterpreting and allegorizing Jewish Scripture in new ways. It is less clear that the group being referred to here by Philo are indeed Gnostics. Such a conclusion would be speculative and needs further confirmation. This passage, however, does help support the hypothesis that the innovative re-interpretations of Jewish Scripture found in Gnostic literature could have originated within Diaspora Judaism. Some Jews were less dogmatic towards Mosaic Law which meant they were critical of their own traditions and willing to be openly critical about discrepancies within their traditions and scriptures. Pearson believes that a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism that existed in Alexandria is plausible. As more texts from the Nag Hammadi Library are studied, the evidence continues to mount that Gnosticism was a Jewish heresy not a Christian heresy when it first began. Pearson finds it impossible to deny that Gnosticism began among Hellenized Jews. The real issue is now to determine if the Gnostic movement was isolated to Alexandria or also included Hellenistic Jews from Palestine or Syria.<sup>9</sup>

Biblical exegesis in Gnostic literature is one of the most essential attributes to Gnosticism. Pearson states that "a close examination of many Gnostic texts will, in fact, show a considerable indebtedness to the Old Testament (and not only to the

Book of Genesis)."<sup>10</sup> Pearson goes on to explain that Gnostic myth contains elements of the Jewish traditions of exegesis, on top of the many references to the Hebrew Bible texts.

Gershom G. Scholem is another scholar who discusses the relationship between Gnostic and Jewish sources.<sup>11</sup> He does not find it surprising that Gnostic and Jewish sources can explain each other, and that the Gnostics sought to deliberately change the material that they borrowed.<sup>12</sup> Scholem uses many examples to demonstrate this connection. One of his examples is of particular interest because it reveals how Gnostics reinterpreted a Jewish source describing Lilith mythology. Lilith was a child-devouring female demon who encountered the Prophet Elijah. When they encountered each other, Elijah asked Lilith where she was going. Lilith replied that she was on her way to drink blood and eat children. Scholem explains that even though this encounter is not found in Talmudic and old midrashic sources, it was "used and turned upside down by antinomian Gnostics of the third, or at least the early fourth, century."<sup>13</sup> Epiphanius provides the evidence for Gnostic perversion of this story. In *Pararion*, Epiphanius quotes a Gnostic apocryphon which tells of how Elijah met "with a female demon who introduces herself to him as his own succubus! Elijah is said by these Gnostics to have come back into the world after his ascent to

<sup>8</sup> Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 29. Also see Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 72: "...Gnostics frequently borrowed Jewish material and deliberately changed it." On the Jewish origin for Gnosticism see Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 253.

<sup>11</sup> Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 73.

heaven.”<sup>14</sup> Scholem understands this to be Gnostic corruption of Jewish literature.

### Textual Analysis: *What did the Gnostics Say?*

There are several features of *gnosis* that can be identified in the texts that were found at Nag Hammadi. For example, the experience of a distant, other-worldly, different and supreme God is central to Gnostic thought. They believed in the existence of further divine beings (and their separation), who are closer to man than to the supreme God. The idea that the world and matter are evil is present in many of these texts. As a result, the Gnostic feels like a stranger in this world. Since the world is evil it could not have been the creation of the unknowable, supreme God. Gnostics found a disconnection between the “almighty” God of Genesis 1:1 and the “unknowing” God of Genesis 3:9-11. They were skeptical that the “almighty” God would not have known that Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree.<sup>15</sup> Gnostics were unwilling to accept that God is not always all-knowing. Therefore, they believed in the existence of a lower creator God (*Demiurgos*: craftsman, architect).

Some Gnostic texts also contain a mythological drama where the divine element falls from the *Pleroma* into the evil world and inhabits some human beings. Gnostics are a class of individuals who possess this divine spark. The divine element seeks freedom from the evil material world. *Gnosis* is imparted through a heavenly revealer (redeemer) figure, who comes from the divine realm and will ascend to it again. This revealer of *gnosis* has taken on many forms within Gnostic literature. Sometimes the revealer is the biblical figure Seth, Jesus Christ, or

Simon Magus.<sup>16</sup> Salvation is gained through *gnosis* of the divine element (God) in humankind. The goal of the Gnostic is the return of the spark to the *Pleroma*. This brief overview of Gnostic ideology is characteristic of many texts found in the Nag Hammadi library, the Bruce and Askew Codices, and the Codex Tchacos.

Another characteristic of Gnostics is their reproof of Moses and their claim to possess the correct interpretations of Jewish scriptures.<sup>17</sup> These reinterpretations are what connect Gnosticism to Judaism. Gnosticism, especially in what has been defined as Sethian-Gnosticism, respected and adored the biblical Seth, son of Adam.<sup>18</sup> Their belief in an unknowable God stems from the Hebrew Bible. Many texts contain the traditions from Genesis. The personification of wisdom (Sophia) which has Jewish roots can also be found in Gnostic literature.<sup>19</sup> Since creation is evil, Gnostics believed in a Demiurge. The Gnostic Demiurge is the Jewish God of the Hebrew Bible. Whereas Judaism created a complex angelology and demonology, and apocalyptic literature to

<sup>16</sup> For examples concerning the role of Simon Magus in Gnostic thought see: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.23.3 and 1.27.4; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.15; *Martyrdom of Peter* 3. The church fathers considered Simon Magus to be an important figure in the advent of Gnostics.

<sup>17</sup> For an example of this see the *Apocryphon of John* (NH II 13.19-20; 23.3; 29.6).

<sup>18</sup> *Three Steles of Seth*, NHC VII, 5: 118, 12-13; Seth is a Gnostic saviour figure.

<sup>19</sup> The personification of wisdom (Genesis 1:1, Sirach 24:1-9, Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-27, Proverbs 8:22-36). Wisdom was created by God as his first act, pre-existing the world and its creation. Wisdom is the fashioner of all things; she is also intelligent, pure, holy, unique, unpolluted, and all-powerful. Because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. She is the breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. She is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness. 1 Enoch 42:1-3. Since Gnostics believe creation to be evil, Sophia's role in creation is seen as her greatest shame. Sophia has a dual role. She is a fallen being but also a saviour and a life-giving mother. Compare to Genesis 1:2, which can be interpreted or translated as “the spirit of God”.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 3:11



account for evil in the world, the Gnostics created a lower creator God (Demiurge) and renounced this world. The Gnostic Demiurge helps to solve the problem of evil in the world, taking the blame from the unknowable God to preserve his ultimate purity.

The Gnostics use three specific examples from the Hebrew Bible to demonstrate their understanding of the inferiority of the Jewish God. The passage from Exodus 20:5 is always used to support their claims: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me" (NRSV). Isaiah 45:5 also serves the same purpose: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me" (NRSV), as well as Isaiah 46:9: "for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (NRSV). These texts are interpreted as a way of showing the arrogance and idiocy of the Jewish God.<sup>20</sup>

The Gnostic texts must be carefully scrutinized, because they are the primary sources containing the most relevant information concerning these people. Finally there is the opportunity for less ambiguity to surround those that Epiphanius called a "blasphemous assembly".<sup>21</sup> According to Irenaeus the Gnostics claimed to possess the history of the Jews. Irenaeus exposes their line of reasoning in *Against Heresies* 1.30.10, "through Moses [Ialdabaoth] brought Abraham's descendents out of Egypt, and gave unto them the law, and made them the Jews".<sup>22</sup> The other side of the story can be told now. Christian traditions,

teachings, and beliefs appear to be completely absent from the *Apocalypse of Adam*. This is an excellent example of non-Christian Gnosticism. It is instead dependent on Jewish apocalyptic traditions. This tractate and others like it are evidence that Gnosticism is not exclusively dependent upon Christianity but most likely began from Judaism.

Three codices from the Nag Hammadi library will now be examined in order to give the Gnostics a voice. A close look at the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Testimony of Truth*, and *Melchizedek* will reveal the importance of Jewish influences on Gnostic thought.

### *Apocryphon of John: A commentary on Genesis 1-8*

The central Gnostic myth contained within the *Apocryphon of John*<sup>23</sup> has no Christian features. What makes the *Apocryphon of John* a Christian text is the frame story found within it concerning the resurrected Jesus. It is most likely that this was later added by a Christian editor since the Gnostic myth reflects pre-Christian ideals. Christianity had many characteristics that made it attractive for Gnostics, who then adopted many of the teachings of Jesus and viewed him as the revealer of *gnosis*. For example, the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23-38 ends with Adam, son of God and makes Jesus a direct descendant from the seed of Seth. It is evident from texts such as the *Apocryphon of John* that Seth is an important figure in Gnostic literature. Seth represents a hope for humanity, being the third son of Adam and Eve, after the violent murder of Abel and the exile of Cain.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Apocryphon of John* II 11,19-21; *Hypostasis of the Archons* II 86.27 – 87.4; *Apoc. Adam* V 64.1-29.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 206.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 178.

<sup>23</sup> NHC II, 1: 1,1-32, 9 equals IV, 1: 1,1-49,28; NH Library, 104-23; Foester 1:105-20; Layton, 23-51; NH Scriptures, 103-32

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 4:1-16; *Apocryphon of John* 24, 35.

Birger Pearson notes that a part of the *Apocryphon of John* is found in Irenaeus's account of the teachings of Gnostics that he called "Barbelo Gnostics" (*Against Heresies* 1.29). Pearson contends that Irenaeus did not know that these teachings were presented in the text as a revelation of Jesus Christ to his apostle John. If Pearson's interpretation is correct then this would indicate the *Apocryphon of John* was in a more archaic form compared to what is found in the Berlin Codex 8502 and in the codices at Nag Hammadi (II, III, IV). The *Apocryphon of John* existed prior to 185 C.E. and must have undergone stages of literary development as Gnosticism became more Christianized.<sup>25</sup>

The core of the *Apocryphon of John* is a commentary of Genesis 1-8, used to create an anthropogonic myth. The tractate begins by stating that it contains "the teaching [of the savior], and [the revelation] of the mysteries, [and the] things hidden in silence, [even these things which] he taught John, [his] disciple" (1, 1-5). In a time of grievance, doubt and contemplation concerning the reasons for the true mission of Jesus, John experiences a revelation from Jesus (1, 20-30; 2, 1-15). The rest of the tractate continues through the voice of Jesus as he teaches John the Gnostic understanding of theosophy (2, 25-36; 3, 1-36), cosmogony (9, 25-35; 10, 1-20), anthropogony (15, 1-35; 16, 1-35; 17, 1-6), and ends with a description of the triple descent of *Pronoia* (30, 12-36; 31, 1-22).

Jesus explains that the Monad is a monarchy with nothing above, and is described as being the invisible spirit of whom it is not right to think of as a god (2, 26-36). Section 2, 31 which states "pure light into which no eye can look" is

reminiscent of Exodus 33:17-23. God will not allow Moses to look directly at him, since no one can see God and still live. Similar to the image of light found in the *Apocryphon of John*, Exodus 34:29-35 describes how the face of Moses would shine after he spoke with God. His face shone so brightly that he had to cover it with a veil upon returning to the Israelites (34:33). In the *Apocryphon of John*, what immediately follows is "He [is the] invisible [Spirit] of whom it is not right [to think] of him as a god, or something similar" (2, 34-35). This sounds very similar to Exodus 3: 14, where one reads "I AM WHO I AM", and also Exodus 20:4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (NRSV). The tradition of not being able to perceive the image of God has an extensive history within Judaism.

Following a lengthy discourse of negative theology (2, 33-35 to 4, 25), the unknowable God creates through his first thought, Barbelo (4, 28-36). The figure of Wisdom is presented with some ambiguity. On one hand, Wisdom is described as possessing good aspects: heavenly, and brings enlightenment (4, 35). Yet, on the other hand, she has negative aspects: creation; obstacle to enlightenment (9, 30). This ambiguity is present in Sethianism, since in this tradition Wisdom is split in two: Barbelo and the Lower Sophia. Barbelo became the womb for everything for she is who is prior to them all (5, 5). This sounds very similar to the Jewish idea of divine Wisdom. Barbelo from the *Apocryphon of John* can be compared to the Jewish concept of Wisdom found in Genesis 1:2, Sirach 24:1-9, Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-27, and Proverbs 8:22-36. In Proverbs 8:22-24 one reads, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at

<sup>25</sup> Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 30. This appears in footnote 3 of Pearson's book.

the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water" (NRSV). Interestingly, the *Apocryphon of John* says that the thought of the invisible Spirit performed a deed and she came forth, she who had appeared before him in the shine of his light (4, 27-35). This is connected to Wisdom 7:25-26 which states, "for she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (NRSV). Genesis 1:1 is comparable to (13, 13): "then the mother [Barbelo] began to move to and fro." In the Genesis account, Wisdom or the wind from God swept over the face of the waters. The imagery is nearly the same. Later in the *Apocryphon of John* (13, 17-28) it is clarified that the mother moving to and fro is not the same as when Moses said "above the waters" in Genesis 1:2. Instead this action of the mother is a sign of her repentance for creating without the consent of her consort, and the wickedness of the theft which her son had committed. Salvation is achieved when the mother's dissipated essence is restored to its original unity.

The concept of Wisdom begins to differ once the *Apocryphon of John* describes the fall of Sophia. Her fall is a mistake and brings into being the Demiurge Yaltabaoth. This archon is ignorant darkness. It is at this point that the Genesis story comes back into play. This weak archon has three names; Yaltabaoth, Saklas, and Samael. The third name Samael is said to be "impious in his arrogance which is in him. For he said, 'I am God and there is no other God beside me,' for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come" (11, 19-22). This is the Jewish God from the Hebrew Bible. Again Samael

says "I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me" (13, 9). The narrator explains in (13, 10-13) that by Samael "announcing [his jealousy] he indicated to the angels who attended him that there exists another God, for if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?" This is a reinterpretation of Exodus 20:5, Isaiah 45:5 and 46:9. These Gnostics were obviously very well familiar with the writings attributed to Moses.

Yaltabaoth-Saklas-Samael and his angels created man according to the image of God and according to the likeness of his authorities (15, 1-5). This sounds identical to what the God of the Hebrew Bible says at Genesis 1:26. The first man in both accounts is called Adam. The Gnostic account, however, describes in explicit detail the separate creation of every part of the body of Adam (15, 14 to 17, 36). The lifeless being that results is from the rabbinic golem tradition (19, 13-15). Golem originates from the Hebrew in Genesis 2:7 and is also present in Psalm 139:16 where it describes as being Adam a lifeless mass when first created. Then Yaltabaoth is tricked into breathing into the face of Adam the spirit of the power of his mother (19, 23-30). This act transfers the power of the mother from Yaltabaoth to Adam. In Genesis 2:7 the act of God breathing the breath of life into Adam's nostrils makes him a living being. The archons then place Adam in paradise where there is the tree of life (21, 16-25). This is the same concept as found in Genesis 2:8-9. This anthropogony is an innovative reinterpretation of Genesis and other Jewish traditions.

In Genesis 4:1 one reads of the birth story of Cain. This story is also found in the *Apocryphon of John* (24, 15-26).<sup>26</sup> Seth is

<sup>26</sup> For similar examples see: *Hypostasis of the Archons* (91, 11-14); *Apocalypse of Adam* (66, 25-28); *On the Origin of the World* (113, 34-114, 5, 114, 14-15).

the good son to replace Abel who was killed by Cain.<sup>27</sup> He is a prominent Gnostic saviour since he is a revealer of *gnosis*.<sup>28</sup> In Genesis 4:25; 5:3, and 1 Enoch 85-90, Seth is connected to the Messiah. Many more parallels between the *Apocryphon of John* and other stories from Genesis exist. To mention briefly, this includes: the serpent in paradise (22, 10; Genesis 3:1); and Noah and the flood (28, 32-35; Genesis 7).

After this exegetical analysis of the *Apocryphon of John* there are good reasons to assume that it is highly unlikely that Gnosticism is a deviant form of Christianity. It does not make sense that the Gnostics would accept Jesus as the Christ and then go back to the Hebrew Scriptures to create their elaborate myths. Jesus as the revealer of *gnosis* must have been added to their already established cosmogony.

### *The Testimony of Truth*

The *Testimony of Truth*<sup>29</sup> is a fragmentary tractate from the Nag Hammadi Library that is in very poor condition. Much is lost in lacunae. Thankfully scholars such as Giversen and Pearson have been able to translate and restore the majority of the content.<sup>30</sup> This tractate does contain Christian elements. It is one of the most important documents of Christian Gnosticism. The author believes Jesus to be the Son of Man, who was baptized by John in the Jordan River (30.19-25). Polemical passages argue against catholic

Christians and other Gnostics. The Church fathers were not the only ones attempting to purify Christianity. The Gnostics had strong beliefs and were willing to argue against those who did not share their unique Christology. This text also clearly polemicizes against Judaism. The Pharisees and the scribes of the Law are under attack. There are several references to themes and characters from the Hebrew Bible. Even this "Christian" Gnostic community used the Jewish Scriptures in order to better define their beliefs.

But of what sort is this God? First (he) maliciously refused Adam from eating of the tree of knowledge. And secondly he said, "Adam, where are you?" God does not have foreknowledge; (otherwise), would he not know from the beginning? (And) afterwards he said, "Let us cast him (out) of this place, lest he eat of the tree of life and live for ever." Surely he has shown himself to be a malicious grudge. And what kind of a God is this? For great is the blindness of those who read, and they did not know him. And he said, "I am the jealous God; I will bring the sins of the fathers upon the children until three (and) four generations." And he said, "I will make their heart thick, and I will cause their mind to become blind, that they might not know nor comprehend the things that are said." But these things he has said to those who believe in him (and) serve him!<sup>31</sup>

The God of Genesis is characterized as being a blind and not omniscient. This section from the *Testimony of Truth* directly quotes passages from Genesis 2:17; 3:9; 3:22-24; and Exodus 20:5. The *Testimony of Truth* tells the story of the "Garden of Eden"<sup>32</sup> from the viewpoint of the serpent in the form of a Gnostic

<sup>27</sup> The birth of Seth see: *Apocryphon of John* (II 24, 34-25, 2), *Hypostasis of the Archons* (91, 31-33), Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.9.

<sup>28</sup> Seth as the father of the Gnostic race: *Apocalypse of Adam* 65, 6-9 and also *Three Steles of Seth* 118, 12-13.

<sup>29</sup> NHC IX, 3:29, 6-74, 30+; *NH Library*, 448-59; *NH Scriptures*, 613-28

<sup>30</sup> James M. Robinson (ed.). *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures Complete in One Volume* (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 448.

<sup>31</sup> *Testimony of Truth* (IX, 3. 47.14-48.16).

<sup>32</sup> Genesis 2:15.

midrash (45, 23-49, 10).<sup>33</sup> The serpent is portrayed as being the revealer of life and knowledge, and is therefore seen positively (IX, 3: 45, 23-49, 10).<sup>34</sup> Again, the God of the Hebrew Bible is viewed negatively since he wants to withhold knowledge from Adam (46, 16-47, 4; Genesis 3:8-13). *Testimony of Truth* (45, 23-49, 7) is similar in style to a Jewish expository midrash.<sup>35</sup> This Gnostic midrash paraphrases texts from Genesis which is similar to Jewish targumic traditions. The *Testimony of Truth* even contains references to King David and King Solomon (70, 1-30). More Jewish than Christian literary influences are evident within the text. Although the Jewish Scriptures are analysed by utilizing Jewish exegetical methods, the interpretations are diametrically opposed. By the time this tractate came to be in its present form this community was no longer Jewish but were followers of Jesus Christ. The Jewish roots of Gnosticism could not have been excluded from their understanding of Jesus as the Christ. The author of *The Testimony of Truth* was cognizant of Jewish traditions in a similar fashion to the writers of the canonical Gospels.

### **Melchizedek:**

The *Epistle to the Hebrews* found in the Christian canon was not written by Paul but has been traditionally attributed to him. The author of this work remains anonymous but can be referred to as being Deutero-Pauline. Only an approximate

date can be estimated between 60 and 95 C.E. based on its content and other letters of the same time period. As the title suggests, it is most plausible that the original audience were Jewish-Christians. *Hebrews* 7 goes into detail concerning Melchizedek. This character is described in *Hebrews* 7:2 as being King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God. He is a figure from the Hebrew Bible, appearing only briefly in Genesis 14:17-24 and Psalm 110:4. In the story found in Genesis, Melchizedek interacts with Abraham, but only momentarily to bless him.<sup>36</sup> It is in *Hebrews* that Paul points out the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood to that of Aaron in the following respects. First, he resembles the Son of God, as he remains a priest forever (7:3). Next, even Abraham paid him tithes (7:4); he blessed Abraham in 7:6 which is interpreted in 7:7 as being the result of the inferior being blessed by the superior. Levi, yet unborn, paid him tithes in the person of Abraham (7:9). The permanence of his priesthood in Jesus Christ implied the abrogation of the Levitical system (7:11). *Hebrews* was written in Greek, so most likely the author would have read and used the Septuagint. Mystery surrounds Melchizedek since not much is said about him in Scripture. He is essentially a very insignificant Jewish figure when compared to others.

Imagine the surprise when a tractate featuring Melchizedek the priest of the Most High God was discovered at Nag Hammadi. Why would the Gnostics find this figure appealing? If Gnosticism does not have strong ties to Judaism, the answer to this question is even more perplexing. Could this tractate be based on *Hebrews*? Out of all the great mythological and biblical figures found

<sup>33</sup> Compare this portrayal of the role of Eve and the serpent to those found in *Hypostasis of the Archons* (89, 32-91, 7) and *On the Origin of the World* (113, 21-114, 4).

<sup>34</sup> Compare this positive evaluation of the serpent of Genesis 3 to *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II, 4) and *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II, 5). Also consider the reference to other biblical serpents (48, 18-26; Exodus 7:8-12; Numbers 21: 9; 48, 26-49, 7).

<sup>35</sup> Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> In Genesis 14 Abraham is still called Abram. Salem is a short form of Jerusalem, see Ps 76:2. Melchizedek blesses Abraham: Genesis 14:19; Hebrews 7:1.



within Antiquity, Melchizedek is less than minor.<sup>37</sup> If this community did not come from Jewish roots, how would they have stumbled upon this ambiguous figure? The Gnostic community that preserved and upheld this text must have come from roots deep within Jewish traditions. There is no mention of Melchizedek in the canonical Gospels, or in any other tractates from Nag Hammadi.<sup>38</sup>

The present tractate *Melchizedek*<sup>39</sup> is only partially preserved. The genre of this tractate can be identified as apocalyptic, with features drawing from Jewish apocalyptic literature. Melchizedek is an eschatological figure in this tractate, especially in the third major section (18, 11-27, 10). The tractate opens by declaring that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and came down from the aeons in order that a divine revelation may be given. Jesus is described as teaching in parables and riddles, having a following of holy disciples, and being resurrected from the dead on the third day (2, 1-4, 1). The text is difficult to read because of the damage it has endured over time. Thankfully it is still possible to make sense of what has been written. The introduction continues by emphasizing the humanity of Jesus. The author is clearly opposing those who claim that Jesus was fully divine and only appeared to be human. Interestingly, this is very characteristic of Jewish-Christians of this time, as they viewed Jesus as being

human and only being the adopted Son of God upon baptism. For the author of *Melchizedek* Jesus truly was begotten, ate and drunk like a human being, was circumcised according to Jewish traditions, was of the flesh, suffered, and arose from the dead (5, 1-11).

Three main divisions in the tractate are evident. The first revelation is mediated by the angel Gamaliel to Melchizedek (1, 1-14, 15). Melchizedek is called the Holy One, High-Priest, the perfect hope, and the gifts of life (5, 15-17). Gamaliel was sent to the congregation of the children of Seth (5, 20). This is the biblical Seth from Genesis, and in this tractate Melchizedek is in connection to him in some way that is not entirely obvious. This community possessed deep admiration for many figures of the Hebrew Bible. A very different interpretation of the fall of Adam and Eve is presented (10, 1-11, 10). The chronology of events seems to be inverted since when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, they trampled the Cherubim and the flaming sword. Unfortunately the tractate is so badly damaged in this particular section that it is difficult to deduce any more relevant information.

The second part of the tractate (14, 15-18, 1-20) is Melchizedek's reaction to the secret revelation he has just received. First he rejoices and glorifies God. The text reads "and I began to [...] God [...]" (14, 19-21) but it should be assumed here that Melchizedek is worshipping God in this section because of the surrounding verses, even though the word is lost in a lacuna. Melchizedek goes on to proclaim a prayer of praises to God, Barbelo the mother of the aeons, the four Luminaries (Harmozel, Oriel, Daveithe, Eleleth), and Jesus Christ (16, 16-18, 6).

The third main part of *Melchizedek* (18, 20-27, 10) is very fragmentary. Scholars must

<sup>37</sup> Melchizedek is of minor importance (and popularity) when compared to the great heroes of Greek and Roman mythology, or to the Israelite patriarchs, Kings, and prophets. That is not to say Melchizedek is of no significance. He was subjected to Jewish interpretation and was of importance in Christian circles as well.

<sup>38</sup> Melchizedek is present in the Gnostic fragment from Bala'izah, the *Second Book of Jeu* in the Bruce Codex, *Pistis Sophia*, Book 4, in the Askew Codex, and *Pistis Sophia*, Books 1-3.

<sup>39</sup> (NHC IX, 1:1, 1-27, 10; *NH Library*, 438-44; *NH Scriptures* 595-605).

act as detectives, searching this ancient text for evidence of its true message. It seems as though heavenly beings are appearing to Melchizedek since 18, 20 can be translated as “many [...] appear [...] there [...] appear...”. Then after this, 19, 10 states “they gave [...] their words [...] and they said to me, [...Melchizedek, Priest] of God [Most High]”. This vision also includes mention of the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus (25, 1-9). Jesus was physically abused, then crucified from the third hour of the Sabbath-eve until the ninth hour. He then arose from the dead. Whether this resurrection occurred over three days is unknown. In the concluding passages, Melchizedek is described as being a great warrior-priest. He is instructed by the heavenly beings to be strong because the enemy archons have made war. Melchizedek is a heavenly figure in this tractate, even possessing the power and strength to battle archons. The influence of *Hebrews 7* is predominant throughout the text, but the tradition originated from Genesis. Melchizedek’s role as a heavenly warrior-priest (26, 1-10) is from Jewish apocalyptic speculation.

## Conclusion

The basic Gnostic myth and ideologies stem from Judaism because Gnosticism began in a Jewish *milieu*. Stating the Jewish origins of Gnosticism does not detract from the religion itself, but aids modern scholars to better understand and to envisage the *milieu* from which Gnosticism sprang. Documents from the first-century or earlier are needed to make this thesis bullet-proof, but by closely examining the texts it can be concluded at this point that Judaism influenced Gnosticism, and that most of the earliest Gnostics were probably Jewish. That is not to say, however, that no other religions or cultures influenced the resulting Gnostic ideologies that are present in the forth-century Coptic

documents which are currently available from Nag Hammadi.

Suggesting that Gnosticism originated in Judaism does not deny the other cultural and religious influences present in Gnostic literature. Throughout the first century CE, Greek religion and culture dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Platonic-Pythagorean metaphysics have a strong influence on the Gnostic concept of *gnosis*. Allegorical interpretation of Mosaic Law in Diaspora Judaism cannot be totally ruled out. There were conservative Jews, and Jews who could more closely be associated with philosophers. Judaism was far from being uniform. Deriving spiritual truths from the Law is not considered to be conservative Judaism. Positing a Jewish sect who could reinterpret their own scriptures to the extent found in the Gnostic texts is entirely plausible. We have seen through the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the Essene community interpreted the Jewish scriptures differently from what can be considered conservative Judaism.

If Gnosticism is older than the turn of the Common Era, it might have become stronger immediately around the time of the Roman occupation (circa 37 B.C.E.). The traditions within the Nag Hammadi codices reflect ancient beliefs. This would mean that Gnosticism began as a religious conviction independent of and prior to Christianity. It seems that the influence of Judaism is too great to account for any other direct site of origin. Diaspora Judaism accounts for the Hellenistic, Platonic influences incorporated into Gnosticism. If the first Gnostics were pagans of some sort (Romans or Greeks) then they would not have claimed the Jewish scriptures for themselves. Roman and Greek mythology and philosophy provide a myriad of possible sources of interpretation and inspiration. It is

therefore highly unlikely that the Hebrew Scriptures would play such a central role in their ideologies. Jewish influences have shown to be central to the *Aprocryphon of John*, the *Testimony of Truth*, and *Melchizedek*. These three documents are Gnostic Christian, yet still contain evidence of strong influences from Judaism. These are only three examples from the Nag Hammadi Library and many other tractates show evidence of Jewish influence. As scholars continue to work on these texts, the mysteries behind the origins of Gnosticism may be revealed.

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*Lamp Beaverton*

*Martha Elias Downey*

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# GNOSTIC ORIGINS AND THE APOCRYPHON OF JOHN

51

Robert Smith

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## Identifying the Gnostics

Traditionally, Gnosticism is regarded as a second century Christian heresy; however, to declare Gnosticism as a heresy is to presume that it can only be understood in relation to the Christian Church. Indeed, many think of Gnosticism as a form of Hellenized Christian thought that added elements from other religious traditions; however, the attempt to unravel the real events in any certain historical sense is extremely challenging. First of all, it is difficult to ascribe set characteristics and practices to Gnostic thought because of the variety of texts and interpretations. Majella Franzmann explains that by the time the thoughts of the founders of the early Christian movements were written down, several crises had already permanently altered the records, which exhibit evidence of internal squabbles and external pressures.<sup>1</sup> This includes internal clashes between different groups, resistance from those opposed to movement beyond the religious boundaries of the founding community, early challenges to leadership and authority, and external persecution. Discussing the dynamics of early religious movements, Franzmann continues stating that

Inevitably as a religious movement moves from stories and simple sayings or statements of belief to more complex doctrines, the potential for disagreement among members and larger groupings increases. As more rules are made about behaviour and ritual, further room for disagreement arises. Rules are as much about defining what is left out as much as what should be kept in, and at this [early] stage of settling down and increasing institutionalism, various Christian groups became more concerned about who was a member and who was not a member. At this stage, the labels of orthodoxy and heterodoxy become important for the purposes of making a clear distinction between groups.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary research on Gnosticism, particularly since the Nag Hammadi discovery, strongly suggests that the heterodox have been treated unfairly within the histories of mainstream Christianity. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are relative to where one stands, and very difficult to determine in the early stages of religious movements. It is important to note that Gnosticism existed as part of early Christianity, but also independently from it. As Christianity spread, it converted Christians from increasingly different backgrounds and worldviews.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity: Taking the 'Heretics' Seriously," *JRH* 29 (2005): 117.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 118.

The Gnostic version of early Christianity drew from the Gnostic movement in Greco-Roman society, the latter being older and more commonly widespread at the time. In contrast, Proto-Orthodox Christians drew from a different heritage. Proto-Orthodox groups (later identified as mainstream) labelled Gnostic Christian groups as heretical, and Gnostic Christian groups in turn labelled Proto-Orthodox Christians as heretics.

One of the primary differences between the two groups is that, in contrast to Judeo-Christian developments, Gnostic thought does not focus on knowledge of God and his agency throughout history (i.e., the Jewish covenantal promises). Rather Gnosticism focuses on knowledge of a higher transcendent realm, as well as the nature and origin of the soul and its reunification with God. From the Gnostic perspective, salvation is highly individualized and relies on self-knowledge of who one is, where one comes from, and to where one is going. Furthermore, the earthly person of Jesus (his life and death) is relatively insignificant. Even though the Gnostics were not as concerned with the human Jesus, they were willing to accept him as the ascended Christ figure who reveals salvific knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The principle accounts of early Gnostic thought come from the heresiological reports of the early Church Fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Rome, Hippolytus, etc.) and from the Gnostics themselves. The heresiological reports vary significantly in their treatment of the early Gnostics. Notably, all the reports from the early church heresy hunters see Gnostic systems as a threat to the Christianity they espoused. Franzmann points out that there is a distinct

disadvantage in depending on the apologists for information, since it is the nature of such writings to describe opponents in a derogatory way.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, subsequent accounts from the Church Fathers become increasingly hostile. The earliest reports come from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Justin Martyr comments on Simon Magus (circa 150 CE), who is also mentioned in the Book of Acts (8:9-24). In the biblical account, Simon is portrayed as a charismatic charlatan who wants to bribe Peter and John for the power to "lay hands." He is also portrayed as a Samaritan, which means he would have been familiar with Judaism. It is important to note, however, that Simon is not a Christian.

Additional heresiological verification of Simon as a Gnostic comes from Irenaeus' account in *Against Heresies* (circa 185 CE). Therein, he gives a detailed summary of a myth that Simon espouses, which is very similar to the Gnostic myth found in the *Apocryphon of John*. It is noteworthy that, in his apology, Irenaeus also reports of Gnostics claiming to be "no longer Jews, nor yet are they Christians" (*Against Heresies* 1.24.6). This might suggest that Gnostics had somehow abandoned their traditional Jewish heritage, and did not embrace the "Christian" message. While it is apparent that Irenaeus and Justin Martyr did not know the Gnostic myth in its final form as found in the *Apocryphon of John*, it is clear from their writings that some of the main structural characteristics of Gnostic thought existed as a non-Christian system, circa 185 CE.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Grassi, "The Gnostic View of Jesus and the Teacher Today," *RE* 77 (1982): 337.

<sup>4</sup> Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity," 120.

<sup>5</sup> B. A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 26-33. See also Frederik Wisse, translation and introduction to "The Apocryphon of John," *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson (2d ed.; The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1988; repr., New York: HarperOne, 1990), 104.

In contrast, turning to the Gnostic writings reveals a complex picture of different groups with diverse theologies and organization. The earliest Gnostic Christian systems, otherwise known as "Sethian" or "Classic" Gnosticism, developed in relative proximity to Judaism, likely in Alexandria and around the Eastern Mediterranean. It should be noted that the word "Sethian" is an overarching term used to categorize various subgroups that shared common elements—most notably the reference to the character of Seth. Another particularly evident characteristic of Sethian Gnosticism is the revelation of gnosis, or salvific knowledge, through the construction of elaborate myths. Gnostic myth is largely concerned with beginning and end times, and includes themes of theosophy, cosmogony, anthropogony, and soteriology.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the myths serve a purpose and are used polemically. John Painter examines the presentation of history in the ancient texts, which he uses as criteria to isolate and identify the Gnostic from Proto-Orthodox developments. He argues that in contrast to Proto-Orthodox perspectives, which emphasize the priority of history, Sethian Gnosticism rejects history by focusing attention on myths on the beginning and the end, with no valid place for history in the middle. Furthermore, any historical events adopted into the systems are treated as myths that give symbolic explanations of the nature of man in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Another element that scholars emphasize as having heavily influenced the Sethian Gnostic worldview—particularly the sharp metaphysical dualism between the immaterial and material worlds—is Platonism. Pearson notes that Plato's work *Timaeus* (5th century BCE) reflects a cosmological structure that posits that the real being of things is appropriated through knowledge of a metaphysical structure that is the truer reality supporting what we perceive and experience in the physical world.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, understanding this structure influences people to a right ethic and puts them in line with the cosmic order. Gnostics, however, reinterpreted Platonist elements in non-Platonist directions. From the Gnostic view, metaphysical reality is explained in mythological terms, particularly through the Gnostic Sophia myth. In the Gnostic cosmogony, the physical world is perceived as an error, or a rift between higher and lower realms, which traps the true self from reuniting with God. As a result, Sethian Gnostic systems emphasize the dualistic split between the spiritual and physical, which underscores the sharp dichotomy between good and evil.

PHEME PERKINS reminds us that in the ancient world knowledge and education were associated with an elite upper class, yet the majority of people were still illiterate and relied on oral traditions.<sup>9</sup> For

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> J. Painter, "Gnosticism: An Ancient Problem Raises Contemporary Questions," *JTSA* 1 (1972): 45. Painter brings up many points that deserve further qualification, such as whether the rejection of history is part of the social conscious makeup of the Gnostic, or if it is an intentional rejection of tradition. What he shows is that Gnostic Christians were clearly coming from a different historical and mythic vantage point, and interpreting Christianity in a different way than that of the Proto-Orthodox Christians. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that two perspectives did not occupy the same space, as

evident by Paul's dealings with the Gnostics in the New Testament. It is clear that these perspectives lived side-by-side and intermingled to the extent that they may have attended the same congregations. While there are many core differences, the interaction between early Christians is not unlike the way different denominations are juxtaposed in modern times. In the process, they created texts and interpretations that drew from different authoritative sources and influences, which they used as apologetic defenses in the struggle for definition.

<sup>8</sup> Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> P. Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (Theological Inquiries; ed Lawrence Boadt et al.; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980), 8-11, 21.

these people, old myths, formulae, writing, and philosophical terms carried weight and authority. Perkins associates the Gnostic movement with members of the growing literate middle class who sought an authority equivalent to educated discourse without having made the conversion to analytic thought, and further claims that, while instructional, the philosophic dialogue tradition could not have been a direct source of Gnostic composition. To emphasize this point she calls attention to the fact that Gnostic writings do not argue in the analytic terms established by the philosophical schools. Rather, they tell stories which mix archaic myth, biblical exegesis, and philosophical terminology.

Perkins explains further that the allegorical esotericism espoused by Gnosticism emphasized the transcendence of the individual, and groups generally followed an unstructured form of association that had little in the way of fixed dogma. Unlike Judaism or Proto-Orthodox Christians, which focused on God's agency in history and covenantal plans for humanity, Gnostic Christians were free from ties to particular events or places (such as the crucifixion). Furthermore, Perkins claims that Gnostics were more concerned about participation in individual cults than association with a holy person or larger group. The inconsistency that resulted from one group to another led to diverse views and disputes between the different Gnostics perspectives. Perkins points out, however, that despite a lack coherency between groups, there are two distinguishing characteristics that can generally be applied to early Christian Gnostics: (1) they interpreted the Bible by using a different myth of the soul's origin and destiny, while also incorporating the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic urgency; and (2) they have a distinctive reaction *against* Jewish and biblical traditions.

Perkins identifies similar hostilities found in the Johannine community, and indicates the end of the first century where circumstances were ripe for such polarizing ambivalence to have occurred.

Adding to this, Franzmann summarizes some of the contemporary scholarship that paints a marginalized picture of the early Gnostic Christians by emphasizing that they were politically and culturally on the periphery in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>10</sup> This is arguably because they were situated between the East and Rome and, as such, existed between Jewish and Hellenic thought. Although not all Gnostics had a Jewish heritage, it is presumed that many Gnostic Christians were essentially Gnostic Jews who converted to the Christian message, thus they understood some things about Jewish teachings, doctrines and belief systems.<sup>11</sup> They had also absorbed a great deal of Hellenic philosophy and culture.

### ***The Apocryphon of John***

The *Apocryphon of John* is understood as a Sethian work from among similar texts from the Nag Hammadi tractates, the "Untitled Text" of the Bruce Codex, and two writings from the Codex Tchacos. Key characteristics of Sethian texts include a focus on Seth as a savior figure and ancestor of the elect; a divine triad of a Father, Mother, and Son; light beings and other supernatural entities; the evil Yaldabaoth who tries to destroy the seed of Seth; three descents of the Savior that lead to salvation; and rituals of baptism

<sup>10</sup> Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity," 125-126.

<sup>11</sup> K. Rudolph, "Zur Soziologie, soziologischen 'Verortung' und Rolle der Gnosis in der Spätantike," *Studien zum Menschenbild in Gnosis und Manichäismus* (ed. P. Nagel; Wissenschaftliche Beiträge: Martin-Luther-Universität, 1979), 19-29. Quoted in Franzmann, "A Complete History of Early Christianity," 125-126.

and ascent.<sup>12</sup> This being said, not all the texts exhibit all the markers. Moreover, some texts show no Christian influence, while others show varying degrees of Christianization. Still, even texts outside the corpus reflect Sethian mythological elements, which underscore the significance of the Sethian brand of Gnosticism.

Four copies of the *Apocryphon of John* exist, but there are variations between the texts. The work can be divided into three sections: an apocalyptic framework (1,1-2,26; 31,25-32,9), revelation discourse (2,26-13,13), and a commentary on Genesis 1-7 (13,13-31,25) that was modified into a dialogue. The Nag Hammadi Codex (III,1) and the Berlin Codex (BG,2) represent independent translations into Coptic of a short Greek rendering, while Nag Hammadi Codices II,1 and IV,1 are copies of the same Coptic translation of a long Greek version. Pearson points out that the longer version contains material that is missing from the shorter version, such as the hymn of Pronoia (30,11-31,25), and references from the "Book of Zoroaster" (19,10).<sup>13</sup> The longer version also has Christ revealing to Adam and Eve the knowledge from the forbidden tree, whereas in the shorter version it is Epinoia—who is a manifestation of Sophia. Pearson notes further that the various versions emphasize that the Christian parts are secondary additions. Once one strips away the apocalyptic framework at the beginning and end of the text, the dialogue between Christ and John, and the few Christian glosses throughout, the remaining text stands

independently without any Christian references.<sup>14</sup>

Frederik Wisse states that *The Apocryphon of John* deals largely with the origin of evil and salvation.<sup>15</sup> As a revelatory dialogue between the risen Christ and the Apostle John, son of Zebedee,<sup>16</sup> the text reveals apocalyptic secrets and a salvific historiography. Wisse explains that the highest deity, or Father, is conceived as an ultimate and transcendent perfection that excludes all anthropocentrism and involvement in the world. Only the Father is self-existing—everything else emanates from him. This deity directly emanates a series of luminous beings, including Christ and Sophia, who, in turn, create other beings who are ultimately responsible for the creation of the material world. The cosmic order is divided into two: a higher heavenly realm and a lower heavenly realm. The beings in the higher heavenly realm are characterized as "luminaries" and "Aeons," who personify God's virtues like Truth, Understanding and Love. The "perfect Man" or "Adamas" also exists in this realm, and can be seen as a heavenly projection of Adam. A heavenly figure of Seth also exists, who is the son of the "perfect Man." Seth is placed below his father and Seth's seed or "the immovable race" is placed below him. Thus, Sethian Gnostics identify with the immovable race, and trace their origins back to the heavenly realm through the mythical lineage of Seth.

Contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition, evil occurs when Sophia desires to create without the consent of the Father. Consequently, what she ends up

<sup>12</sup> Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 60. See also T. Rasimus, "Ophite Gnosticism, Sethianism and the Nag Hammadi Library," *VC* 59 (2004): 249.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>15</sup> Frederik Wisse, translation and introduction to "The Apocryphon of John." *The Nag Hammadi Library*, edited by James M. Robinson (2d ed.; The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1988; repr., New York: HarperOne, 1990), 104.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark 3:17.



producing is the monstrous creator-god Yaldabaoth, who is essentially the god of the Hebrew Bible (9,25-10,19). Yaldabaoth uses his power to create a lower heavenly cosmos with angels, humans and the physical world (10,20-19,20). The supernatural beings in this lower realm are called "Archons," but their existence is perceived as an error and a "counterfeit" rendition that mimics the higher heavenly realm. Sophia tricks Yaldabaoth to breathe life into humans, and when he does he is stripped of the light power he received from his mother, which he greedily wants to retrieve and keep for himself (19,16-20,9). The evil powers of Yaldabaoth and his minions work to keep people in ignorance of their true source so that he can devise a way to steal it back, but Christ is sent from the higher heavenly realm to remind people of their true origins and the soul's way back to God (20,10-32,9). Only those who possess this knowledge can return to the higher heavenly realm, while the rest remained trapped and are reincarnated until they come to the saving knowledge.

The myth in the *Apocryphon of John* is complicated because characters are depicted at multiple levels. According to Pearson, Sophia is cast as (1) Barbelo—the higher wisdom that originates from God and through whom God begets the Christ (4,27-6,33); (2) the lower Aeon Sophia—who creates Yaldabaoth and inadvertently the world (9,25-20,9); (3) the restored Mother Sophia (23,20-23,26); (4) Epinoia—who resides in Adam and in who's image woman is created (20,15-20,28); and (5) Christ as the Pronoia—who brings about the final salvation of the Gnostic elect (30,11-32,5).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, many other characters have a counterparts: Yaldabaoth is clearly an imitation of the true transcendent God (10,20-11,22); as mentioned Adam is

connected to "Adamas" or the "perfect Man" (8,30-9,1); and the biblical figures of Cain, Abel, and Seth are also named as beings in the heavenly realm (10,34-36). Notably, Jesus plays a minor role compared to other figures in the *Apocryphon of John*, particularly compared to Sophia; although the two are linked. In fact, while it is clear that it is the Christ who appears and is the revealer of saving gnosis, there are arguably only three references to Jesus. This includes the mention of the "Nazarene" (1,14) and the "Savior" (31,33), and the ending colophon that mentions "Jesus Christ".

As a Sethian revelation dialogue, the *Apocryphon of John* shares many characteristics with other revelation dialogues in the Gnostic corpus. A characteristic of the revelation dialogue is the perplexities and troubling questions of the recipients just before the appearance of a heavenly revealer. In the *Apocryphon of John*, Christ appears to John when the disciple is in a desert place, pondering over such questions as: Why was the Savior sent into the world? Who is his Father, and of what nature is "the aeon to which we shall go" (1,17-29)? Gerard Luttikhuisen remarks that in many revelation dialogues the role of the ignorant recipient is played by a disciple, and further attempts to answer (1) what the lack of knowledge means considering that the disciple purportedly attended the teaching savior during his earthly existence, and (2) how Gnostic revelations are the related to the savior's earlier teachings.<sup>18</sup> He states:

We cannot presume *a priori* that these Gnostic evaluations of the teaching of the "earthly" Jesus are at the same time evaluations of the New Testament

<sup>17</sup> Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> G. P. Luttikhuisen, "The Evaluation of the Teaching of Jesus in Christian Gnostic Revelation Dialogues," *NT 30* (1988): 158-159.



accounts of this teaching... But we have also to reckon with the possibility that Christian Gnostic writers of the second or third century made *indirect* use of New Testament texts. Instances of this can be suspected in the...*Apocryphon of John*. In [it] we find an allusion to the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (28:20)...[where] the actual revelation to John is preceded by the statement, "I am the one who is with you (plur.) forever... The echoes of Matthew 28:20 in the *Apocryphon of John* are remarkable because of the fact that...further parallels with particular New Testament passages are very rare, if not wholly absent.<sup>19</sup>

Luttikhuisen concludes that there is a chronological distinction between incomplete or provisional teaching—what Jesus said before his death and resurrection, and a full and definitive teaching—the secret teaching of the resurrected Christ. Furthermore, the *Apocryphon of John* is not a Gnostic clarification of the earlier words of Jesus, but rather it conveys new revelations, which were quite possibly meant to surpass if not to replace the teachings of the "earthly" Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

## Comparative Analyses

### Context

To better understand the *Apocryphon of John*, it is necessary to know where it is situated in the Gnostic corpus. Most of the Gnostic texts defend groups against external pressures. Returning once again to Perkins, she outlines three contexts in which Gnostic polemic is addressed.<sup>21</sup> The first category, to which the *Apocryphon of John* belongs, is conversion. The texts used in conversion of both

Christians and non-Christians, present fairly extensive surveys of Gnostic teachings without overtly direct attacks on other doctrines. According to Perkins, the *Apocryphon of John* represents the most systematic exposition of gnosis, which seems to have been aimed at persuading fellow Christians. The second category of texts is concerned with asceticism. For Perkins, the content of the Gnostic revelation dialogues reveals that the majority of them insist on some form of asceticism.<sup>22</sup> The *Testimony of Truth* provides explicit examples of this tradition, which criticizes both Proto-Orthodox Christians and Gnostics who do not renounce the world and enslaving passions. Scholars refer to the overtly ascetic Gnostic texts as the "Thomas" tradition. The third and final category of texts is concerned with defense of the Gnostic tradition. According to Perkins, these texts attempt to demonstrate the truth of a Gnostic tradition, which derived from a particular Christology and conception of the Savior, against the growing strength of the Proto-Orthodox tradition.<sup>23</sup> It should also be noted that compared to some of the other texts, which exist in incomplete and incomprehensible fragments, the *Apocryphon of John* has remained largely intact.<sup>24</sup>

### *Poimandres and the Gospel of Truth*

John Painter attempts to demonstrate a common basis for Christian and pagan Gnosticism by comparing the *Poimandres* tractate of the Hermetica to the *Gospel of Truth*.<sup>25</sup> The content of both texts serve as comparative sources for the *Apocryphon of John*. He maintains that in order to determine a pre-Christian source for

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 164-165.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>21</sup> Perkins, *Gnostic Dialogue*, 157-162.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>24</sup> For an example of a Gnostic text that is incomplete and fragmented see *Melchizedek*.

<sup>25</sup> Painter, "Gnosticism," 48.

Gnosticism it is necessary to demonstrate three things: (1) a unified attitude that is not derived from Christian sources; (2) that this attitude can be found in documents where there is no evidence of Christian influence; (3) and that this attitude is both central and unified to both pagan and Christian forms of Gnosticism. Central to his analysis is the claim that the common element uniting these writings is a particular understanding of humans and their place in the universe, which is alien to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Written in Egypt in the second century CE, *Poimandres* is a non-Christian, Hellenic-Gnostic document belonging to the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The understanding of humans is set in a cosmological backdrop, in which creation is brought about by the will of God through the Logos, or Mind, who begets the Demiurge, and who in turn creates the physical world. Humans are created by the "Mind" of the Father and are like him. The physical world, however, is problematic because it brings about ignorance of God and death. Ignorance of God means ignorance of the true nature of humans, the remedy of which is to rediscover one's true nature and origin. This knowledge is conveyed from the Father to humans through the Logos, and concerns the nature of humans and their divine origin, rather than knowledge of God.

In comparison, the *Gospel of Truth* is identified as an early Valentinian work. Painter claims that although it lacks a more developed cosmological mythology characteristic of Gnosticism, it nevertheless points out the Gnostic understanding of existence. Reference to Jesus is incidental to the teaching concerning the nature of the created order and the perversion of that order through error. The Gnostic understanding is set against a familiar cosmological backdrop:

only the Father is self-existing—all things exist in him (27,9-11), and from him emanate a son and other beings called "Aeons" (38,7-36). One Aeon in particular concerns the "Word," and is the way of return to the Father (16,34-17,1). The erroneous act occurs when the Aeons become ignorant of the Father, thus creating a deficiency (17,4-36). Furthermore, salvation comes through the knowledge that awakens those to their true origin and reunites the human soul with the Father (18,34-19,17; 21,8-14).<sup>26</sup>

There are certain undeniable similarities between the texts in question. Interestingly, in neither document is there a redeemer or revealer figure of any significance. Rather the saving knowledge is intrinsic by virtue of humans having the essence of the divine spark within. A central theme is the problem of physical matter, which is brought about by error and which represents a trap that can only be overcome by realizing one's true nature and origin. This teaching is clearly foreign to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Painter concludes that the *possibility* of a non-Christian Gnosticism must be allowed since it can be shown that the Hermetica and second century Christian Gnostic texts share a common idea of knowledge, which is central to their systems, but alien to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

### *Alchemical Traditions*

Régine Charron draws attention back to the Egyptian alchemical tradition which clearly exhibits strong similarities to Gnostic texts.<sup>27</sup> She also argues that the alchemical tradition is often left out of the discussion, and as a result remains somewhat unknown. The alchemy to

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 50-51.

<sup>27</sup> R. Charron, "The Apocryphon of John and the Greco-Egyptian Alchemical Literature." VC 59 (2005): 438-448.

which Charron refers was practiced in the first few centuries CE in Egypt as a mystical art of transformation, which was applied to the soul as readily as it was to material elements. The principle evidence of Charron's thesis is supported by (1) metaphorical "baptismal" rituals of transformation, and (2) similarities between the Pronoia Hymn in the *Apocryphon of John* and the alchemical teachings of Cleopatra. Charron argues that the authors of Gnostic and alchemical texts display a common intellectual and religious background, as well as the common use of Jewish, Hermetic and Christian philosophical sources. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of both Gnostic and alchemical activities was the achievement of a salvific state of unity and of spiritual perfection. In addition to being a technical operation, Charron argues that alchemy also has a mystical aspect that can be understood as a redemptive process.

One of the most interesting features in the alchemical writings is the use of allegorical language. In their descriptions, the alchemists refer to metallic substance as composed of a body, soul, and spirit that are transformed into a perfected state through a process called dyeing, which comes from the same etymological root as baptism—namely to "dip." Further connection is given to the language in the descent of Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John* whose third and final descent is meant to bring light and redemption to the dead lying in the prison of darkness in Hades. By comparing the teaching of Cleopatra in the alchemical text to the Pronoia discourse, Charron attempts to establish the similarities in the themes and terminology as follows:

The numerous liturgical terms and motifs shared by both texts are remarkable: the dead lying in Hades (in prison, in darkness), the spirit of darkness, the sleep and call to

awakening, the illuminating and vivifying water coming from above, the "raising up" or resurrection, the sealing and the gift of immortality. In both texts, it is a female figure who "calls" to awakening: the soul (Psychè) in the alchemical writing, and Pronoia in the *Apocryphon of John*... Finally, the achievement of this salvific [task] in both texts is called a "sealing," with the "life-giving water" associated with light from the divine realm.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, Charron successfully links the two texts, and three things are made clearer: (1) the fact that forms of non-Christian Gnostic traditions coexisted and developed alongside Christian ones; (2) Egypt was a likely place for the origination and development of Gnosticism; and (3) the pseudo-science discipline of classic alchemy mixed a particular mythical understanding of the world with spirituality and mystic formulae, which also exhibits strong similarities to the basic Gnostic teachings.

### *The Descent Motif*

Edwin Yamauchi outlines key arguments in the early twentieth century scholarship that posits the descent of Sophia as a reflection of the Babylonian myth of the descent of Ishtar—which itself was based on the Sumerian descent of Inanna.<sup>29</sup> The most obvious parallel is the act of descent itself, in which the female figure goes down to the underworld where she is subjected to abuse. The parallels, however, do not stop there. In the Gnostic text *The Thunder; Perfect Mind*, a female revealer figure, likely Sophia, expresses herself in a series of "I am" statements, and tells a story in a poetic form that mirrors the structure in other

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.450.

<sup>29</sup> E. M. Yamauchi, "The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism," *TB* (1978): 144-153.

Near Eastern mythology—such as with the descent stories. Additionally, in ancient Babylonian mythology Ishtar was called "The Prostitute," and connection is made to the reference of "Sophia *Prunikos*" or "Wisdom the Whore" in the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*. This also recalls the fallen Sophia embodied in Helen, who was purportedly a prostitute, in the heresiological accounts concerning Simon Magus.

The flow of logic presumes that such Babylonian and Sumerian mythology would have been known in ancient Israel, disseminated in light of the Babylonian Diaspora, and eventually influencing the development of the Gnostic Sophia myth. However, the connections are far-reaching and tenuous at best. Yamauchi points out that apart from the descent and the designation of prostitute "...there are no convincing correlations in the development of the myths as far as the motives, the modes and the results of their descents are concerned."<sup>30</sup> Hence we must look elsewhere for the origin of the myth of Sophia's fall.

### *Jewish Antecedents*

In his seminal article, George MacRae reviews points of contact with the Jewish Wisdom Tradition and the Gnostic Sophia myth, such as found in Sethian Gnostic texts, to show how the latter may have developed from the former.<sup>31</sup> He also argues that the Sethian-Ophite version of the myth demonstrates the more original character by virtue of its occurrence in non-Christian Gnostic contexts. MacRae posits that the Gnostic Sophia myth has its origin in the combination of the Jewish tendency toward the hypostatization of divine

attributes and the widespread ancient myths of the female deity. He gives fifteen parallels: (1) Sophia is personal (*passim* in both literatures); (2) Sophia is joined in intimate union with God (Wis. 7:25-26; Prov. 8:30); (3) Sophia was brought forth from or in the beginning (Prov. 8:22; Sir. 1:4, 24:9); (4) Sophia dwells in the clouds (Sir. 24:4; LXX Bar. 3:29); (5) Sophia attends God's throne or is herself enthroned (Wis. 9:4; 1 Enoch 84:3; Sir. 24:4); (6) Sophia is identified with a (Holy) Spirit (Wis. 7:7, 7:22-23, 9:17); (7) Sophia was at least instrumental in the creation of the world (Prov. 3:19, 8:27-30, etc.); (8) Sophia communicates wisdom and revelation to humans; (9) Sophia descends into the world of humans (1 Enoch 13:2; LXX Bar. 3:37); (10) Sophia re-ascends to her celestial home (1 Enoch 13:12); (11) Sophia protected, delivered and strengthened Adam (Wis. 10:1-2); (12) Sophia is referred to as a "sister" (Prov. 7:4); (13) Sophia is associated with a sevenfold cosmic structure (Prov. 9:1). (14) Sophia is identified with life (Prov. 8:35; LXX Bar. 9:14 etc.); and (15) Sophia is a tree of life (Prov. 3:18 ; 1 Enoch 32:3-6).<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, the main difference between the Jewish Wisdom Tradition and the Gnostic Sophia is in the attitudes toward Wisdom, and MacRae notes further that the Jewish sources do not explain the notion of a *fall* of Sophia. In the Jewish Wisdom Tradition Sophia is a positive figure, whereas in Gnosticism she is at least partly a negative being. MacRae puts forward that the key in the transition (from the Jewish Wisdom Tradition to the Gnostic Sophia myth) may prove to be in the Gnostic attitude toward Judaism. He states that it must arise from the confrontation of religious and philosophical ideas in the syncretistic processes. Furthermore, whatever the

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>31</sup> G. W. MacRae, "The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth," *NT* 12 (1970): 86-101.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 88-94.

precise origin, it is a foreign element that uses forms of Jewish thought and expression to drive it toward what we know as Gnosticism.

MacRae and Yamaguchi maintain that no single form of Jewish tradition can account for the pre-cosmic fall of Sophia, nor indeed can any single line of non-Jewish thought account for it. Some scholars posit that the fall of Sophia myth may go as far back to the Jewish traditions of the fall of celestial beings in Genesis 6, and moreover the fall of Eve in Genesis 3.<sup>33</sup> MacRae argues, however, that while use of the Hebrew Bible in Gnostic texts points to Jewish sources, merely citing the Old Testament does not demonstrate Jewish origin.<sup>34</sup> Given such limited use of the Hebrew Bible in Gnostic texts, it is possible that the authors had only a very basic understanding of the Jewish thought. Overall, MacRae's work helps to elucidate the points of contact between the Jewish Wisdom Tradition and the Gnostic Sophia myth. Yamauchi also reminds us that no single source can satisfactorily explain all the facets of a syncretistic religion like Gnosticism. He states that

Hellenism, which was certainly pre-Christian, formed the intellectual climate of the age which viewed the human body with prejudice... Hellenistic philosophy and astrology provided Gnosticism with its anthropology... This anthropology viewed man's spirit/soul as a divine spark imprisoned in the body's tomb—a view prefigured by Plato... we may concur that Judaism provided Gnosticism with its cosmological myth.<sup>35</sup>

Yamaguchi warns further that in the attempt to explain Gnosticism as the acute Hellenization of Christianity by focusing on the Jewish elements, scholars are in danger of undervaluing the obvious Hellenistic elements of Gnosticism.

## Conclusions

Contemporary scholarship attempts to account for the origins of Gnosticism by examining the closest logical precursors to Gnostic thought. The primary sources of Gnostic thought come from the Gnostics themselves and the heresiological reports against them. But the problem in working with the apologists is obvious: they do not deliver a neutral observation, but rather take the offensive. Furthermore, the problem of heresy becomes even more acute when one considers the possibility of a pre- or non-Christian source for Gnosticism. The evidence strongly suggests that the basic Gnostic myth, as presented in the *Apocryphon of John*, was well known in the early to mid second century CE. Thus, given time for development it is evident that Gnostic thought was already spreading and circulating around the same time as the Christian message, and it is only through syncretism with Christianity that it began to be considered as a heretical threat.

Early Gnostic accounts are partially confirmed by the account of Simon in the Book of Acts (circa 90-100 CE), and the corresponding heresiological reports of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. But the heresiological reports vary so greatly and the reliability of their accounts becomes questionable, particularly where Simon gains supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly. It should also be noted that the biblical account makes no reference of a "Gnostic" Simon or the Gnostic myth for that matter. This being said, it is not unfathomable that Simon was a real person. Either way, he represents

<sup>33</sup> Yamauchi, "The Descent of Ishtar," 151.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 151-152.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 170-173.

someone with a particular religious perspective that was becoming contentious with the Church Fathers.

While it is certain that a type of Sethian Gnosticism existed in a non-Christian form, it is difficult to say with certainty how it existed in a *pre-Christian* form. This is largely because there is no concrete textual evidence that places a version of the basic Sethian mythical structure prior to the second century. This suggests an impetus somewhere around 70-150 CE for the birth of Christian Gnosticism, as it is understood today. Furthermore, it is suggested that the key in understanding the impetus lies in the anti-Jewish attitudes that developed around the same time. The basic Gnostic myth would have needed at least a few decades to develop and be disseminated, which places the origin of the myth as we know it, and the anti-Jewish polemic, around the end of the first century and possibly earlier.

It is likely that Gnosticism developed in or around Alexandria, Egypt, as evident by the striking similarities to the alchemical and hermetic texts of the same period. The Christian Gnostics' particular understanding of the world affects what they find valuable and worth theologizing in the Christian message—particularly in regards to Jewish doctrine and tradition, and the significance of Jesus. Gnostics often politicized against each other, but most could accept the Christ as a wisdom figure who came to reveal to humans the saving truth. Although there are undoubtedly core differences, this basic overarching claim is not entirely dissimilar from other Christian perspectives. Gnostics, however, were not that familiar with Jesus and therefore his significance is fairly marginal. This is evident in the *Apocryphon of John* where little mention of the name Jesus is made.

It is undeniable that there are strong Jewish precursors to the Gnostic Sophia myth, and it is plausible to think that the basic Gnostic myth, including the fall of Sophia, began to develop around the end of the first century CE. In addition, the many non-Christian precursors could be traced as far back as the fifth century BCE, approximately five hundred years before the birth of the Christian movement. Furthermore, the negative reinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the anti-Jewish polemic could be representative of an earlier revolt within Judaism. Gnostic Christians were likely Gnostic Jews who converted to the Christian message. It is important to note, however, that the differing treatment of Sophia, particularly her fall from grace, does not appear before the first century, which reflects an important shift that scholars have yet to explain conclusively.

It is logically posited that there must have been an impetus for Christian Gnosticism brought about by the clash between Jewish and Christian ideologies, around the end of the first century. The Jewish Wisdom Tradition provides one of the strongest precursors to the basic Gnostic Sophia mythology. When one reads the Classical Gnostic Sophia myth, as found in the *Apocryphon of John*, there is also a clear sense of Hellenic thought that is ontologically foreign to both Judaism and Jewish Christianity. Gnostic texts were clearly formed by people who were influenced by Hellenism, yet who lived in close vicinity to Judaism and who had access to Scripture. Although Gnosticism purportedly "lost" the struggle for orthodoxy, it would be an error to conclude that Gnosticism simply originated and ended with the early Christian Church.



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*Airplane Wing*

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# THE CATACOMBS OF ROME: TYPOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF JESUS CHRIST IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

67

Melanie Perialis

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## The Catacombs of Rome

One can of course speculate as to when Christian art came about, yet archaeological evidence and scholarly debates cannot pinpoint the birth of Christian art. The crystallization of ideas and dogma passed through a preliminary stage to come to the present form in the Christian churches of today. Nonetheless, in order to come to an understanding of the stages of development, a study needs to be performed in the catacombs of Rome, a place that was constructed by Christians and developed over the centuries as Christianity came to complete its corresponding body of beliefs and rituals. Therefore, the catacombs will be examined in this article in order to unearth the influences of existing art standards and practices onto this new form of art referred to as early Christian art.

The catacombs of Rome were used as burial sites from the second through to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. From the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, until the ninth century the sites were no longer used as burial places; instead they were now filled with pilgrims who wanted to visit the graves of the early Christian martyrs. Due to the pilgrimages in the catacombs, the burial practices in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century changed; they started burying the dead in close proximity to the church.

Later, the saints and martyrs whose remains were in the catacombs were moved to new and existing churches that bore their names. Consequently, from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards the catacombs were forgotten. Fortunately, they were re-discovered in 1578 by workers in the Vigna vineyard. This find came at an ideal time. Fighting between the Protestant and the Catholic Church was on the rise due to the Reformation and subsequent Counter-Reformation. The catacomb discovery allowed all to know that the use of icons was not a new addition that the church instated. Icons were used by the first Christians to represent their belief system. Similarly, the discovery allowed the Catholic Church to show that the veneration of the Virgin was something that was introduced by the first Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The re-discovery of these burials is quite fascinating, yet what they are and how they were used is of the greater interest. The catacombs are underground cemeteries that were carved out of the volcanic rock tuff that is found in the area. This rock, which can be found throughout Italy, is a rock that is quite easy to carve yet is solid enough to be used in most Roman constructions once it comes into contact with the air and it

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<sup>1</sup> L.V. Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome: In Search of the Roots of Christianity in the Catacombs of the Eternal City* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 9-13.

hardens. These underground burial tunnels were made up of intricate subterranean galleries that had one of three types of burial forms. The most standard and found throughout the catacombs is the *loculi*. These are simple wall graves, rectangular in shape, that are cut out on both sides of the wall. The *acrosolia* are once again carved into the wall but are surmounted by a semicircular arch. Finally, the *sarcophagus* is a rectangular box made out of stone where the body is placed the actual word means flesh eater. The *acrosolia* and the *sarcophagi* are usually found in burial chambers called *cubacula*, which are highly decorated.<sup>2</sup>

When one is trying to study the catacombs one has to keep in mind that they were constructed over a long period of time. The construction, according to Rutgers, went through four phases. The first phase began when underground burials commenced in the second century. The second phase is when the real catacombs were constructed in the third century. The third phase is when the catacombs were expanded and developed into underground communal cemeteries, and finally, the fourth phase, took place when burial stopped and pilgrimage began.<sup>3</sup> These phases changed and developed the catacombs and burials; therefore, one has to keep in mind that there is a chance that what was there in the beginning of the second century may have changed by the end of the fifth.

Nonetheless, the catacombs, which offer a wealth of images, were well preserved because there was no real climatic change in these underground burials. After close examination of the content of the catacombs, archaeologists realized that not only did the building go through phases but so did the paintings. These

three phases are as follows: phase one corresponds to the beginning of Christian art in the second and third centuries. Phase two, the Old Testament phase, which took place in the third century, and finally, phase three, the New Testament phase, which took place in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Keeping these phases in mind, images that come out of the catacombs along with sarcophagi will be examined to establish the origin of the forms, symbols, and images found.

Christian iconography, in the form existing today in the Orthodox or even Catholic Church, was not born overnight. It took centuries and a lot of modification to come up with the beautiful art symbols use in their worship and venerated today. Not surprisingly, when Christianity appeared there was no Christian art. Christians had to find a way to express themselves artistically. One option was to incorporate existing objects that were currently available to them or to develop an iconography appropriate to them. As it will be shown, later Christians used both of these options to their advantage; they used popular themes from pagan art that suited their beliefs and transformed them in a way to speak to them.<sup>5</sup>

An evolution is apparent in the images that follow. The evolution is found in three stages: first, symbolic images derived from messianic roots and are adapted to pagan-Christian understanding. Second, anecdotal images, which allow the painter and sculptor to extract out of the images spiritual and ecclesiastical messages and not just depict biblical images. Third and final are portraits and figures, which incorporate all the relevant questions on the incarnation of Christ, the church and the empire. According to Tristan it is this last stage that covers the adventures of

<sup>2</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 42-44.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 82-84.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 85.

iconography in the first six centuries.<sup>6</sup> Having said this, the first images to be considered correspond to what Tristan calls symbolic images. Nonetheless, before considering the images themselves, some historical background on why these images were accepted and used by early Christians will be presented, starting with Clement of Alexandria and the symbol of the fish.

## SYMBOLIC IMAGES

### The Fish

Clement of Alexandria (ca.150-220) was born to a pagan family and later converted to Christianity. Little is known about his life, yet starting at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, his writings began influencing Christianity considerably. One of the ways that Clement was influential when it came to the milieu of representational art can be seen in his work entitled *Paedagogus*. This work, composed of three books, has as its basis Christian ethics and uses Jesus as the teacher/educator.<sup>7</sup> In *Paed.* 3.59.2 line 8 Clement mentions five images that are acceptable for Christians to wear on their rings. These images are the dove, fish, ship, lyre, ship's anchor and finally, if one is a fisherman, he may use an apostle drawing children out of the water.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, it can be understood that these images are accepted by Clement to have Christian significance. The popularity which Clement enjoyed during his lifetime and afterwards, explains why the symbols he proposed became predominant in the first Christian communities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>

centuries. A good example of a Christian ring from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, Paris. This late 3<sup>rd</sup>-century ring consists of an engraved gem, with the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ and one fish. This can be clearly understood of as a Christian ring not only because of the fish (its significance and meaning will be discussed later), but also because of the Greek word, which translates as "fish", and was used as an acrostic composed of the first letters of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, these images went beyond the use on rings to be placed on gravestones, the catacomb walls, glass bowls, oil lamps, and ornaments.

The fish, one of the images mentioned by Clement, can be seen on the wall of the catacomb of Callixtus in Rome. This image consists of a fish with a basket of five loaves of bread placed on it. This image is mirrored on either side making it two fishes being represented. One can claim, like in a pagan context, that this is just a representation of food with no Christian or theological significance. It is true that in a pagan milieu fish were represented in fresco that evoked associations to the sea and seafood. A good example of this is a mosaic from the first century BCE in Pompeii represented, presumably, on one of the walls of the House of Faun (Figure 11). In this mosaic, however, different kinds of fish, an octopus, squid and other sea animals are represented. It is easy to look at this image and imagine that this alludes to the seafood that the people of Pompeii dined on. Yet this does not necessarily have to be true for a Christian viewer. A Christian, going back to the image in the catacomb of Callixtus (figure 12), may not

<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole à L'icône : II-VI Siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 19.

<sup>7</sup> "Clement of Alexandria" in D. Wyrka, ed., *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature* (New York: The Crossroad, 2000), 130-132.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*. (Trans. Simon P. Wood. Washington: The Catholic University Press, 1954), 246.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 196.

see in this just a fish; for that Christian it may be a symbol of her belief such as Christ and the apostles as fishers of men, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and finally the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> Yet the question can be raised, Why did early Christian painters and church fathers consider the fish as an acceptable image for Christian usage? Where did this image come from? Moreover, why was it associated with Christ and the Eucharist?

The answers to these questions can essentially be found in the Bible and more specifically in the Gospel writers. Mk 6:39-45, Mt. 14:15-22, Lk. 9:10-18 and finally Jn. 6:5-16 refer to the miracle of the loaves where two fish and five loaves of bread are divided to feed 5000 people. At first glance, these readings do not appear to have any correlation with a Eucharistic meal, but, upon close examination, the Gospel writers employ terms that were used to describe the Last Supper, which is the quintessential Eucharistic meal. The following main five actions are common in meals: 1) the people or community sits down, 2) one person (head of the table, priest, or teacher) takes the food (bread, fish, wine), 3) blesses the food or gives thanks, 4) breaks and 5) distributes to the people or community.<sup>11</sup> These similarities between a Eucharistic meal and the miracle of the loaves offers an indication of why early Christians saw and represented the bread and fish as part of the Eucharist, which at the same time offered them hope of resurrection and life to come in the messianic age. Nevertheless, what does the fish have to do with the Messiah?

In order to understand the correlation between the fish and the Messiah, it is important to look back at the Jewish tradition. In Jewish apocalyptic circles the fish was found as the main dish in messianic banquets. This stems from the thought that Bekemoth and Leviathan were fish, which would be food for those who would live in the messianic age.<sup>12</sup> This is clearly stated in 2 Baruch 29:

And it shall come to pass when all is revealed... that the Messiah shall then begin to be revealed. And Behemoth shall be revealed from his place, and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation, and shall have kept until that time; and then shall be food for all that are left.

From this and other passages, fish can be seen as something present at the Messianic banquet and the messianic age. Therefore, since this image offered hope of life in the messianic age for the Jews, it is understandable that the early Christians took this to refer to their apocalyptic food, a Eucharistic meal: Jesus distributing "eschatological food sealing the recipient in, the life to come of the coming Kingdom of God."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is easy to understand why the early church fathers, such as Clement, chose the fish to be one of the images that can be represented by Christians.

Nonetheless, a correlation can be found in pagan thought that may have also influenced Christians in associating the fish with Christ the savior and protector. For the ancient Greeks and Romans the *poisson par excellence* was the dolphin. Pliny spoke highly of this amazing creature, which was a remarkable diver who would take on its back castaways and bring them

<sup>10</sup> Jas Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Richard H. Hiers, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3 no 1 (Spr 1976): 31.

<sup>12</sup> Hiers, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art," 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 27.



to safety. There was a story of the poet-musician Arion, at the time that mentions that he was thrown in the water by his fellow sailors and was saved by dolphins. The story goes that the dolphins came and fought against whales that were coming to eat Arion. It is easy to see how the dolphins can be associated with Christ. This story can be seen on numerous pagan sarcophagi with an image of a trident or an anchor, which was the symbol of hope and stability for the Greco-Romans.<sup>14</sup>

The symbolic images though could go so far in expressing the belief, intentions and aspirations of the early Christian. Furthermore, during the time of persecution ambiguity and symbolism was the norm, since the expression of the Christian belief was condemned but in time of peace Christian expression flourished. This, therefore, bring us to the second part of Tristan's evolution, the anecdotal images, which allows the painter and sculptor to extract out of images spiritual and ecclesiastical messages and not just stagnant depictions of biblical images.

### ANECDOTAL IMAGES

Once in the catacombs the viewer is not only struck by the beauty and mystery that is found there, but also by the vast amount of Old Testament stories represented on the walls of the cubicula. Eusebius, the fourth century bishop of Caesaria in his work *The Proof of the Gospel*, defended Christian use of Jewish scriptures. He states that those Holy Books belong to the Christians and that when they are read properly they offer certain proof that is fulfilled in the Gospels. One example that Eusebius gives, and is found represented in the catacombs, is the account of Abraham's

three visitors at Mamre (Genesis 18:1-8). Yet how does the vision at Mamre fulfill the Gospels? Using a typological interpretation, which sees Old Testament characters and events as prefigurations of New Testament characters and events, both Eusebius and Justin Martyr would assert that it can be seen in the text and in visual representations that Abraham saw the pre-Incarnate Christ, an event that foreshadows Jesus. As Justin Martyr writes: "At this point I asked, 'do you not see, my friends, that one of the three, who is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him who is in Heaven, is Lord of the two angels?'"<sup>15</sup>

### *The Vision at Mamre*

The vision at Mamre can be seen in Cubiculum B in the Via Latina catacomb. Not surprisingly, this cubiculum is full of Old Testament scenes such as Rahab saving the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:15), Samson slaying the lion (Judges 14:5-9), Noah in his ark, Jacobs Ladder (Genesis 28:10-13) and many more. The vision at Mamre appears to be a new scene in funerary art, in cubiculum B the panel is 38 x 37 inches and is bordered by a 5-inch band of stylized flowers. Abraham is depicted as an old man with long hair and beard. He is wearing a simple tunic with one hand raised in front of him towards the three visitors. Abraham sits on a rock out in the open, which is inferred from the background trees, and greenery; Abraham's tent is not found in this image.

The three men are represented higher up as if on a ledge or floating. The three men, who are referred to as angels by most scholars, are represented as normal men. They are young-looking beardless men with brown hair. All three are dressed in long tunic, mantle, and sandals that are

<sup>14</sup> Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole à L'icône : II-VI Siècle*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Justine Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (Trans. Thomas B. Falls. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 237.

outlined and black.<sup>16</sup> Just like Abraham, the three men have their right arm extended in a gesture that suggests speech or even blessing and their stance is very similar to the Roman *adlocutio*. Out of the three men the one in the middle is depicted smaller than the rest. Robin M. Jensen suggests that this figure is not represented in a way to appear more important than the others, which is the case in other representations of the visit at Mamre.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the middle figures seem to be distinct from the other two, and that could suggest that the three divine persons are represented as the Trinity, while the middle figure symbolizes the Pre-Incarnate Son of God, which may have been the intention of the artist. It is likely that when commenting on the representation of the three men at Mamre, Irenaeus was reflecting some opinion that the artist may have known. In his work *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 44, Irenaeus states:

And again Moses says that the Son of God drew near to exchange speech with Abraham: and God appeared to him at the oak of Mamre at midday, and lifting up his eyes, he saw, and behold, three men were standing over him; and he prostrated himself to the ground and said; Lord, if I have truly found favor before thee; and all the rest of his speech is with the Lord, and the Lord speaks to him. Two, then of the three, were angels, but one the Son of God; and with Him Abraham also spoke pleading for the men of Sodom, that they might not perish, if at least ten just men were found there.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Ferrua. *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*. Trans. Iain Inglis, (Scotland: Geddes and Grossett, 1991), 70.

<sup>17</sup> Robin M. Jensen. "Early Christian Images and Exegesis." *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*. (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 66.

<sup>18</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (Trans. Joseph P. Smith. New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 76.

The next image to be analyzed is once again an Old Testament scene that appears to have the most prominent biblical character, other than the Good Shepherd, to be represented in the catacombs. This is the life of Jonah. According to Goodenough, in the Via Latina alone Jonah is represented twice thrown into the mouth of the monster, three times being vomited by the sea monster, three times sleeping under the arbor and finally two times "aroused" or angry, as Ferrua would suggest. On the left and right wall on top of the arcosolium in cubiculum A the image of Jonah can be seen. On the left-hand wall Jonah is represented being cast into the sea as mentioned in the book of Jonah: "he replied 'take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will calm down for you.... And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea stopped raging'"<sup>19</sup>

### *The Life of Jonah*

The image is damaged and faded and for this reason the sails of the ship, the upper bodies of the three sailors and finally the head of the sea monster has been lost. This is found in a panel 30 x 19 ½ inches and is bordered by what appears to be thick reddish brown bands. On the opposite is Jonah disgorged by the sea monster as mentioned in Jonah 2:11. In this 27 ½ x 21 ½ inch panel, Jonah is projected from the monster's mouth with both his arms outstretched in front of him, while his head is lifted backwards. The colors of this panel, like the one mentioned above, is green for the monster and red for everything else. The background is the color of the plaster, and there is no indication of water or ground line.<sup>20</sup> The sea monster that swallows and spits out Jonah is not original to

<sup>19</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jonah 1:12-16.

<sup>20</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 63.



Christianity. Maritime themes enjoyed great popularity in the Roman world in the first two centuries of the Common Era. Even though it is assumed, in the representation of Jonah, to be the sea monster from the Bible, the monster takes on the form of a dragon that was quite popular in Roman representation.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the explicit representation of a monster and not an actual big fish, according to Tristan, is done so that there will be no confusion between the monster that swallowed Jonah, which represents death, with the dolphin and most importantly with the symbol of IXΘΥΣ.<sup>22</sup>

On the right-hand wall, immediately to the right of Jonah being spit out, Jonah is represented as angry and to the right of this image Jonah is represented lying under the pergola (Jonah 4:5-11)\*. In the first image he is represented sitting on a rock holding his chin with his right arm, in the second image he is reclining on what appears to be a rocky outcrop that has a greenish color with a red outline.<sup>23</sup> Jonah has his right leg bent at the knee while his left leg is straight out in a relaxed position. He has his left arm bent at the elbow, propping up his upper body, while his right arm is bent behind his head. His face is in a frontal pose, while his body is in a three-quarter position as he is seen semi-reclining on the "couch." The pergola is also represented in a green color with vines hanging from it, yet the leaves have been discolored and damaged, and, therefore, are not all visible. What is interesting about this last image is the origin of this sleeping figure.

In classical Greek mythology Endymion, a beautiful young man that had been

submersed into an everlasting sleep by the moon goddess Selene, was represented in the same manner as Jonah. At first sight it appears that there is no differentiation between the representations of Endymion and Jonah. What is represented is a naked young man with the same stance (Roman artists represented a person asleep by showing them reclining on a couch with one hand behind their head). Yet, as Christians did when adopting images, they adapted the image that fit their needs. For this reason, unlike his Roman counterpart, Jonah is represented under a pergola. This imagery brings to mind the "climbing ground" found in the book of Jonah.<sup>24</sup>

Yahweh God then ordained that the castor-oil plant should grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and sooth his ill humor; Jonah was delighted with the castor oil plant.<sup>25</sup>

The question that should be asked is "Why Endymion? Why not just make up a new image?" As mentioned earlier when Christianity appeared, Christian art did not exist, yet what did exist was Greco-Roman art and workshops that dominated the market. Therefore, it would be natural for Christian converts, most of whom were formerly pagan, to seek out something familiar and commonly available. Nonetheless, adopting images and adapting them to make them have Christian significance can be seen as an evolutionary process through which early Christians found their identity.<sup>26</sup>

The story of Jonah is not just mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah in Mt. 12: 38-42:

<sup>21</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 93-94.

<sup>22</sup> Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole à L'icône : II-VI Siècle*, 186.

\* The cycle of Jonah can also be seen in cubiculum C and cubiculum M.

<sup>23</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jonah 4: 6-8.

<sup>26</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 103-105.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees spoke up. 'Master,' they said, 'we should like to see a sign from you.' He replied, 'it is an evil and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign! The only sign it will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights...' <sup>27</sup>

and figures such as Irenaeus, and Justine Martyr offer a theological explanation to the story and in turn to the understanding of the images. Justine, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, uses the image of Jonah as a symbol of the resurrection while using three of the four scenes from the pictorial cycle.<sup>28</sup> Justin states:

And these Memoirs also testify to the fact of his resurrection from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion, for it is therein recorded that in answer to the contentious Jews who said to Him, "Show us a sign," He replied, "An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, and no sign shall be given in but the sign of Jonah." Though these words are mysterious, His listener could understand that He would arise from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion. <sup>29</sup>

It is clear that Justin came to an understanding of the story of Jonah as a pre-figuration of the crucifixion of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew. In the Jewish tradition, the story of Jonah was not understood to be a pre-figuration of the Messiah, yet the original meaning must have been ambiguous to the

evangelists, who added several interpretations to the text. One of the interpretations is the reference to the three days Jonah spent inside the sea monster to indicate the time Christ spent in the heart of the earth. It is interesting to note however that the *Di Rossi* version of the *Midrash of Jonah* mentions that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath who was resurrected by the prophet Elijah, the immediate forerunner to the Messiah according to Jewish tradition. Jonah, in the Midrash, is thought to have been physically taken up to heaven, like Elijah, and his task in the messianic age is to bind and bring Leviathan to the righteous in Paradise to be feasted on. Therefore, the Jewish Midrashic images of a messianic Jonah must have been quite strong in the mind of Matthew in order to make such an association. Nonetheless, no matter what the origin, the interpretation of Jonah being spat out of the sea monster as the resurrection of Christ becomes the most popular artistic interpretation in early Christian art.<sup>30</sup>

### *Sacrifice of Isaac*

On the left-hand wall, of room L in cubiculum F, the sacrifice of Isaac is represented.

It happened some time later that God put Abraham to the test. 'Abraham, Abraham!' he called. 'Here I am,' he replied. God said, 'Take your son, your only son, your beloved son Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, where you are to offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you.' Early next morning Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him his two servants and his son Isaac. He chopped wood for the burnt offering and started on his journey...

<sup>27</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 12: 38-42.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Cadman Colwell, "The Fourth Gospel and Early Christian Art," *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr. 1935): 194.

<sup>29</sup> Saint Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho." *The Fathers of the Church: Writings of the Saint Justin Martyr* ed. Ludwig Schopp, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 314.

<sup>30</sup> Bezael Narkiss. "The Sign of Jonah." *Gesta* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1979): 64.

Abraham built an altar there, and arranged the wood. Then he bound his son and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of God called to him...then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, the image itself has been quite badly damaged by looters who tried to remove it in 1954.<sup>32</sup> Abraham, in this image, is dressed with a short tunic and a mantle. He is bearded and holds a long sword in his right arm while in his left he presumably holds his son Isaac, who appears to be leaning next to him in a short tunic and sandals. To their left is an altar with burning wood; behind this a ram is visible among small bushes. On the top of the frame, the hand of God is visible coming out of red clouds, representing the divine voice stopping Abraham from killing his son. The same image can also be seen in cubiculum C with minor differences. While the altar appears to be burning, Abraham holds the sword while Isaac is kneeling with his hands tied behind his back; the ram is to the left of the altar. Yet the hand of God in this representation comes out of blue clouds (the hand is not visible in the image for it has been damaged); below the figures of Abraham and Isaac is a servant dressed in a short tunic holding on to a loaded donkey.<sup>33</sup>

This scene is probably the most common representation, other than the Good Shepherd, in catacomb art, oil lamps and sarcophagi. In the book of Genesis, the importance lays in the obedience that Abraham shows to God, yet this does not

explain why this image was represented in funerary art.<sup>34</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews, however, offers an explanation to why this story would be represented in a funerary milieu:

It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He offered to sacrifice his only son even though he had yet to receive what had been promised, and he had been told: Isaac is the one through whom your name will be carried on. He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, it can be understood that this image brought to mind for the ancient viewer a comfort in deliverance and resurrection of the dead. This idea of sacrifice can also be seen in the letter of Paulinus of Nola to Melania the Elder, who left her son in the care of a tutor, a form of sacrifice for a mother to leave her child, in order to follow God's call. Paulinus, however, goes one-step further and compares the ram that replaced Isaac with the lamb that signifies Christ.

Like Melania, father Abraham got back his one son whom he had offered to God, because when the demand was made he readily offered the child. The Lord is content with the perfect sacrifice of heartfelt love, so the angel's hand intervened to stay the father's right arm as it was poised for the blow. The angel snatched up the victim and in its place set a hastily furnished sheep, so that God should not lose his sacrifice, nor the father his son. There was this further reason, that the mystery to be fulfilled in Christ and rehearsed by Isaac (so far as the image of God could rehearse it)

<sup>31</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Genesis 22: 1-13.

<sup>32</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>34</sup> J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscover Monuments of Early Christianity* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 68.

<sup>35</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Hebrews 11: 17-20.

could be given shape through the ram. For the lamb which was to be later sacrificed in Egypt to typify the Savior was thus already anticipated by the beast of its own species—the ram which replaced Isaac as victim to prefigure Christ. So the ram was found by Abraham since the highest sacrament was not his due, but it was killed for Him for whom the fulfillment of the sacrament was being preserved.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, it is understood that the sacrifice of Isaac was understood and represented as the iconographic paradigm of Christ's crucifixion. Nonetheless, if this image is a prefiguration of Christ, where are the similarities? Robin M. Jensen, in her article, points out the similarities between Isaac and Christ: 1) Abraham was offering his beloved and only son, as God the Father did with Christ, his Son, 2) both sons were miraculously conceived, 3) it took three days to get to the place of sacrifice or place of resurrection, Christ resurrected in three days, 4) both sons carried the wood for their sacrifice, Isaac the wood to burn on the altar and Christ his cross to Golgotha.<sup>37</sup>

The Letter to the Hebrews points to the representation of the sacrifice as the obedience of Abraham to God, yet Paulinus clearly maintains that Isaac is a prototype to Christ's sacrifice. The problem here lies in the dates, Paulinus wrote his letters in the late fourth and early fifth century. So, this may give credence to Jensen's statement that before 313 CE it cannot be said with certainty that the sacrifice of Isaac was seen as something more than a symbol of deliverance and resurrection since all the literature that talks about the prototype comes from the

fourth century onwards. Even though the original theological significance may be different in the second to the third centuries, the pictorial origins cannot be disputed. The only problem with this is that according to our analysis the answer comes from the written word and not from the image itself. Nonetheless, as Jensen suggests, "homilies and liturgies were the most important source from which early Christian imagery derives meaning from".<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it is possible as Kessler suggests that artistic interpretation influenced the written word. This may be the reason why in early representations of the sacrifice of Isaac, Isaac is not represented as bound on the altar.

A good example found in the Catacomb of Callixtus, which dates to the first half of the third century CE where a child like Isaac and Abraham are shown like orants, while a ram proudly stands to the left of Abraham along with an olive tree and the fire wood in the back-ground.

Similarly, in a later third century representation, Isaac is shown as a child carrying the wood while Abraham is pointing to the fire on the altar. On the other hand, in the catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus and Cubiculum F in the Via Latina, Abraham holds a knife in his right hand and the childlike Isaac has his hands bound.<sup>39</sup> What is interesting to note is that, in the Jewish tradition and in the representations of the Sacrifice the Akedah, Isaac is represented and understood as an adult between the ages of 26-36, old enough to get married and carry the heavy burden of the wood of the ultimate sacrifice.

<sup>36</sup> St. Paulinus of Nola, *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola* (Trans. P.G. Walsh. Westminster: The Newman Press, 1967), 111-112.

<sup>37</sup> Robin, M. Jensen. "Isaac as a Christological Symbol in Early Christian Art." *The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 5 no 2 (Winter 1993): 8.

<sup>38</sup> Robin M. Jensen. "The Offering of Isaac in Jewish And Christian Tradition." *Biblical Interpretation* 2, (1994), 105.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157-159.

In stark contrast to the Sacrifice of Isaac, is the image found on the Torah niche at Dura, where Isaac is clearly represented as a child that appears unbound lying on the altar. Could we conclude from this that the Christian view of Isaac as a child comes from the exegesis that the Dura artist made to the biblical story? In any case, one has to keep in mind that the Dura representation of the Akedah is the closest of all representation to the actual biblical story.<sup>40</sup>

Catacomb construction started, in its first phase, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, yet the earliest remaining images come out of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. Interestingly, a visible evolution can be traced in the catacombs, offering information on what influenced the fociers, painters, and the patrons to depict certain images as they did. Like Dura, the form of representation was rooted in pagan art. The message, though, was Christian in its entirety, even when the depictions came out of the Old Testament. Jonah is a clear prefiguration of Christ, even though he is represented in the form of the well-known Endymion. The symbol of the fish may have just been a marine representation for the pagans, yet for the Jewish community it was the main dish of the Messianic banquet; and finally for the Christians the symbol of Christ.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

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*Guillaume Grenier-Fontaine*



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# ON A FRIEND WHO IS ON DISPLAY IN THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

80

R. Joseph Capet

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It was only once in New York City, where I had the fortune to discover in one of the byzantine back halls of the public library a statue, cast from blackened bronze, of a nymph balancing upon a log. The piece, so the placard informed me, was the work of a Frenchman, Moreau, whose name I only remember because it brought to mind Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. It is only as I recall the encounter, some years later, that the appropriateness of the mnemonic reveals itself to me in being applied to this statue—this vivisection of living girl and unthinking ore. For, in fact, the two Moreaus were not dissimilar in the extent to which they sought to play at God, or in their quixotic determination to cast the face of man from brutish materials. They differed only in the degree of their success.

Such was the awkward genesis of this distrusted immigrant, sequestered to a forgotten corridor near old *New Yorker* cartoons. Whether it was ill conduct, fear of foreign infections, or simple errors of paperwork that prevented her from taking her rightful place in the lustrous eye of American society I do not know. But she seemed to accept the injustice with a great equanimity, balancing carefully upon her fallen log, as a tightrope walker might take her constitutional or Anubis balance his scales. Indeed, she stood with an unflappable serenity, one arm extended toward the limitless arena of the stars high

above, the other beckoning the eye into the lilliputian forests far below her, and both suspending her tenuously between the celestial and the chthonic.

It was this, more even than the slender grace of her limbs, or her pixieish face aglow with the youthful joys of simple feats, which commanded my tenderest admiration. In the plane of her outstretched arms was encompassed the whole nature of man, perched between the earthly and the heavenly, and prepared to tumble off at the slightest provocation into inhumanity should he lose his balance to either side. Had I been wandering the library with Nietzsche in the off-hours of that sunny afternoon perhaps I would have turned to him and said, "You see, man is not your rope tied over an abyss. Here he is, attempting to walk the rope. Moreau has said it all already, in bronze."

She seemed very precarious at first glance, as though my sudden reverential intake of breath as I rounded the corner might have been enough to upset all her efforts, and yet for as long as I wheeled eagerly around her in a most distracting fashion, she betrayed not the slightest sign of perturbation. In fact, though I have not seen her in some years, I have every confidence that should you, dear reader, take it upon yourself to pay her a visit, she will be balancing upon that log still. How many of us can make the same boast? All of us have, from time to time, listed

ominously this way or that, our startled mouths assuming circles as perfect as those traced by our flailing arms, and not altogether dissimilar from those drawn in the sand by Archimedes shortly before his murder. All of us will, in the end, topple over embarrassingly, kicking the log into the grass at some distance on our way.

I think, sometimes, that may be the point; for this reason the Lord invested Adam with our wobbly, half-finished bipedalism. At the sound of Israfel's trumpet, when the skies over the little woodland spring of our world combust in red and orange, we are all meant to fall from the log on which our humanity teeters. Some, losing their balance, will ascend in the direction of this lovely sculpture's uplifted arm. Others, with a less fortunate footing, will follow her other hand's arc unto dust.

But not she! That patinaed beauty remains always upon her log, as a songbird upon a branch—the axis mundi of our humanity. Not for her the glory of her starward reach, the beatific vision of the God whose image she bears. Neither the ignominy of the clay which made the mold in which she was cast. Wars and revolutions, no less than the silent tremblings of our souls in moments of weak resolve, sprawl us in an endless lemming-like procession around her, and yet she stands. Either prostrate beneath her terrestrial hand, or exalted above her celestial one, we shall all put off one or the other of our natures; only she can remain in the balance which is the way of mortal men. Moreau's little nymph is, in this respect, a more faithful vision of humanity than are we, and will be human long after the last of us have become angels and dust.

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## BUILDING

### (BASED ON PSALM 127: 1-2)

Martha Elias Downey

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I woke up one day and said, I am going to build a house  
 I got a hammer and some nails  
 and a big book from Amazon that promised "do it yourself without fail"  
 I envisioned something extraordin-ary  
 marble and glass, cedar and cherry  
 impressive and functional  
 smaller than Babel yet bigger than a stable  
 And I took my first nail and I raised my hammer and I swung with all my  
 might  
 and this is how I broke my right....thumb

I woke up the next day and said, I am going to build a career  
 I drew up a plan  
 go to the best university in the land  
 study smart, network hard, get straight A's  
 hire myself out to the highest bidder and one day  
 hopefully not too far away  
 build my own business empire  
 smaller than Rome, of course, but bigger than Bethlehem  
 And I took my first exam, after a night of cramming, which is after all,  
 obligator-y  
 and this is how I made my first C...minus

I woke up a week after that and said, who needs a career?  
 I am going to get back to nature and raise my own food  
 I planted organic seeds  
 pulled out organic thorns and weeds  
 fertilised with organic manure from my organic pure-bred bovine herd  
 I irrigated with purified water and tilled the nutrified ground from dawn till  
 dusk  
 I turned vegetarian, bought a juicer, and voted egalitarian  
 The fields were turning ripe and heavy with harvest  
 not enough that I could eat, drink and be merry for the rest of my life, no  
 but certainly more than a handful of manna  
 And so I sharpened my sickle while I watched the harvest moon grow  
 and that was how I saw the hail coming out of no...where

I didn't go to bed that night as I watched my city of grain...maimed

my curses and threats did nothing to shame... this icy enemy  
 He marched in the gate and took what he wanted  
 He flaunted his cold power and flattened the tower-ing stalks of wheat  
 And only then did he beat his slow retreat

I woke up the next day and said  
 building a house is vanity, total insanity, all pain and no gain, a decaying  
 proposition  
 and building a career is vanity, too  
 false expectation, deflation, promises that never reach gestation  
 and self-sufficiency, it is a vain lie, pie in the sky, requiring more for less,  
 reaping nothing but stress  
 everything I have tried is vanity  
 is this the curse of humanity?  
 If there is a God, he is not on my side  
 He has taken me for a ride, and I want to get off!

I woke up the next day and there was a knock at my door  
 it was a carpenter, someone I thought I had met before  
 I can build you a house, he said, but it might take awhile  
 I use only the best materials and those don't come cheap or easy  
 Cheap and easy have already been tried and found wanting, I told him  
 What's the cost going to be? I inquired of the man who had come knocking  
 What do you have? he asked  
 Well, I said, due to some unfortunate circumstances, I am left with only my  
 two hands  
 and one of them is giving me some pain  
 an old injury is to blame  
 I know all about old injuries, he said, and pulled out an experienced hammer  
 I am ready to get started, he told me, and waited for my reply  
 Well if you want to build it, I said, I am willing to try...again

The arrangement had me puzzled, I had to admit  
 because there was nothing I was contributing to this equation  
 except the story of how I jumped from one failed situation...to the next  
 I had to know, so I asked  
 If you are the builder, then what is my task? Am I to be your assistant?  
 He laughed at the question  
 as if he heard it all the time, and said  
 You? Why don't you be....loved. Yes, beloved.

*Martha Elias Downey is currently pursuing an MA in Theological Studies at Concordia University with particular interest in Christian mysticism and the accessibility of Theology. This poem was originally performed as spoken word in conjunction with a paper presented at the conference, "The Bible as You Don't Know It: Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies for the Real World."*



*Berkley Tree*

*Martha Elias Downey*

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# A MINUTE AND A HALF TURN OVER TIME

Martin Sartini Garner

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85

Tommy, when he finds himself in awkward social settings, and particularly when the awkwardness has been achieved by something he's said or done or seen, as had been the case so often in the past, he now thinks, squeezes the space under his arm, in order to determine whether his anxiety has soaked him, whether the creases of his t-shirt are beginning to harden. He can smell himself in these moments, almost as if his fingertips were nostrilled, and he wonders whether anyone else senses the pang of deodorant mixed with cool sweat. In high school he would sweat rings under his arms, great rings whose borders were shaded in white, a product of the sodium in his Mountain Dew.

He hasn't shaved in about ten days, not since he pre-gamed the reunion, and peppery stubble poke at his probing, moist fingers as he sizes up his neck, another nervous habit.

It's good to be here, it's great to be here, he knows. Airplanes land. They take you home. Don't worry. Get on board.

There is a crack in the seat of the yellow plastic chair, and every time Tommy shifts his weight, it pinches the fat on the back of his thigh. He lifts his leg and the chair releases the loose denim of his jeans with a muffled pop. Though his eyes are trained on the ceiling, counting the rotting spots in the roof beams, he can feel everyone looking at him, a common sixth sense. Some are glancing at one another. No one has spoken in at least a minute and a half, and the tension doesn't seem to be deflating. Actually, if he's right, Tommy can feel it in his feet—the tension—a steady flood of battery acid. He lifts his leg to pull it out of the sting, and the chair pops again.

"Let me run and get an ashtray real quick," Mark says. He crosses the room and disappears up the stairs into the kitchen. The air is lighter, but still tactile.

The other guys in the room look around and make eyebrow-heavy eye contact. It's likely that no one has ever asked if they could smoke a cigarette during community group before, and even more likely that none of these guys has ever seen someone smoke while giving their testimony. Which makes sense and seems fair, Tommy acknowledges. Even to him, the entire concept of a lit cigarette festering in a basement among a group of people gathered to praise God and study His Word does seem—well, not evil, really, but it does straddle a few lines that no one in the group seems too comfortable examining, Tommy included. “So, yeah, welcome, Tommy,” Mark had said. “We’re glad you’re here, the Lord is good. So, the way we usually go is, we’re gonna open with prayer, and then I thought before we get into the Word, do you want to share your testimony with us?” And then, without hesitation, as if he’d been waiting for the chance to ask, Tommy said, “Can I smoke in here?”

It's cold in the basement. The walls are unfinished. Dirt and jagged corners of concrete look like they're falling out of the wall. There is a scrap of rug that was once green but has now faded to the color of toothpaste. In a corner, just visible behind the still-rocking movement of Mark's fading periwinkle recliner, a washer and dryer groan and tremble as they do their work. The air smells like dried air. As basements go, even Michigan basements, it lacks a natural charisma. There are folding chairs, too, the kind that are made out of a khaki metal and which squeak when you shift your weight, which most of the others do, staring at the ground, examining the scratches in their leather shoes, waiting for Mark to return. They can hear his footsteps falling on the kitchen floor above.

Tommy prays to stay awake, to not slip.

“Anyone seen Paul lately?” Jared asks. Jared had been a class ahead of Tommy and the others and, with the exception of Mark, is the oldest person in the group. His navy Detroit Tigers cap has an improbable brown stain at its crease, and his heavy white sneakers are oily in the corners. “Tommy, weren't you staying with him?”

Tommy's reverie breaks. “Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Yeah, I was, but I'm over at my mom's now, on Lake. I actually haven't seen Paul since the reunion.” Jared looks surprised. His mouth opens, but Mark rambles down the stairs and hands Tommy a Flintstones mug. “Sorry, this is all I could find,” he says.



Tommy pries a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "I'm sorry," he says, "do you guys mind? I should have asked that." Emphatic noes and head-shaking from everyone. "No worries, man," says a guy Tommy doesn't remember named Cody. Cody is remarkably tan for Michigan in the springtime; his pookah shells pop off his bronzed neck like teeth. He'd bumped fists with Tommy in a strange way at the reunion.

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Mark settles back into his recliner. He has his hand on the plunger, but he doesn't pull it back. His eyes are small, almost squinty, and they're encircled with loose, dark skin that baffles his thirty-two years. He could be twenty-three or forty, Tommy thinks. He looks deeply satisfied, almost post-coital, so calm that the firmness of his handshake startled Tommy on Sunday.

Besides Tommy and Mark, most are sitting in the folding chairs. Jared and a bearded guy Tommy vaguely remembers named Chris are on opposite arms of a love seat, their Bibles and notebooks between them. Tommy lights his cigarette and creaks back into the chair's pinch.

"Alright, well," he says, flicking his ash into the Flintstones mug. The cigarette gives his hands office while he talks. "So, I don't really know how to begin and all, except to start—" he cuts himself off. He hunches over onto the edge of the seat. His legs are bouncing. Stay, stay. He has given pitch speeches to developers in catered rooms; he has spoken to scores of therapists and psychs in no-smoking rooms on padded couches. But then, he always talked about the past, and about things that had happened and had finished happening. They wanted a story, so he had shaped them one, culled from a context that was to them blank. But this, these guys spread around the basement—they know, they remember. They have to. They saw him with space in his eyes. They had talked to him, in those moments, unsure to whom they were speaking—was he in? There was no comedy then, no blockbuster concepts, no interesting phenomena. There was only a hole in today.

"I guess I should start at the beginning of all of this," Tommy says. "I guess it's—it's hard to tell?" He looks around the room. No one seems sure whether they are supposed to answer him. "I mean, do you guys just want to know—what do you want to know? What did you guys talk about when you—I mean, when you, like—" Tommy can't get himself to the word 'witness.'" He sighs.

He pulls at the cigarette. It's not like things are completely different. It's not like his mind is finally right—different, better, but not right—or like he finally wants the right things, or good things. He doesn't do the things he wants to do yet, or, the things that he thinks he should probably want to do. He actually does want to do *some* good new things: he wants to be with people, to hear what they have to say. This is good, a delicious peace. All of this new wanting, and knowing what to want, and figuring out how to want: it's so queasy and fresh. He feels like he's walking on an electric floor in fuzzy socks when he goes out, like his moves are shot through foreign currents. Desires, both the living and the dead ones, mingle and cook together. All is hot.

"Well, I guess we—what we'd like to know, really, is what all happened that led to your joining us here," Mark says. His nose rounds to a point. He looks like a stoned cartoon turtle. Strange. All of them, they all look so different, Tommy thinks. So different from the little boys they'd been when he last was around any of them. He reminds himself that he just met Mark on Sunday, that he'd seen the rest a week before that.

"Okay, sorry. That's—okay, let me start over."

"Take your time," Mark says.

Everyone is paying attention. Their heads are cocked, their eyes drawn. Mark's recliner is rocking gently. A guy named Michael, he had a crisis about whether he should like Nirvana, he's leaning forward on his thighs. Across the room, Jared is slumped in the love seat. An empty and dented Coke can sits next to his feet. His chin is resting on his chest, his knees almost obscuring his face. But he looks focused, ready. The posture is almost a decoy, Tommy thinks, to disarm you before those eyes. This is one of the ways men love each other.

Tommy nods at Mark, pulls from his cigarette, exhales, consider another angle. "I guess I felt trapped. Everything was so vivid for so long, so intense, you know?" Those who do nod back. "And I guess I should have probably felt like life was amazing, like it was full of wonder. I know people like that, people who never had what I had. That...gift, or whatever. They just sorta *knew* that life was bigger, deeper. Enchanted, almost, if that makes sense." Tommy surveys the room. Most are still following him. Mark is nodding, but Tommy knows what he thinks Tommy is saying is not at all what he's saying. If he

finds out—when he finds out—will he ever be able to see me? How could he? What would he find him, and believe him to be? A prophet? A mystic? “I shrunk,” Tommy says, but he stops, and shakes his head at himself. He’s looking over Mark’s head, letting himself be hypnotized by the spin of the dryer. “Trapped,” Tommy says, “by sin.” Michael lifts off of his knees and sits back. Mark nods profusely. Jared nods.

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“Maybe—maybe that’s not the right word. Well, or, maybe it is, but I’m not sure if I’m using it right, yet.” This is their word. It belongs to them. It’s not meaning what he wants it to mean. There is a chance, he’s known since coming in, that the moment he opens his mouth to say exactly what he wants to say, that he will make no sense whatsoever. There is a chance that he could be misunderstood, or, worse, simply not understood at all. And then Tommy has another thought. What if he’s wrong? What if he’s completely off base and has missed some sort of mark that he didn’t even know he should have been aiming for? Was sin what had trapped him? Was sin what he wanted salvation from? What if this thing, this peace, these words, this testimony, were to fly out of him and get shot on sight? What if he were to lose all of this? The silent moan of having pressed mute to the whirrs and roars and everything else—gone. Does that happen? Would the Lord let it happen?

“This is harder,” Tommy tells the group, “than it seems. Harder than you guys—than you guys make it look.”

Mark looks around at the other faces. Despite his advantage in years, he is still in the grand scheme of things just as fresh as they are. What he really has on everyone here is a degree, and a serious amount of training, and knowledge. That’s really the only difference. His calling has trained him for patience. The other guys have been given it over time.

He smiles. “Tommy, you don’t have to share tonight if you don’t want to.”

Tommy blows some smoke through his nose, shaking his head “no”. “No, no, I want to. I—believe me, I do.” He’s tracing lines in the air with his cherry. “I just, you know, I don’t really know how to talk about something like this. I’ve never done it before.” He pauses, looks around. “Or any of this, really.”

When he goes to sleep in his mom's basement, he stares at the ceiling above with his childhood blankets, littered with NFL logos, pulled to his chest, and he almost can't believe the peace he feels. It's real, and textured. He can rub it like the pilled fabric of the sheets. For the first time in his life, he feels like he's here, like he's a part of something, anything. Even when alone, he can feel it in his mind, and in his heart, or whatever, but he can't really put words to it. How pleasantly odd this feeling he feels, of knowing that there's a place where he can put all of himself.

How do you share that? What are the words for that? Where is the beginning, and what is with it?

The guys in the room glance at one another. They're waiting, eager. Tommy has a presence in the room that they can all sense. Like sitting near a heavyweight champion. Though they've lived, though they've mostly married, though they all have jobs and hobbies, they know that their lives and Tommy's life are incomparable. They are satisfied as they sit, uncomfortable where they stand. But eager. Tommy has spices from the east. What else exists?

Tommy is stalling, and he knows it. He knows that he can simply shout all of these words, get everything off of his chest in some grand Pentecostal quake, and that no one would bat an eye. In fact, they'd probably be right moved, he thinks. He holds smoke in his lungs. Drafts linger on his tongue. But he would flap his tongue around in the circle, and then nothing would have changed, only the words. The thrums of his shouting would only unstitch all the quiet. He is here. It's an uncomfortable comfort, allowing yourself to belong to something. He never wants to open his mouth again, actually, never wants to see anything outside of what he sees when he is about to go to sleep at night. He wants a retreat, a retreat from the wilderness.

He flicks his cigarette. It was so very cold on top of the mountain. Come on down, sinner: come down unveiled, for you are not the only one here. That was what he had heard.

They're all starting to look around at one another. Mark has his eyes closed, but he's not asleep. Several mouths move in silence. Lips are shifting down at their corners, pulling the eyes with them. They're trying so hard to listen and to understand. They want so

badly to know. A few of them are nodding their heads in tiny, barely noticeable bobs, almost like a tremble. Jared is still moving his lips, mouthing something to himself. He's making eye contact with Tommy from behind those knees. Jared didn't go to prom; he'd gone to some all-night event at his church instead. Now he is a man. He looks innocent. They all do. They are sheep on the edge of a city. They know after all that there is a world.

Tommy realizes that he hasn't said a word in at least a minute and a half as he rolls the filtered end of his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. He drops the butt into the mug. It pings like a muffled coin.

Jared speaks. "Tommy, look, we're really just happy that you're here, you know?" He blinks at his own words. "I mean, you know, not that you're *here* as in part of our group, but here as in like home. You know?"

Mark smiles and turns back to Tommy. He leans back in his chair, closes his eyes again. When he opens them, he is smiling. "If it's all the same to everyone else, I think we can really just wait until Tommy's ready before we have to hear his story. Or, Tommy, if you don't want to share, that's fine, too. We'll all get to know you, I'm sure, in time. It's fine." He shoves himself backwards and clamps the chair down, the recliner shouting from its gears as he pulls the plunger. "You're only new for a little while."

Mark reaches for his Bible, which is on a table at his side. "Okay," he says. His voice is louder, more commanding. Everyone snaps from their reveries. "Last little bit of Galatians 3; who wants to read?"

For a moment, a trailing moment whose residue stays in the basement air, the group is still looking at Tommy. Their eyes are open. Everyone is paying attention to him, though there seems to be no pressure; they're paying attention to everything and everyone else, too. None of them seem to be worried about missing anything. No one is talking. Their eyes show that they are all empty, empty without being empty, empty in the same way a home is empty: waiting and prepared. Everything is arranged, and set. Someone will read. They will all sit together, and wait.

***Marty Sartini Garner** lives in Montreal and is currently pursuing his Masters degree in Creative Writing at Concordia University.*



*Wheat*

*Martha Elias Downey*

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# ODE TO A HMONG DANCER

R. Joseph Capet

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93

O marionette on strings of grace,  
whose each turn echoes clatt'ring beads  
like crashing snowflakes in wind's embrace  
or fatal collisions of falling leaves,  
with what skill the angels pose your hands!  
Or perch your head upon your neck  
as though it were not weighed with cares  
as though it did not understand  
the path of life's retreating trek  
to sin's sure wages' silent lair.

O flitting elfin beauty dark  
with feet arranged by willing fate  
and eyes that shower youthful sparks  
is it not, nonetheless, too late?  
What sombre thoughts dog lively steps  
through melancholy years' parade?  
What smiling, singing, sad lament



wells up within your deepest depths?

Even young you know your age,

though tender, is not innocent.

94

But dance, doomed creature of the clay!

And pay no heed our mortal lot;

the players, though all doomed, still play

and sentenced spectators still watch,

as each exacting ankle's twist

carves from out of time and space

a swaying window on the boards,

to see through your rotating wrist—

through that snapped conduit of grace—

the motionless movement of the Lord.

---

# BURNISHING SPIRIT

Mary Gedeon Harvan

---

95

Like lava in a crater

You seethe in my heart

Rumbling discontent

Scornful of confinement

In that tepid place

You boil over

Spewing brilliance

You reshape my surface

Mend my core

Revived in grace

My soul ignites

Shedding apathy



*Blue Mountain, Australia*

*Elisa Pistilli*

# OPEN MY EYES

Mary Gedeon Harvan

97

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Open my heart, Lord

Chisel your love

Open my mind, Lord

Etch your design

Open my soul, Lord

Sculpt your will

# I ASKED GOD

98

Sam Logiudice

---

Feeling unsettled one day,  
I went to the Lord and asked

If the trees sway  
The leaves rustle  
The birds sing  
And the winds whisper  
If the oceans roar  
The silence hums  
The past reveals  
And the present repeats  
If words they speak  
Pages they scream  
My feelings are yelling  
The longing it cries

Lord, when will your voice be.....

***Sammy Tore** is an ATM Technician who in the last year has started studying a course in Miracles, which has added a whole new meaning to his spiritual life.*



*Awa Dembele-Yeno*

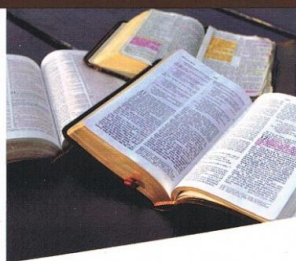
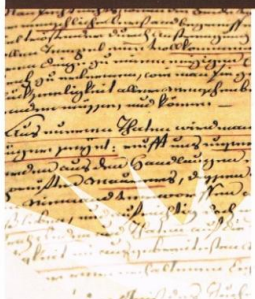
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