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Discoveries of the Nag Hammadi Library,

Through the Lens of the *Apocryphon of John*

For this talk, I will be introducing the Nag Hammadi Library and Gnosticism as a whole through the lens of a specific text found in the codices of said library: the *Apocryphon of John*. It is my belief, and the belief of many scholars, that this text is an excellent gateway into the world of Gnosticism since it describes the cosmology and creation story that was shared, in one version or another, by many of these Gnostic groups. But first, let us provide some background information.

In 1945, thirteen papyrus codices were discovered in a clay jar, buried in the Northern Egyptian desert, near the town of Nag Hammadi. After some initial confusion and general hub-bub, it was discovered that these codices were a collection of texts, written in the Egyptian dialect Coptic, dated to around the fifth century. What they contained included some of the most baffling texts in the history of Christian scholarship. Contents included early Christian writings, some of which would be seen as acceptable or even canonical to a modern Christian, but the

majority of these codices fall into the category that scholars today label Gnostic, a theology now deemed heretical by the Orthodox Church.

This Nag Hammadi Library, as it became known, has turned the mainstream perception of early Christianity on its head. The Gnostics were known before this discovery, yes, but texts ascribed to these so-called heretics were scarce due to them being banned and destroyed by the Church. The majority of our knowledge on the Gnostics stemmed from slanderous accounts written by their enemies, the early orthodoxy. For example, Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis prefaces his verbal lashing of the Gnostics with, "Truly it pollutes the ears—the blasphemous assembly of great audacity, the gathering and the interpretation of its dirt, the mucky perversity of the scummy obscenity" (Williams 93). Epiphanius would go on to accuse the Gnostics of everything from mass copulation rituals to cannibalizing infants, none of which have any sort of backing in the texts written by the Gnostics themselves. With this find, though, scholars could now finally peer into the Gnostic worldview from their own words and better understand this esoteric branch of Christianity.

So, what is Gnosticism and who were the Gnostics? This is a very complicated pair of questions with no real answer. Indeed, the term "Gnostic" itself is dying out in the modern era due to

its increasing irrelevance when regarding the bulk of these groups of early Christians, since it so loosely defines the people that traditionally fall under the label. For the sake of this talk and for time, however, I shall attempt to define it to the best of my ability. The term itself is derived from the Greek word "gnosis", which means "knowledge". In general, Gnosticism is used to label certain sects of early Christians who deviated from what would become the orthodox canon.

These groups tended to share a radical dualistic worldview in which the disdained, imperfect physical world and divine spiritual world are strictly distinct. Those who have achieved "gnosis" are the ones who have risen to the spiritual world through personal revelations and secret teachings. Again, this definition is very loose and hardly fitting, since as we now know, the groups under the label of Gnosticism were very diverse in their beliefs and practices. Think of it as more of a guideline than a strict definition.

As previously mentioned, I will be analyzing a specific text from the Nag Hammadi Library, the *Apocryphon*, or *Secret Book of John*. It is a book ascribed to the Sethian group of Gnostics, named after the third child of Adam and Eve. The reason for this name will be revealed in due course. It was written some time in the second century, certainly written before 185 CE, since Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon admonished the

writing as being among the "unspeakable number of apocryphal and spurious writings, which they themselves have forged, to bewilder the minds of foolish men, and of such as are ignorant of the Scriptures of truth" (Roberts 344).

Besides it's role as a Gnostic creation myth of sorts, I also pick this manuscript upon which to focus since, admittedly, it is quite unusual and bizarre to a newcomer to Gnosticism, especially if one is approaching from a mainstream Christian perspective, be it Protestant, Catholic, or any other denomination. In this text we will see, in full force, the influence of the religiously and intellectually diverse world that comprised the Mediterranean and beyond at that time of Antiquity.

Four versions of the *Apocryphon of John* exist, with slight variations between them. Their main content, however, remains consistent throughout. What this text entails is a revelation to John the Apostle by Jesus Christ, similar to the book of Revelation, but in this text Jesus is explicitly teaching John secret knowledge, so that he may know the truth of the universe and of Jesus' origin.

It begins with a Pharisee named Arimanius mocking John, before the apostle flees to a mountain to contemplate his doubts and questions. As he does so, the earth quakes and a light shines in the sky. Jesus appears to John in three simultaneous

forms, a young child, a young man, and an old man. Jesus tells John, "I am the father, I am the mother, I am the child. I am the incorruptible and the undefiled one" (Meyer). He then begins to tell John the story of creation, according to the Sethians.

Jesus begins by describing the One, who is the ultimate divine being. This being, which is referred to in many esoteric circles as the Monad, is the original substance, from which everything else is derived from. Jesus describes it by saying, "For it is greater than a god, because it has nothing over it and no lord above it. It does not exist within anything inferior to it, since everything exists within it alone. It is eternal, since it does not need anything...it is always absolutely complete in light" (Meyer). This comment by Jesus is reminiscent of descriptions of the Monad as seen in Middle Platonism and Hermeticism, among other religious and philosophical groups of the time.

From the mind of the Monad comes Barbelo, the "first human", the "mother-father", the "holy spirit". She is described as an androgynous being, and is labeled "the triple male, the triple power" (Meyer), which harkens to the thrice great Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom who is associated with the Hermetic tradition. Together, Barbelo and the Monad produce many cosmic beings, known as Aeons, who inhabit the pleroma, or the whole of

the divine realm. These Aeons include Mind and Light, with the latter being Christ.

Eventually, Sophia, who is the Aeon of Wisdom, is formed. Sophia wished to create her own being without the help of the Monad and, as a result, brings forth a deformed being unlike any of the other Aeons. Described as a dragon with a lion's head and lightning shooting out of his eyes, this being is named Yaldabaoth, or "child of chaos", also called Samael or Saklas. In horror, Sophia casts Yaldabaoth out of the divine realm and surrounds him in clouds, hiding him away from the rest of the Aeons.

Yaldabaoth, who is ignorant of his cosmic neighbors, believes he and his mother to be the only ones in existence. He proclaims, "I am a jealous god and there is no other god beside me." This may remind you of Exodus 34:14, which says, "for you shall worship no other god, because the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (*NSRV Bible*, Ex. 34:14). So, in his thoughtlessness, Yaldabaoth begins to create his own servant beings, lesser versions of the Aeons from which he descends. These archons aid him in the formation of his own plane of existence, the Earth which we now inhabit.

If you haven't caught on yet, in the Sethian view of things, Yaldabaoth is the name for the Jewish god, Yahweh, the god of the Old Testament, and the god of canonical Christianity.

This being, referred to as the demiurge, is commonplace in Gnosticism. Here we see an attempt to reconcile the violent, jealous nature of Old Testament Yahweh with the overall more loving and forgiving Jesus of the New Testament. Maybe the reason why Yahweh is so quick to anger and smite, and why the world he created is so flawed and imperfect, is that he isn't really the all-powerful god of the universe that he claims to be.

Moving on, as a result of Yaldabaoth's prideful boasts, Sophia repents to the Monad, and is forgiven. Together, they work to redeem her and her bastard child. The Monad calls out to Yaldabaoth to announce his presence, and the echo of his call leaves the image of his spirit. Yaldabaoth, in another act of defiance, attempts to recreate the Monad's spirit for himself, and crafts the first man: Adam. However, Adam is not alive and is immobile. Sophia, seeing an opportunity, tricks Yaldabaoth into breathing his essence into Adam to animate him. This both gifts Adam with divine wisdom and robs Yaldabaoth of it.

Adam, now possessing wisdom and "gnosis", becomes a threat to Yaldabaoth and his archons. They attempt to contain him, crafting a prison of fleshly desire and ignorance to distract him from divine knowledge, the Garden of Eden. Within the garden lies the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which the demiurge and his archons use to fuel their connection to the divine. They

attempt to conceal it from Adam, and command him not to eat from it.

Pitying Adam, Barbelo sends a helper to him, a spirit of Life called Epinoia to dwell in him and help liberate that divine wisdom within Adam. Sensing this defiance, Yaldabaoth puts Adam in a trance and attempts to seize Epinoia from him. He partially succeeds, and from Adam springs Eve, derived from Epinoia. Jesus then reveals that he was the serpent in the garden, who convinced Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, which awoke them to their confinement in a world of impurity. In a final attempt to confine them in the physical realm, Yaldabaoth assaults Eve, who conceives Cain and Abel, who in this version are evil spirits. This introduces the concept of intercourse, which is portrayed as another attempt to keep humans in a fleshly and impure state, distracting them from their divine origin.

Eventually, after being cast from the garden, Adam begets his own son, Seth, who is named "after the manner of the heavenly race in the eternal realms" (Meyer). Seth is, thus, the spiritual ancestor of all humans and, in a way, the model human. This is also the reason for the Sethians' name. Due to the nature of our conception and birth, however, we have forgotten our divine origin, and the realization of our ancestry is the achieving of "gnosis".

Skipping over some details for the sake of time, the *Apocryphon* also credits the demiurge with sending the flood to wipe out his creation and with sending archons to mate with humans, creating the Nephilim, in another attempt to thwart humanity.

A dialogue then begins between Jesus and John. John inquires about the nature of salvation. Jesus reasserts that those who reconnect with their spiritual origins will be saved. Those who do not realize this will continue to undergo reincarnation until they achieve "gnosis". Some will still reject this revelation, though, and they will be damned.

Jesus then asserts his position in all of this: he is here, an agent of the divine, to remind us of the pleroma, and to guide us to "gnosis".

The *Apocryphon of John* is, at its most literal, a dramatic and cosmic tale of heavenly beings, evil overlords, and a hope for an escape from this fleshly prison. At its most allegorical, it still serves as a figurative representation of a common Gnostic worldview: every human contains the potential for "gnosis" within them, and our route out of this filthy world is to rediscover that divine essence within us and ascend above our blind peers.

Despite being a great example of the average Gnostic's view of the odd, perplexing universe they found themselves in, the

Apocryphon of John is surprisingly optimistic under its horrifying, heretical surface. It's a tale of hope and escape just as much as it is a tale of lost wisdom and abominable demigods. At the same time, it is a fascinating look into the diverse world of early Christianity. This text is a great example of how this religion didn't begin in a vacuum. In the absence of a set canon, the diverse world of the Mediterranean in the first and second century CE took this brand new cult of Jesus Christ and attempted to fit it in with preconceived beliefs and ideas. For many, it wasn't necessarily that their old beliefs were wrong and Christianity was right, it was moreso "now we see a bit more of the big picture, so let's reexamine the puzzle pieces we already have". We see influence, for example, from Judaism with its Old Testament foundations, Middle Platonism with the Monad and other elements of its cosmology, and even Hermeticism, with its ideas of dualism, enlightenment, and references to the "Thrice Great".

In the end, I hope that this examination of the *Apocryphon of John* serves as an intriguing introduction to the world of Gnosticism and the rest of the fascinating knowledge gifted to us by the Nag Hammadi Library. In addition, may this brief introduction to Gnosticism urge you to reconsider and rethink the foundations of early Christianity. So many writings and ideas were lost to us because they were considered heretical,

despite being written by people who claimed to be Christian. In their minds they were just as orthodox as Irenaeus and Tertullian, and followed the teachings of Jesus just like these major figures from the patristic era did. We likely only have a fraction of all that was deemed unfit to be kept by the Church, and what is available to be studied was preserved mostly through coincidence and sheer luck. But, in those that have survived, we see a plethora of beautiful writings, detailing vast cosmologies and thought-provoking philosophies that only the bright minds of Antiquity could conceive. So, I'll leave you with a suggestion to give the *Apocryphon of John* a read for yourself, along with the rest of the Nag Hammadi Library and other Gnostic texts. They are a fascinating look into the Christians who didn't make the cut, and a notable stepping stone for our own personal quests for "gnosis". Thank you.

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