



The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity

Hans Jonas

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The Gnostic Religion was the 1st decent introduction to gnosticism for the modern world & is still of value today. It includes both heresiological & original texts--Nag Hammadi only uncovered later. It holds useful material on Simon Magus, the Hermetic Poimandres (shown here to be equally a gnostic document), the Valentinians, Mandaeans, Manichaeans & the "Hymn of the Pearl". The existentialist bent--Jonas a student of Martin Heidegger--makes an interesting contrast to Pagel's more orthodox view of gnostic religion as theistic. This volume & the Nag Hammadi library will provide good coverage of the diverse teachings of gnostic & related movements.

Introduction: East & West in Hellenism

The Meaning of Gnosis & the Extent of the Gnostic Movement

Gnostic Imagery & Symbolic Language

Simon Magus

The "Hymn of the Pearl"

The Angels that Made the World. The Gospel of Marcion

The Poimandres of Hermes Trismegistus

The Valentinian Speculation

Creation, World History & Salvation According to Mani

The Cosmos in Greek & Gnostic Evaluation

Virtue & the Soul in Greek & Gnostic Teaching

The Recent Discoveries in the Field of Gnosticism

Epilogue: Gnosticism, Nihilism & Existentialism

The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity Details

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Author : Hans Jonas

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Szplug says

Although enough information has come to light to cast Martin Heidegger's qualities as a human being in doubt, there is little question but that many of his students—schooled by his powerful mind to explore the subtle immensities of phenomenology, ontology, and metaphysics in the early-to-mid twentieth century—went on to become influential and powerful thinkers themselves. One such *éminence* was Hans Jonas, who parlayed a fascination with gnosticism—proposing it a distant ancestor to modern existentialism—into the first comprehensive work in English to explore the various avenues of thought, metaphysics, mythology, and theology that went into its dualistic and heretic system that opposed a divinity-bearing man striving for knowledge (*gnosis*) against a hostile, sometimes evil, universe.

In this powerful, illuminating work, Jonas traces the directions of classical western thought in the centuries prior to the birth of Christ, a period in which Greek-centred Hellenism spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern world, working its way into the cultural and belief systems that had preceded it as Greek itself became the language of choice for serious discourse. The intermingling of Greek rationality and philosophy with the rich mythological tapestries of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Persia—combined with the massive upheavals and destruction that accompanied the setting up of two colossal, antagonistic empires, Roman and Parthian, as masters of the settled world—produced a ferment of new religious and philosophical notions, an intricately creative cauldron in which roiled many of the ideas that provided the base material with which the road towards the modern world has been paved.

Dividing the multiple streams of Gnostic thought into two principal channels—the *Iranian* and the *Syrian-Egyptian*, the former with strong Zoroastrian influences in the division of *Good/Light* and *Evil/Darkness* into two eternal, unassimilable realms; the latter with a cosmogony in which *Evil/Darkness* is created from *within* the essence of *Good/Light* itself and can thus be redeemed—Jonas examines the then-existing Gnostic texts and provides an exegesis, comparing them to other Gnostic strains and the orthodox Christian soteriologies that were in direct competition for the minds of the public. Jonas aimed for an even mix of the Iranian and Syrian-Egyptian types in the six principal systems he examines, even including a pagan gnostic belief in the *Poimandres of Hermes Trismegistus*. The most detailed exegesis is performed upon the highest-deemed representatives of the two strands: the *Valentinian Speculation* for the S-E and *Manicheanism* for the Iranian. The final chapters compare Gnostic virtues—in libertinism and a more prevalent asceticism—against those of classical Greece and Christianity, explore the minimal amounts of the Nag Hammadi discovery then available (a complete tome of Gnostic writings in Coptic which was only partially translated at the time of the printing of Jonas' revised second edition), and conclude with an epilogue comparing Gnosticism with Existentialism—focussing on Heidegger's early work in *Being and Time*—that is worth the price of the book alone. Then, as now, the terror and dread that bears down upon the naked soul when belief in the unity of man with nature—a unity that is grounded in the infinite—is shattered by the ever-anew anxieties of the unsettled and unsettling *present*, a now in which neither guilt nor hope can dampen the flames of an existence that appears alone and isolated, will cause the afflicted to seek answers inward, away from the cold and unfathomable world. In the gnostic dawn, postulating a divinity beyond all comprehension seemed a *rational* response to the apparent *irrationality* of a suddenly menacing and hardscrabble environment.

Although every Gnostic system was unique to itself—indeed, within each different strand believers were encouraged to elaborate, expand upon, and revise the existing bases of thought—they all shared certain core tenets: the material universe was a flawed and hostile environment ruled and created by the Demiurge and

his Archons who, either through malice or ignorance, had fashioned the cosmos solely to keep man imprisoned and separated from the Alien God; that the latter, the infinite source of Light and Goodness, was unknowable to man whilst so imprisoned and existed beyond the Demiurge's illusionary universe; that man bore within himself the *pneuma*—a spark of the divine spirit—and that, through *gnosis*, or knowledge, he could cast off his physical body and soul—artifices of the Archons—and ascend through the universe to return to the source of Divine Light that was the true God; and that *ignorance* of this Divine Essence was the principal means by which the material world kept mankind in bitter and perpetual thrall. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect is the manner in which Jesus Christ is re-invented as an incarnation of the Unknown Divinity's essence, sent to impart to man the *gnosis* that will reveal the ignorant materiality of the natural world; thus Christ's tribulations were to *impede* the success of his mission to educate man, whereas in Christian soteriology Christ's tribulations were the very *means* with which he would redeem the sins of a fallen mankind. In Gnosticism, *original sin* is non-existent, the God of Eden being the deceiving and jealous Demiurge, the serpent but one of the manifestations of this *Jesus incarnate* who braves the dangers of the Archons and their darkness in an effort to make man aware of the Alien God; an entity *unknown and unknowable* despite the fact his divinity, existent in the *pneuma* of every man and woman, is the path to salvation by way of a post-cosmic reunion of the *pneuma* with the infinite Divine Light.

As the Demiurge has often been identified with the Old Testament God, the Gnostics were from the start in opposition to Judaism and Christianity; and yet its dualistic structure, rich mythology, and inspired metaphysics and soteriology has had a vast influence upon religious, philosophical, and political thought, and has continued to exert a fascination upon people, from a variety of cultural backgrounds, through to today. Although criticized as being dated due to the subsequent information made available through the completed translations of the Nag Hammadi discoveries, *The Gnostic Religion* is brilliantly written and clearly explained, and the linkage made between this ancient dualism and modern nihilism provides a unique lens for interpretation. This wonderful book is a keeper, a tome I will be dipping into and refreshing myself with over time—for without embracing their eschatology, I can't but agree with the central Gnostic premise: knowledge is indeed the spark that kindles the flames of a very human passion; the boundless curiosity to explore the world and try to make *sense* out of all that the *senses* reveal.

Erik Graff says

Despite the facts that I read it in translation, that the text is now out-of-date & that Hans Jonas isn't even a specialist in the field, his *Gnostic Religion* served me as the best introduction to the field that I encountered while formulating plans for an undergraduate thesis. Having just had a friend, a reader totally unschooled in early church history, read it and like it, I confidently recommend it to anyone even mildly interested in religion in the ancient world as it pertains to modern Christianity and philosophy.

In another review, I recommend GRS Mead's much older *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* similarly. Like Mead, Jonas takes the worldview of the "gnostics" seriously, though he relates them to his intellectual generation and existentialism rather than to Mead and his generation's theosophy.

Mohamed Karaly says

Michael says

A lot of books about the Gnostics talk about how they were suppressed by the mainstream Christian church, were an influence on church beliefs, acted as a catalyst to force the church to define its beliefs when it rejected the Gnostic beliefs or goes over the history of the discovery of hidden texts. They do all that but don't really cover what the Gnostics believed. This book covers the beliefs and the differences between the beliefs of various sects. I highly recommend it if you want to know the Gnostics instead of knowing ABOUT the Gnostics.

Jonathan says

None

Jared Saltz says

Jonas provides the clearest and shortest understanding of gnosticism that I've ever read. It is so well done that you could read only the first two chapters and still have an immensely better appreciation for the contents of and rationale for gnosticism, in its pagan and Christian contexts. The first three chapters provide the historical context and survey of the contents for gnostic writings. The rest of the book provides a more in-depth look at the various systems of gnostic thought, as well as specific writers, and specific questions. Jonas concludes by noting that the beginning and end gnosticism's paradox is the unknown God himself who is unknowable on principle because the other is totally unknown and is other to everything that is known, and yet is somehow the object of a knowledge and asks to be known. The knowledge of him itself is the knowledge of his unknowability; the predication upon him is thus known by negation and is a negative theology. He is truly an alien god.

Dr_Savage says

A masterwork on Gnosticism by one of the great German philosophers of the twentieth century. Jonas devoted decades to the study of this fascinating phenomenon, and he presents his key findings here in a more accessible style than in his early, two-volume study, "Gnosis und spätantiker Geist". His academic studies under Heidegger had sharpened Jonas's perception for the thought-world of Late Antiquity, which Jonas presents as one marked by a deep rift between self and world, world and God, and God and self. What could overcome this schism, according to the elect, was gnosis, a Greek word meaning "knowledge". For the Gnostics, unlike for earlier philosophers, humans could not hope for any reliable normative or ethical guidance from the structure of the cosmos. The cosmos was instead corrupt and evil, the product of a tyrannical demiurge, and only by defying this baleful order (either through asceticism or libertinism) could humans break through it to achieve union with a transmundane, wholly other God. In an epilogue, Jonas draws interesting parallels between the spiritual situation he discusses in his book and the nihilism which haunted European thought in his own lifetime. Indeed, one reason to read this book is that Gnosticism is still very much a part of our own thought-world: it thrives today in New Age religions, esoteric cults, Dan

Brown-style potboilers and even in science fiction - "2001: A Space Odyssey", for instance, is recognisably a neo-Gnostic text. Although Jonas's study has since been superseded in some of its details, its synthetic approach provides a welcome corrective to the plethora of specialist studies on this topic, which all too often leave the reader wishing for greater clarity and perspective.

Jason Ross says

This is a very academic treatment of Gnosticism, but one that has endured through three editions. Such a lifespan is exceedingly rare for an academic book, and surprising for a book so technical in its treatment of such an arcane topic. Interest in the Gnostic religion transcends academia.

Jonas sketches a narrative of this interest in his introductions to successive editions of the book. Introducing the first edition, in 1957, Jonas tells very much an academic story, grounded in scholarly research about the myths and symbolisms of human origins - especially about the competition between those Christian myths and symbols which had become dominant, and the Gnostic myths and symbols which once competed with those of Christian orthodoxy. In this competition, Jonas from the start marks Gnosticism as the "aggressor -- it was an embattled cause from the beginning and thus came under the scrutiny of those whose cause it threatened to subvert." The academic story, then, was of recovering the origins of an ancient - and heretical - faith that had been rooted out and erased from memory.

Though Jonas presents himself as seeking not the origins, but the "essence" of Gnosticism, his volume found renewed interest following the 1946 discovery of the Nag Hamadi manuscripts. Research on these manuscripts progressed slowly, and in 1962 Jonas published a second edition which added a chapter incorporating some insights from the find. By 1970 study of Gnosticism had shifted even more significantly, as Jonas reported, "It is now difficult to define which field, which particular section of scholarship, is the true home of research in Gnosticism." (Indeed, by 1976 Gnosticism had made a prominent appearance in popular culture, with Tom Wolfe marking as Gnostic many of the New Age religious sects that had sprung up in the 1960s and 1970s during the first of many subsequent American "Me" generations in his landmark essay of that name.)

Given the prominence of Gnostic studies - a field which Jonas had done much to advance - Jonas took the opportunity in his Third Edition to tell of the connections between his own intellectual history and his interest in Gnosticism. In this way, Jonas effectively re-framed his original work. His first edition analyzed the main tenets of Gnostic literature, catalogued the systems of thought developed by several Gnostic speculators, and discussed the conflict between Gnosticism and "the Classical Mind"; the second edition added a chapter discussing the Nag Hamadi scripts and, more importantly, the chapter "Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism". With that latter chapter now ending the book, and Jonas's own narrative (anchored in his encounter with Heidegger) beginning it, the book now begins to point more broadly to appeal that the essence or spirit of Gnosticism has held out to those of us shaped by the problems of the modern world.

Jonas sees both ancient Gnosticism and modern Existentialism as responses to the experience of not feeling at home in the world. Ancient Gnosticism is portrayed in opposition to the classical view of the cosmos as an "order" (which is the translation of the Greek "cosmos"). In the original text, Jonas expounds on this contrast

at length, drawing from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Cicero to draw out the connections in their work between their awe for the cosmos, home to man and gods, organized around an intelligible (even if unknown) order, and calling for man to shape his soul and intellect in ways (namely through the cultivation of virtue and through the pursuit of wisdom and truth) reflective of the order of the cosmos.

Gnostics, on the other hand, though they accepted the notion of order, rejected its fundamental goodness. Having transcended the classical belief in an order inhabited by the gods, with a belief in a "transmundane deity" - a God who lived outside the universe of men - Gnostics saw the order of their existence as "rigid and inimical order, tyrannical and evil law, devoid of meaning and goodness, alien to the purposes of man and to his inner essence...." (p. 250) Jonas concludes, "Greek thought had been a grand expression of man's belonging to the world...; gnostic thought it inspired by the anguished discovery of man's cosmic solitude, of the utter otherness of his being to that of the universe at large."

In his essay on Existentialism, Jonas pinpoints the modern history of that philosophic mood to Pascal who expressed that feeling of man's "cosmic solitude" in this way: "Cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened." For this student of Heidegger, Pascal's verb "cast" prefigures Heidegger's experience of "having been thrown" into existence; Jonas concludes that Heidegger's term, "as far as I can see, is originally gnostic." But responding to the anger and rebelliousness that is at the core of Gnosticism ancient and modern, Jonas challenges, "The phrase of having been flung into indifferent nature is a remnant from a dualistic metaphysics, to whose use the non-metaphysical standpoint has no right. What is the throw without the thrower, and without a beyond whence it started?" (p. 339)

Ryan says

Jonas' book is one of the classics in Gnostic scholarship. Predating the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, Jonas interprets the Gnostic religion in Twentieth Century philosophic terms. Trained under Martin Heidegger, Jonas draws parallels between Gnosticism and existentialism. Though slightly outdated, Jonas' book is a must-read for anyone even remotely interested in Gnosticism.

Greg says

This book caught my attention at some point in the past. Then it was mentioned again recently in another book I'm reading, so I thought to look it up in the school library, and behold it was there. So I read it. Fascinating genesis story about my coming to read this book aside, I'm going to add another one, because this is about all these different Gnostic views of the world, and they are not a real group of views, but competing attempts at mythologizing the Judeo-Christian, or monotheistic religions at the time. So this second genesis story is that Dan Mother Fucking Brown is coming out with his new piece of conspiracy swill this week and I got such a hard on thinking that once again we will discover the truth in Mr. Browns books that I ran out early and picked up a book on secret religions and read it like a maniac while jacking off with my free hand at the excitement Mr. Brown brings to me. Also if I waited a week later every other ~~hoehebag~~ I mean serious reader, will also be once again engrossed in Gnostic-esque books and I'd look like a bandwagon jumper.

If the bible can have two genesis accounts than so can I.

I found this book pretty interesting, but since I was reading it casually (not taking notes, or any of that shit), there were parts of the book that are just a mess in my head. Joas likes jumping different 'religions' (sects? none of these words work right. manifestations? Nope. do you know what i'm trying to say?) in order to illuminate that the rise of Gnosticism in the early century of the catholic church had more to do with the Hellenist Cosmopolitanism of the post Alexander conquest of the near East than with the church per se. This is kind of interesting stuff to me, the difference the view of the individual in Greek thought, the shift from the *Polis* to Cosmopolitanism and it's ramifications on what is thought of as the individual, the public and the private spheres, and how all of this goes to differences in shaping mytho-centric metaphysical views of creation and the cosmos. This book goes to show how certain Greek ideas run through all of the different attempts at metaphysics of the time (on metaphysics, couldn't New Age people have not picked up this word and tried to make it their own. Couldn't they have just called their stuff Dopey Shit, and left metaphysics to philosophy. Philosophy does have the fucking squatter rights on the term since it's the name of one of Aristotle's books from 2600 years ago and all. So from now on I decree all New Age publishers have to put on the back of their books the subjects that read *Mind, Body, Spirit / Metaphysics*, as *Mind, Body, Spirit / Dopey Shit* I have spoken as the lead of New Age. The keeper of the morons and haters of books. The overseer of believers of Dopey Shit, so it will be done).

I don't know what I was talking about. Oh something about different views of the world, metaphysically. Yeah. It's interesting shit at trying to grapple with obvious problems in the simplistic and kind of contradictory Moses explanation of the beginning of the world. Why are there two stories? Well some of the sects talked about in this book have a good reason for it, most of them though just tack on lots and lots of stuff before whatever it is that makes the person known as Adam occur. There are battles between light and darkness, fucked up attempts and creation, a God who doesn't give a shit about what happens, the blind crazy god one normally thinks of as the creator of our world when one thinks of gnostic world creation, a poor female named Sophia who just creates everything out of a fucked up attempt at emulating the original creator, a God thrown into the darkness and trapped in our world now covered in all of the muck and filth of non-pure being, and lots more little tales (some of these are from the same story, some from different ones, there are lots of them).

What I like about these stories are they are serious attempts at trying to give some kind of meaning to the darkness of the world. Instead of just shrugging while making a silly face to the question of why there is evil in the world if God is all good, and saying "He works in mysterious ways!" like some fucking retard running around the kitchen of McDonald's yelling "Special Sauce, Special Sauce!" because it's one of the only things he fucking knows; these are attempts to come to grips with the idea that the world might not be good, or perfect, or even here by choice, but maybe we are all just a big deity abortion, the unwanted ginger kid in the second grade, or something worse, so much worse than the ginger kid.

I'm growing tired of writing this review. Maybe I will return to it. The book is interesting. It's interesting especially in light of my pop-knowledge of the subject, and realizing that the stuff that Mr. Brown has popularized is kind of a watered down version of what Gnostic thought actually was (or maybe not, as I hadn't read much about this prior to this book, and knew most of what I knew from the back of books and from other reputable sources, my knowledge of Mr. Brown and his books is also derived from similar means. I haven't read any of them. I haven't seen the movies. I read a few pages of the book Mr. Brown wrote about some painting and the church and it hurt me by how simplistically the page I read was written. So I take it back. I read one page of Mr. Brown's work), and that the real nuances and differences between these different views of the world are pretty interesting. Will I go out and buy a book with all of the works mentioned in here in translation? Probably not. Maybe I'll read a bit more on Google Books from some Victorian translations of Pre-Dead Sea Scroll stuff, but that is because it's free and I get bored sometimes.

If you have read this far I thank you, sorry this didn't turn out to be informative. I hope you at least got a chuckle out of the dick and retard jokes.

Mario D'Amore says

Good general vision and introduction to Gnosticism.
Buona visione generale e introduzione sullo Gnosticismo.

Chadwick says

This is the definitive work about Gnosticism. Readable, eminently *understandable*, which is the real miracle, considering the baroque nature of some of the source material.

Gregory Klages says

Jonas explores and unravels the intricate fabric of Gnostic religious thought that developed concurrently with early Christianity. The two faiths competed, responding to some of the same pressures rising within Judaism, the Greek cults, and other Middle Eastern religions. Where Jonas' book is particularly thought-provoking is that he spends almost no time at all placing these beliefs within a socio-political context, instead exploring their philosophical origins, the basic tenets of their faith, and including examples (where they exist) of liturgy and theological writing from the Gnostics themselves.

For more comments, see:
<http://generationpositivecanada.blogs...>

Jamey says

It's *the* book about Gnosticism.
