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Late Antique 'Gnostics' and the Medieval Kabbalah.
An Argument for a Revised Methodology

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Christ Church Trinity Term 2012

--- Brief Abstract ---

This thesis aims to provide a critique of the conclusions of Gershom Scholem regarding the potential for 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation, and to establish whether, in light of the available evidence, Scholem's arguments (which have yet, to my mind, to be sufficiently challenged) can be reasonably supported. I strive to offer an arguably clearer definition of the relevant taxonomic terms than is often presented in scholarly analyses of this question, whilst also arguing for the applicability to this debate of certain pertinent methodological approaches drawn from the wider school of comparative mythology. As such, I also attempt to establish a clear methodology for judging the probability of the genetic descent of one 'system' from another, *viz.* that perhaps the most logical method for assessing potential similarities between different 'systems' is to assume in the first instance that all correspondences identified are essentially coincidental, dismissing this assumption *only* if one can identify a high level of exactness in these comparisons (such as would render pure coincidence relatively improbable) and/or establish a secure chain of transmission between two sources, a chain which renders the transmission of ideas not only possible but indeed probable. Applying this methodology to certain potential routes by which second century 'Gnostic' thought might have been transmitted to the origin point of the medieval Kabbalah, I attempt both to demonstrate the wider applicability of such a methodology beyond the narrow question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic relationships, and to illustrate the serious difficulties with advancing any of these potential routes as a reliable source for the transmission of 'Gnostic' ideas to the Kabbalah. Rather, I argue that it may be more logically defensible, in the absence of clear source evidence, to ascribe such correspondences as are located purely to coincidence, albeit a coincidence perhaps somewhat tempered by certain observations regarding the relative ubiquity of certain concepts and modes of thought.

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--- Detailed Abstract ---

My thesis takes as its essential starting point the pioneering work of Gershom Scholem on the origins and development of the Medieval Kabbalah, and in particular his oft-repeated contention that the theosophy of this system can be seen to clearly evince signs of filiation with the thought of the second century 'Gnostics', with the result that the chronologically latter theosophy can be said to be in some sense directly related to the theosophy of the earlier system(s). To my mind, however, there exist several serious flaws in Scholem's argumentation on this point, and it seems to me that those relatively few pieces of reliable scholarly work which have addressed the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation post-Scholem have yet to properly identify, evaluate, and respond to these problems. In my thesis, therefore, I attempt both to rectify this situation, and also to offer what I perceive as a more nuanced treatment of the proposed relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah than has hitherto been offered. I proceed primarily on the basis of certain key issues which I have identified regarding Scholem's treatment of this subject, with the argument that by addressing these difficulties, we may be able both to more securely examine the prospective relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah and, at the same time, potentially define a reliable general methodology for examining other instances of proposed inter-system relations.

In particular, I argue that Scholem often takes the 'Gnostics' as a relatively homogenous 'group', and adduces evidence for a genetic relationship with the Kabbalah from various different 'Gnostic' sources. More recent scholarship in the field of 'Gnostic' studies has, however, raised important *caveats* regarding the definition and even the very existence of such a homogenous 'Gnostic' thought stream, and it seems to me that these conclusions have not yet been sufficiently applied to the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation. Furthermore, I contend that Scholem's methodology for adducing a genetic relationship between the 'Gnostics' (however so defined) and the Kabbalah rests primarily on identifying what he perceives as relatively similar theosophical motifs between the two systems. I argue, however that (i) many of these proposed similarities do not, when taken in their proper context, actually correspond as closely as Scholem claims; (ii) that Scholem draws these examples of correspondence from a wide range of so-called 'Gnostic' evidence, with the result that he essentially claims that the Kabbalah was genetically descended from a 'Gnostic group' which few scholars would today agree actually existed; and (iii) that Scholem's argument rests primarily on the identification of such similarities alone, without adequately demonstrating *how* such ideas could have been transmitted from the second century 'Gnostics' to the Jews of the medieval Occident.

I further propose that the arguably 'mythic' character of the relevant 'Gnostic' systems renders it appropriate to examine questions regarding their influence by means of the methodologies developed in the schools of comparative mythology. Primarily in the latter chapters of this thesis, I thus attempt to demonstrate the utility of such methodologies (which, to my mind, are currently under-utilised in this area of scholarship) for offering a more cautious assessment of the potential for 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation than that offered by Scholem.

What follows below is an outline of the structure of my thesis, with an indication of the work undertaken in each chapter. As should, I hope, be evident, the chapters proceed by means of a logical progression, with the conclusions of each directly informing the analyses undertaken in subsequent chapters, enabling the construction and application of a potentially useful methodological approach, and the ultimate demonstration of the validity of this approach to the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation.

Chapter One

The Definitive Questions: Delineating the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah

This chapter focuses on essential questions of definition, necessary to establish at the outset of any undertaking. I aim to make clear not only what I refer to in the thesis when I speak of 'Kabbalah' (*viz.* the various streams of 'Jewish mystical thought' which emerged in the medieval period) but also the perhaps even more complex question of the definition of 'Gnostic'. I provide arguments for rejecting the term 'Gnosticism' and its potential implications of homogeneity, and instead advocate focusing more on specific, more clearly defined, 'strains' of thought (e.g. 'Sethian' or 'Valentinian' thought streams), rather than trying to fit all the available evidence into a somewhat artificial pattern of an overarching religious movement. The importance of this undertaking is emphasised throughout the thesis, especially insofar as it can be demonstrated that attempts to date to identify correspondences between 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic thought often 'mix and match' elements from a wide variety of 'Gnostic' sources, including some (such as the Thomasine literature) which are arguably not in fact 'Gnostic'. As I stress during the thesis, it seems difficult to establish a reliable chain of transmission from the 'Gnostics' to the Kabbalah if the starting point of that chain is a 'Gnostic group' which never in fact existed.

Chapter Two

Location and Construction: The 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians'

Building on the previous chapter, I here attempt to more precisely define two specific 'Gnostic' thought streams (those of the 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians'), and to clearly identify the extant sources for each, as primarily identified by their relative commonality of systems and presuppositions. I choose to focus on these two 'groups' since, as will become clear from chapter 4 onwards, parallels adduced to the Kabbalah have primarily been drawn from either 'Sethian' or 'Valentinian' thought.

Chapter 3

The 'Mystic' Impulse: The 'Gnostics', the Kabbalah, and 'Mysticism'

Some brief relevant observations are given here concerning a more general idea of 'mysticism' as a ubiquitous religious element, and an examination is made regarding why the 'Gnostics' are generally ignored in scholarly treatments of 'mysticism', whilst the Kabbalah is, by contrast, often treated as an example of 'mysticism' *par excellence*. I try to avoid any overly assertive conclusions regarding this point, as a fuller consideration is ultimately a matter for another thesis, but do aim to raise the possibility that the surviving 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic evidence shows a certain similarity of form and function, such as arguably legitimises further enquiry into their possible genetic relationship. I stress here, however, that this similarity cannot in itself be indicative of such a relationship, since it appears to be a rather widespread element of many religious traditions. This will be an important point which I continually revisit throughout the thesis, *viz.* that a genetic relationship between two specific thought streams cannot be proven solely on the basis of motifs which are relatively ubiquitous, since without a clear chain of transmission one cannot say with certainty from which of many potential sources each thought stream derived those motifs. This chapter also serves as the final part of the necessary prolegomena to the main undertaking of the thesis, and its themes not only run throughout the remainder of the thesis, but will also be explicitly re-examined in the final chapter, thus effectively establishing a thematic bookend to the main argument, the specific analyses of which serve to somewhat substantiate the methodology proposed for the first time here.

Chapter 4

Conceptual Correspondence: The 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' Sources and the *Bahir*

Turning then to the specifics of the main argument, this chapter focuses on an examination of the Kabbalistic evidence, and argues that the primary source for comparison with the 'Gnostics' must be the earliest available evidence for the Kabbalah, the book *Bahir*, not least because it was this text upon which Scholem concentrated his argument for 'Gnostic' influence. It is also stressed that in order for one to claim that there was 'Gnostic' influence upon the Kabbalah, it must be shown that such influence was present from the start (i.e. the *Bahir*). If such influence is only identified at a far later stage in the Kabbalah, then it necessarily suggests that 'Gnostic' influence cannot have been *determinative* for the Kabbalah, but was merely adopted by a system which had already independently developed certain similarities to it. Thus, the majority of this chapter is focused on the *Bahir*, and the correspondences which Scholem claimed to identify between it and the 'Gnostic' evidence. I attempt to demonstrate, however, that not only are these correspondences scarcely as exact as Scholem claims, moreover they are drawn from a large variety of Late Antique evidence, thus rendering doubtful the claim that they indicate the existence of a clear chain of transmission from one 'group' to another.

Chapter 5

Correspondence and Coincidence: Kabbalistic and 'Gnostic' Systems, and the Question of Ubiquitous Ideas

Developing the arguments of the previous chapter, I turn here to an examination of the later Lurianic Kabbalah, and argue that although one still cannot identify any highly precise correspondences between it and the 'Gnostic' evidence, such parallels as can be adduced are arguably far clearer than those which have been raised in relation to the *Bahir*. Such an observation thus, I suggest, challenges the theory that the origins of the Kabbalah are to be traced to 'Gnostic' influence: were such the case, one would expect the clearer parallels to occur in the earlier Kabbalah, not in a later development of it. Although, as I argue, the level of difference between 'Gnostic' thought streams and Luria's Kabbalah is still too stark to suggest any influence from the former to the latter, I note that even *were* such influence demonstrated, the impact of 'Gnostic' ideas at this late stage would testify not to the determinative nature of such ideas for the Kabbalah, but rather of an independently developed and coincidental similarity between the two thought streams, such as might have made the motifs of one adaptable into the systems of the other. Proceeding from this point, I then examine the potentially coincidental development of certain widespread motifs in various systems, reinforcing an argument in place since chapter 3 that relatively ubiquitous ideas cannot generally be used to prove anything regarding a potential chain of transmission.

Chapter 6

The 'Cathar' Connection: On the Possibility of the Transmission of 'Dualism'

Drawing together strands from the previous chapters, I proceed here to outline my proposed methodology for examining the validity of proposed influences between different systems. I argue that the logical method is to assume in the first instance that all correspondences identified are essentially coincidental, dismissing this assumption *only* if one can identify a high level of exactness in these comparisons (such as would render pure coincidence relatively improbable) and/or establish a secure chain of transmission between two sources, a chain which renders the transmission of ideas not only possible but indeed probable. Having previously established that the proposed correspondences between the origins of the Kabbalah and the 'Gnostic' evidence are not exact enough to categorically rule out the possibility of coincidental development, I thus turn my focus, as per my methodology, to the identification of a reliable chain of transmission. In this chapter then, I examine the possibility (hitherto largely ignored in Kabbalistic scholarship) that the 'Cathars' might have played some role in the transmission of 'Gnostic' ideas to the medieval Occident. In so doing, I also examine the theory of 'Gnostic'-'Cathar' filiation by applying my established methodology, thereby hopefully demonstrating the wider general applicability of this methodology beyond the narrow question of purely 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation. By use of this methodology, I then reject the possibility of the transmission of 'Gnostic' ideas to the origin of the Kabbalah via the 'Cathars', for a variety of reasons both conceptual and historical.

Chapter 7

Material Transformation: The Role of the 'Alchemic Tradition'

Continuing with the application of my now-established methodology, I next examine the possibility of transmission of 'Gnostic' ideas to the Kabbalah via the so-called 'alchemic tradition'. Again, for several conceptual and historical reasons I argue, as per my method, that the potential correspondences between these traditions lack both the levels of exactness and of historically demonstrable transmission necessary to support such a claim of influence.

Chapter 8

Ancestors, Descendants, and Extended Relations: 'Gnostics', the Kabbalah, and Merkabah-Hekhaloth Traditions

This chapter focuses on the hypothesis, advanced by Scholem, that both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah can ultimately be traced back to an earlier 'Jewish mystical tradition', and that the similarities between the two can thus be explained by their common heritage. Although I argue in favour of the contention that much of 'Gnostic' thought (especially the 'Sethian' variants) can be shown to have originated from a Judaic background, I conclude against Scholem's theory that this postulated earlier 'mystical tradition' both influenced and was influenced by the 'Gnostics', who can thus be shown to have been a direct ancestor of the Kabbalah. Certainly, I feel that Scholem's theory is more convincing than any other alternative, such as those considered in the preceding chapters, but I still contend that, as per our methodology, Scholem's argument fails, given the lack of extant evidence, to reliably *prove* such a descent from the first centuries of the Common Era to the *Bahir*. I do, however, attempt to somewhat mollify these essentially negative conclusions, and argue against the assertion of Joseph Dan (one of the few Kabbalistic scholars who explicitly disagrees with Scholem on Kabbalistic origins) that in the absence of extant evidence, one must assume that the *Bahir* is a wholly original work. In particular, I stress that the stratified nature of the *Bahir* suggests that at least part of it adopts or even reproduces ideas from earlier sources; *pace* Scholem, however, I aim to dispute the argument that those earlier sources were directly influenced by the 'Gnostics', and instead view them as being essentially 'intra-Jewish'.

Chapter 9

The Repetition of Originality: On the 'Independence' of Ideas

Finally, as a concluding point I attempt to apply, albeit with appropriate caution, certain observations from the schools of comparative mythology and social psychology, and question to what extent any ideas are truly original. I consider whether the, admittedly less than exact, points of correspondence between 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic thought are not ultimately best explained by the observation that there are only a limited number of variations available to explain the problems of theodicy and of the dual transcendence and immanence of the divine. I note that this is merely a hypothetical argument, one which seeks to establish something of a middle ground between the positions of Scholem and Dan, and of course, stress that such a theory is essentially a necessary contingent only whilst we lack the relevant extant evidence, and will thus require revision should such evidence ever emerge in the future. For the moment, however, I argue that such a theory, combined with our established methodology, perhaps appears as the most responsible reaction to such evidence as is currently available.

The Repetition of Originality

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Preface

Notes on the transliteration of Hebrew in this thesis

In general, relatively conventional transliteration of the Hebrew (as outlined in the table below) will be used in this thesis. The following exceptions and modifications will, however, be applied where to do so would contribute towards the overall clarity, familiarity, consistency, or phonetic accuracy of the relevant transliteration.

(i) Technical terms directly relevant to the subject of study will be in the first instance given in the unpointed Hebrew with an accompanying transliteration. For subsequent occurrences, the transliteration will be used.
(ii) Transliteration of vowel pointing will be primarily focused on reflecting accurate pronunciation of the Hebrew, as opposed to any attempt to strictly correlate each occurrence of pointing with specific letters of the Latin alphabet.
(iii) Although the silent letters א and ע will generally be omitted, in certain circumstances their presence will be represented by an inverted comma, usually when it is necessary to indicate that two otherwise unseparated vowels are not to be pronounced as a dipthong. Thus *Ma'aseh* for מעשׂה.
(iv) Certain terms generally accepted in a certain transliterated form (e.g. *Kabbalah*), will retain this form within the thesis.
(v) Similarly, although feminine plural endings will generally be rendered with ~*ot*, terms which are conventionally stylized in the literature as ~*oth* will continue to be rendered so. Thus mitzv*ot* but Hekhal*oth*.
(vi) In the main, the letter ח will be transliterated with *ch*, except for circumstances where the form with *h* is generally more familiar. In these cases, *ḥ* will be used to indicate the appropriate transliteration. Thus *Ḥasidim*.
(vii) Although י will generally be represented with *y*, it will be written as *i* as appropriate where it forms the ending of a word.

Conventional Transliterated Forms

א	**Omitted**	**ל**	**l**
בּ	**b**	**מ**	**m**
ב	**v**	**נ**	**n**
ג	**g**	**ס**	**s**
ד	**d**	**ע**	**Omitted**
ה	**h**	**פּ**	**p**
ו	**v**	**פ**	**f**
ז	**z**	**צ**	**tz**
ח	**ch**	**ק**	**q**
ט	**t**	**ר**	**r**
י	**y**	**שׁ**	**sh**
כּ	**k**	**שׂ**	**s**
כ	**kh**	**ת**	**t**

A Note on Terms

As should be expected in any scholarly work which considers speculative traditions such as the Kabbalah and Merkabah 'mysticism', to say nothing of such 'Gnostic' traditions that may have drawn inspiration from a Judaic milieu, a certain amount of precision will be required regarding both the definition(s) of Judaism used, and the terminology which is applied. As such, it is germane to direct the reader's attention at the outset to the relevant terminological conventions which shall be employed in this thesis.

Delineating the precise boundaries of what might or might not be described as 'Jewish', or considered to fall within the sphere of 'Judaism' is a complex matter, especially so when one is debating concepts within the history of ideas. It is, after all, well to recall that the halakhic emphasis present in much post-Temple rabbinic Judaism arguably to an extent frames the definition of 'Judaism' in terms more of praxis than of belief, and that beyond the central tenet of monotheism, normative Judaism thus permits a far wider degree of speculative thought than do its Christian contemporaries. Furthermore, the precise definition of 'Jewishness', or even the extent to which such a concept existed in Antiquity is a matter of no small debate, a debate which will somewhat affect our examination of 'Gnostic' origins in this period. The reader particularly interested in this subject beyond the scope of our thesis is thus directed to Shaye J.D. Cohen's excellent work *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Hellenistic Culture and Society, XXXI (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1999).

In light of these considerations, therefore, I shall attempt in this thesis to employ the following terminological methodology, with the hope that by so doing a practical level of definition may be applied to the relevant topics under discussion:

(i) Where the terms *Jewish* or *Judaism* are employed, what is meant are those elements which remain within the acceptable bounds of the normative rabbinic Judaism of the period discussed. In relation to the situation in Antiquity, these terms thus refer to those elements acceptable either to the forms which would eventually become normative rabbinic Judaism, or which at least largely, if not entirely, agree with them.

(ii) Furthermore, the use of these terms also implies a certain amount of exclusivity in relation to the use and influence of certain concepts. Therefore, the use of the Old Testament *per se* would likely not be described as *Jewish* after the advent of the early forms of Christianity, although certain methods and interpretations applied to it might be.

(iii) Although the terms *Jewish* and *Judaism* may thus generally be applied to much of the speculative forms which we shall be considering here (e.g. the Merkabah and the Kabbalah), not least insofar as these speculations generally remained within the acceptable bounds of normative Judaism and were often carried out by dedicated practitioners of the religion, on occasion we may note certain trends and concepts which although doubtless originating within this context, have perhaps developed to a point if not wholly beyond the pale of normative Judaism, then at least on the fringes. When discussing the influence of these ideas, therefore, we shall seek to enclose the terms *Jewish* and *Judaism* <u>within inverted commas</u>, in order to indicate a certain distance from the normative meanings of these terms.

(iv) As we shall see especially in regard to aspects of the ‘Gnostic’ evidence, there will be observable certain influences which although clearly once originating within normative Judaism, have a) been developed to such a point as to be wholly abhorrent to any normative observant Jew, and/or b) lack a level of exclusivity such as would necessarily relate these influences to a normative Jewish community or tradition. This is particularly the case in relation to certain instances concerning the Old Testament where the use to which such scripture is put evidently goes far beyond the acceptable constraints of Judaism whilst, as mentioned above, the mere use of the Old Testament itself is not, by the second century, something which could only have been drawn from a normative Jewish milieu. In such cases then, it will be more appropriate to speak of a *Judaic* influence, i.e. one which may owe its ultimate origin to normative Judaism, but which has ceased to exist within its bounds.

Contents

Introduction

Professor Gershom Scholem (1897-1982). After applying no small amount of consideration to the matter, I found I could not realistically conceive of any more apt words with which to begin this thesis. To be sure, as we shall see throughout the following work, the late Professor Scholem was neither the first nor the only scholar to undertake an examination of the medieval Kabbalah, nor to postulate its direct historical and phenomenological filiation to the 'Gnostics' of the second century. Nonetheless, as we shall equally see, it is his rightly respected name and his highly impressive corpus of work which yet stands behind, and often exercises a determinative influence upon, much modern scholarship of the medieval Jewish Kabbalah, especially as regards the question of its relation to those adversaries of the early Church who are generally labelled 'Gnostics'.

Indeed, the perception of a potential for a direct relationship between these two thought streams is perhaps most surprising for its sheer prevalence, both amongst scholars and even more remarkably amongst a sizeable section of the non-academic world. It is honestly quite surprising that within the multi-cultural and religiously varied world of the twenty-first century, the names of what one might essentially define as a second century 'Christian heresy' and a medieval 'Jewish mystical tradition' are by no means strangers to the *communis opinio*; one need only perform a brief Internet query to locate over 8,500,000 pages related to the term "Gnostic" and almost 11,000,000 pages related to the term "Kabbalah" (plus another few million pages if one adds together the results for all possible transliterations of the latter term), whilst a staggering 884,000 pages contain both these terms together[1].

Of course, it cannot be our intention here to attempt to address this court of public opinion: in any case, rational argument is rarely capable of successfully achieving such a Herculean feat. Rather, our focus will necessarily be on the academic aspects of the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation, and in particular the continuing influence of Scholem's work. Our primary aim in this thesis shall be to critically assess the plausibility of Scholem's conclusions on the matter, especially in light of the work of much modern scholarship in related areas, and to attempt to ascertain whether, and to what extent, Scholem's hypothesis

[1] These results are correct as of May 2012. Incidentally, when I first performed this query back in 2009, there emerged roughly 1,000,000 pages for "Gnostic", 2,000,000 pages for "Kabbalah", and 500,000 pages for a combination of the two terms; the trend is clearly growing quickly...

of a historical descent from the ‘Gnostics’ to the Kabbalah can be considered accurate and verifiable. In order, however, to reach a solid conclusion on this topic, I intend to employ a threefold approach, which will hopefully guide our analysis towards a justifiable outcome:

Firstly, we shall aim to apply a perhaps greater level of specificity to certain aspects of the question than is often found in scholarly treatments of the subject, most particularly, as we shall see, in relation to debates regarding the definition and application of the term ‘Gnostic’. In this undertaking, we shall of course be aided by the great advances which have been made in our understanding of the ‘Gnostics’ post-Nag Hammadi, advances which regrettably somewhat post-dated much of Scholem’s most influential work. Secondly, we shall attempt to explore certain aspects of the question which, as we shall see, have often been largely sidelined or ignored in ‘Gnostic’-Kabbalistic scholarship. To this end, in line with our central focus on the question of a possible historical and phenomenological connection between the ‘Gnostics’ and the Kabbalah, we shall also aim to give some consideration to such issues as the relation of both to arguments related to general concepts of ‘mysticism’ and to the theories of ubiquitous ideas, as well as the potential historical roles played by both the ‘Cathars’ and the ‘alchemic tradition’. Finally, I hope to construct a secure methodological approach for assessing the implications of the occurrence of potential parallels between different sources, an approach which will be both developed by, and simultaneously applied to the relevant questions noted above; our ultimate goal then will be to define this methodology and to apply it to Scholem’s hypothesis. It is therefore to be hoped that by doing so we will be able to reassess the question of ‘Gnostic’-Kabbalistic filiation as presented by Scholem, and by building on the wealth of scholarship post-Scholem, thereby provide a reasoned examination of his conclusions, and a securely defensible argument as to whether the position of Scholem, and indeed the very concept that the ‘Gnostics’ and the Kabbalah are in some way directly historically linked, is to be either supported or rejected.

If I have seen further it is by standing on ye sholders of Giants.

Isaac Newton, *Letter to Robert Hooke* (15 February 1676)

Can it be
That modesty may more betray our sense
Than woman's lightness? Having waste ground enough,
Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary,
And pitch our evils there?

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure,* Act II, Scene 2

Chapter One
The Definitive Questions: Delineating the ‘Gnostics’ and the Kabbalah

If we should be wary of automatically amalgamating the ‘Gnostics’ and ‘Kabbalah’ into one entity, so too should we be cautious not to overwrite divisions within each of those traditions. Indeed, before we can even begin to contrast the ‘Gnostics’ with the ‘Kabbalah’, we must necessarily define just what we mean by each of those terms.

‘Gnosticism’, the ‘Gnostics’, and ‘biblical-demiurgical traditions’

The definition of what precisely constitutes the ‘Gnostic’ phenomenon is a long-running debate, and one which is still far from being settled. In fact one will rarely find a serious scholarly work of recent times on the ‘Gnostics’ which does not devote considerable space to the question of definition, not least because scholars of the past few decades have also had to contend with the wealth of new evidence provided by the Nag Hammadi Codices[2]. To be sure, these texts have certainly gifted us with an opportunity for a more accurate definition of what a ‘Gnostic’ is, but at the same time they have also highlighted how much more complex the problem is than was previously thought. Like the addition of extra pieces to a jigsaw puzzle, whilst the end result will be a much clearer picture, in the meantime the process of assembly becomes far more difficult.

Now arguably, two of the major taxonomic terms, the more traditional ‘Gnosticism’, and the alternative ‘biblical-demiurgical traditions’ (proposed by Michael Williams in his seminal book *Rethinking Gnosticism*) are both to some extent useful, but ultimately fail to convey as accurate an understanding of what a ‘Gnostic’ is as we might hope for. Therefore, although exploring every facet of the definition of a ‘Gnostic’ (a subject which has rightly had several books devoted to it) would be beyond our aims in this thesis, certain observations here should at least provide us with a way towards a workable methodology for defining our subject.

To begin with the term ‘Gnosticism’, I for one am strongly in favour of its rejection, as the very application of an ~ism implies a degree of homogeneity and agreement between all strands of thought which it encapsulates. Indeed, from a social-scientific standpoint, the ~ism

[2] For an outline of taxonomic efforts from the Pastoral Epistles up to Kurt Rudolph’s work, see Antti Marjanen’s excellent introductory article ‘What is Gnosticism?’ (2005), listed in the bibliography.

could arguably be called the perfect application of a colonialist paradigm, as it is almost always applied by those outside of the groups it seeks to define, and generally eschews distinctions between these groups in favour of creating a simple unified whole. Thus the very idea of 'Gnosticism' implies a coherent system, whereas in reality, as Michael Williams notes, given the variety of 'Gnostic' "stories", their reduction to "the story of a single movement or religion, or '~ism'" can only obscure any investigation into them; the sheer number of different sects enumerated in the writings of the heresiologists, with different descriptions of their beliefs, practices, founders, and geographical locations, should make us wary of treating all 'Gnostics' as one[3]. Indeed, Irenaeus can assert (*Haer.* III.11.2) that "according to certain of the Gnostics, this world was made by angels… [b]ut according to the followers of Valentinus, the world was [made by]… the Demiurge", whilst noting elsewhere (IV.6.4) that several other 'Gnostic' groups also hold a "false father" as creator[4]. Now admittedly it was in the interests of the heresiologists to stress the diversity of their heretical opponents, as against the unity of the one true Church, but this does not preclude their writings from furnishing us with useful evidence of the diversity of 'Gnostic' thought; however much the heresiologists emphasised the diversity of the 'Gnostics', it is unlikely that they would have done this had the 'Gnostics' actually been one unified group, (especially since a unified group can easily rebut accusations of diversity)[5]. This evidence of 'Gnostic' diversity can also be corroborated by the Nag Hammadi evidence; indeed, despite its reputation as a so-called 'Gnostic' library, it is actually striking how difficult it is to identify any common theme present in all the Nag Hammadi texts. Some of them, but not all, display a complicated cosmological system (e.g. *Apocryphon of John*), some intermix cosmology with a strong focus on the Christian Christ figure (e.g. *Gospel of Philip*), whilst others present a salvific system largely relatable to a speculative 'Jewish' milieu, with arguably no hint of a Christian figure (e.g. *Apocalypse of Adam*), and some display no real cosmology at all (e.g. *Gospel of Thomas*)[6]. Even amongst those texts which do focus on cosmology, there are major variances between their systems with regard to the respective roles of σοφία and the

[3] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), p.7.
[4] ANF translation (2007), pp.426, 468. See also Tertullian, *Prescription* 41, "for it matters not to them [the heretics], however different be their treatment of subjects, provided only they can conspire together to storm the citadel of the one only Truth" [ANF translation (2007), p.263].
[5] This stress continues even in the writings of the later heresiologists; Epiphanius, for example, outlines 80 different sects in his *Panarion*, roughly ⅓ of which (primarily sects 21-56) he characterises as 'Gnostic'. See also the excellent table of groups (especially 'Gnostic' groups) found in the heresiologists in M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), pp.34f.
[6] On the question of distinction between 'Jewish' and 'non-Jewish' 'Gnostic' texts in Nag Hammadi, see Birger Pearson's insightful 1986 article '"Jewish Gnostic" Literature'.

Demiurge in creating man, the process of the generation of the aeons and the archons, and the names, forms, numbers, and roles of those entities. Ironically, perhaps the most easily observable common theme in the Nag Hammadi texts is a tendency towards asceticism, a tendency which in the second century is far from unique to the 'Gnostics', and which stands in stark contrast to the libertinism which is also attributed to some 'Gnostic' groups by the heresiologists[7]. Given this startling level of variance between the so-called 'Gnostic' groups and texts, I thus feel justified in rejecting the application of the term 'Gnosticism' to them, and tend to agree with Michael Williams that 'Gnosticism' has by now become little more than a "protean label", the use of which makes an implicit judgement of homogeneity amongst the 'Gnostic' groups, and is thus likely to obscure attempts to assess the historical reality of what a 'Gnostic' is[8]. Indeed, the argument could be made that the increased scholarly interest in 'Gnosticism' in Europe during the interwar period contributed greatly to this more 'protean' assessment, as the academic mood of the time tended to focus more on the location of 'Gnostic' antecedents to later theological and philosophical streams rather than a precise construction of what was meant by 'Gnostic' (c.f. below, p.112 on the Messina Conference, which would aim to more tightly define the term, but would not take place until the 1960s). To be sure, it may not be wholly coincidental that Scholem's work on locating the 'Gnostics' in the history of the Kabbalah emerges in a period roughly contemporary with Rudolf Bultmann's similar undertaking regarding a once again vaguely-defined 'Gnostic' thought as potentially standing behind the New Testament[9].

Now, in an attempt to remedy this situation, Williams has proposed that definitions should have a greater focus on indicating "typological features more broadly shared across individual schools or sectarian traditions"[10]. In particular, he suggests that the category "biblical demiurgical" could be used to describe "all sources that made a distinction between the creator(s) and controllers of the material world and the most transcendent divine being, and that in so doing made use of Jewish or Christian scriptural traditions"[11]. Now, Williams is careful to state that a term such as 'biblical-demiurgical traditions' should *not* be seen as a replacement for 'Gnostic'/'Gnosticism' (terms which, as we have seen, he would see

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[7] See S. Gero, 'Encratite Orthodoxy' (1986), pp.287-307.
[8] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), p.3. Incidentally, Bentley Layton, ['Prolegomena' (1995), pp.334-350], has also shown the term to be "fundamentally irrelevant to… antiquity", having only been created in the seventeenth century.
[9] C.f. G. Lüdemann, *Primitive Christianity* (2003), pp.147-62, 200-203; K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* (1984), pp.32ff.
[10] M.A. Williams, 'Gnostic Religion?' (2005), pp.55-79.
[11] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), p.265.

abolished). Rather, his method of categorisation seeks to pay due respect to the diversity evident between several early Christian groups, whilst also acknowledging the similarities between them, similarities he sees as “less a matter of communal or school continuity” and more “the recycling and adaptation of certain motifs by *different* groups or individuals”[12]. As he notes, the sources to which this category may be applied are not necessarily all ones which are usually regarded as ‘Gnostic’ (a point we shall elaborate on presently), but that the category does encompass “a large percentage of the sources that today are usually called ‘gnostic’ [*sic*]”, without suggesting the homogeneity between the sources that terms like ‘Gnosticism’ or ‘the Gnostic religion’ do[13].

The appeal of Williams’s approach is that it neatly sidesteps many of the problems which are associated with terms such as ‘Gnosticism’, but it rather seems to me that whilst his desire to avoid artificial, clear-cut distinctions is admirable, his favoured term, a category of ‘biblical-demiurgy’, perhaps goes too far in the other direction, and thus becomes too indistinct to provide a precise definition of the phenomenon we are dealing with. To illustrate, in the first place ‘demiurgy’ can surely be said to be a relatively common concept, with a large amount of variation in its depictions. Williams is certainly right to say that the idea of ‘demiurgy’ can be found in a “large percentage” of ‘Gnostic’ sources, but it is also to be found in Platonic and especially Neo-Platonic philosophy; we should not forget that probably the most prominent early use of δημιουργός is found in Plato (*Timaeus* 41a)[14]. This point also illustrates the various forms which ‘demiurgy’ can take, and the several ways in which it can be extended; are we to consider the good creator of Plato, the flawed Yaldabaoth of several so-called ‘Gnostic’ texts, and the multiple aeons and archons of the *Apocryphon of John* to all represent a relatively consistent idea of ‘demiurgy’? It is also worth noting that the above examples of the use of δημιουργός give a secondary (both chronologically and qualitatively) role to the Demiurge. Should we then consider systems such as the Manichaean one, which posits more of an ‘absolute dualism’ (i.e. the eternal existence of the forces of light and dark in a roughly equal balance, to the extent that neither one can yet wholly overwhelm the other) to still be ‘demiurgical’? It is interesting to note that in his seminal work on the ‘Gnostics’, Kurt Rudolph, following the earlier work of Hans Jonas, attempts to distinguish between two types of ‘dualism’; ‘absolute dualism’ (called ‘Iranian dualism’ after the geographical area

[12] M.A. Williams, ‘Gnostic Religion?’ (2005), pp.55-79. Original italics.
[13] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), pp.51-53.
[14] As should be obvious by now, the boundaries are incredibly indistinct. It should be recalled that NHC VI contains a copy of Plato (albeit the *Republic* rather than the *Timaeus*).

where the idea is thought to have originated) depicts the equal balance between light and dark, good and evil, whilst the 'Syrian-Egyptian' model depicts a gradual decline in perfection from the highest God, passing through perhaps a Demiurge, and several subsequent archons, to eventually reach the created world[15]. For Rudolph, both forms are present in 'Gnostic' thought, although the majority of branches follow the latter. Whether or not this is actually the case rather depends on how one uses a 'dualistic' system in the definition of 'Gnostic'; are both these forms of 'dualism' to be regarded as examples of 'demiurgy'? Nor should we forget that 'dualism' itself is an incredibly protean term, and does not necessarily imply 'demiurgy'; for example, the mind/body division of Cartesian 'dualism' scarcely demands a separate creator for each. We must also have doubts that a Pharisaic Jew such as Paul would have endorsed any 'demiurgic' system akin to those described above; when he speaks of a 'dualistic' division between the flesh and the spirit, are we not on surer ground in seeing here more of an 'ethical dualism', wholly separate from 'demiurgical' speculation[16]? Given the intense variety of concepts which each of these terms expresses, can we really feel secure in attempting to define the 'Gnostics' writ large as 'dualists' or as utilising 'demiurgy'? Furthermore, let us remember that, as mentioned above, there are several potentially 'Gnostic' sources which do not utilise any concept of 'demiurgy' at all[17]. Certainly it is not a consistent feature in the Nag Hammadi texts, but unfortunately our paucity of evidence and lack of clear taxonomic categories makes it difficult to draw any solid conclusions from this fact. Are those Nag Hammadi texts which don't feature 'demiurgy' therefore not 'Gnostic', which thus means that Nag Hammadi is not solely a collection of 'Gnostic' texts? Or perhaps Nag Hammadi *is* a 'Gnostic' library, but it includes texts without 'demiurgy' because this concept is not essential to define something as 'Gnostic'. We simply don't know, and the fact that we can at best hypothesise about *why* the Nag Hammadi texts were deposited together does not help clarify the situation[18]. Even if we can agree that there were various groups who held some idea of 'demiurgy' (despite the

[15] K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* (1984), pp.65f.

[16] E.g. Rom. 7:5-8:14, 1 Cor. 3:1-3. Indeed, such 'ethical dualism' was a recurring motif, found for example in the *Didache*, and arguably also the Matthean 'Blessings and Woes' (5:3-16; 23:13-31). C.f. R.B. Hays, *Moral Vision* (1996), pp.43-46.

[17] For example, Antti Marjanen ['Mother or Magdalene?' (2002), pp.31-41] declines to consider the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary* as 'Gnostic', since they lack a 'demiurgical' creation. Incidentally, although I personally doubt the *Gospel of Mary* ever contained any serious 'demiurgy', the lacunae in the text (including the absence of the first six pages) restrains me from giving any definite judgement on what the text did/did not contain.

[18] Among the competing theories are the ideas that Nag Hammadi contains texts which were important to a group, who thus set them aside for safekeeping, or that they are heretical texts exiled from an 'orthodox' Christian community, or that they are simply duplicate copies of texts, and were thus placed in an ante-library for storage.

multiple different ways in which the idea can exist), as we have seen, such a wide ranging idea cannot really help us with second century taxonomy, as it is found in many different contexts both before and after this time period. Williams himself attempts to clarify some of the vagueness inherent in the use of the term 'demiurgy' by adding the qualifier 'biblical' (i.e. those sources which "made use of Jewish or Christian scriptural traditions" in expressing their idea of 'demiurgy')[19]. Unfortunately, it is arguable that the term 'biblical', if used as a definition, does not really express this concept; it is a somewhat anachronistic term for the variant collections of writings which existed prior to the solidification of the canon, and it certainly seems a rather inaccurate term to apply to groups who seem to have made such extensive use of what would become non-canonical writings. Furthermore, of those groups and sources which we *might* label 'Gnostic', their attitudes towards and utilisation of scriptural (especially Old Testament) traditions is at best variegated and ambiguous. As we shall see throughout this thesis, there exists a striking diversity in the recognition and usage of the Old Testament, both within the Nag Hammadi texts, as well as in the 'Gnostic' groups described by the heresiologists; as brief examples we might cite the general acceptance of the force and form of the Old Testament found in the *Apocalypse of Adam* and the *Exegesis on the Soul*, contrasted with its radical re-interpretation by 'groups' such as the so-called 'Ophites' or 'Cainites', or even its outright rejection by the 'Simonians'[20]. Although Williams's attempt to reformulate the issue is certainly laudable, it seems that if one on the one hand removes the category of 'Gnostic', and on the other hand advances definitions based on common ideas (such as 'biblical-demiurgical traditions') with the clear intent *not* to make these definitions a replacement for 'Gnostic', one runs the danger of aligning numerous very different sources, groups, ideas, and philosophies with each other, purely on the basis of the one idea they hold vaguely in common.

As a final point regarding Williams's proposal, I should also state that I am largely unwilling to abandon the term 'Gnostic'. Certainly the extension of the term to an ~ism is undesirable (as we saw above), but the term in general is not, I feel, without merits. That our heresiological sources make frequent use of the term 'Gnostic' clearly suggests that it had a great utility for the ancient writers, and I find it hard to conclude that we should easily overlook this utility, although we *may* need to modify our conceptions of what the term

[19] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), p.265.
[20] See, for example, R. Roukema, *Gnosis* (1999), pp.114-118. C.f. the various articles by Birger Pearson cited in the bibliography.

denotes[21]. To illustrate this point, it seems important to stress that we cannot simply take the term γνωστικος to imply any particular set of doctrine or practices. Lexicographically, γνωστικος simply indicates the possession of γνῶσις; it is the particular content of this γνῶσις that is determinative for the nature of any group of γνωστικοί. Clement of Alexandria is able to contrast true γνῶσις (which is essentially Christian) with the false γνῶσις that is the inaccurate teaching of heretics (*Stromateis* II.11); indeed, for Clement, it is only those Christians (such as himself) with the true γνῶσις who actually have the right to call themselves γνωστικοί, for any other group, such a title is simply a false claim[22]. It is interesting then to compare the evidence of Clement with the two references Hippolytus makes to groups who apparently *self*-designated as 'Gnostics'. According to Hippolytus, both the Naassenes (*Refutation* 5.2; 5.11) and those who follow one 'Justin the Gnostic' (*Refutation* 5.23.3) regard themselves as γνωστικοί but, as Marjanen has highlighted, what this means is far from clear[23]. We must ask whether this self-identification as γνωστικοί was intended to imply a specific social identity and set of doctrines, or whether it is more akin to Clement's use of the term, as an assertion that one possesses the correct religious knowledge, without implying anything as to *what* exactly that knowledge is[24]. From the evidence, it arguably seems most probable that we are here dealing with γνωστικος in the latter sense, used as a value judgment rather than for any descriptive purpose; whilst these are the only examples Hippolytus gives of the use of 'Gnostic' as a *self*-designation, it is perhaps notable that he also identifies the doctrines of one Theodotus of Byzantium (*Refutation* 7.35.1) and another Theodotus who is a banker (*Refutation* 7.36.1-3) as being to some extent derived from those of these so-called γνωστικοί. Now, according to Hippolytus, both of these figures primarily err by advocating forms of possession Christology, rather than by holding any doctrines corresponding to the 'Gnostic' beliefs reported to have been held by Justin or the Naassenes; indeed, as Williams carefully highlights, one cannot really identify any teachings or practices of Hippolytus's self-designating γνωστικοί that are exclusively shared by any of

[21] It may also be desirable for scholarship in this area to attempt to retain at least some continuity with those ancient writers who represent much of the source evidence (although we should be extremely cautious not to let this continuity devolve into an *a priori* bias towards the heresiological viewpoint). At the very least, however, it would surely be undesirable to have to add footnotes to all future editions of these writings in order to explain for the modern reader which contemporary term the heresiological 'Gnostic' roughly corresponds to.

[22] E.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV.21. One might also compare Tertullian's distinction between the 'psychic' Christians, and 'spiritual' or 'pneumatic' Christians like himself (e.g. *Modesty* 21.16f.).

[23] A. Marjanen, 'What is Gnosticism?' (2005), pp.1-53. C.f. M.J. Edwards, 'Naming of the Naassenes' (1996), pp.74-80.

[24] Certainly Clement could claim that his doctrine alone was the true γνῶσις, and thus only those adhering to this doctrine could properly call themselves γνωστικοί, but then both the Naassenes and the followers of Justin likely each made similar claims.

the other so-called 'Gnostic' groups[25]. It therefore becomes more plausible to suspect that if the followers of Justin and the Naassenes did self-identify as γνωστικοί, they used the name as an assessment of the quality of their belief (as seen in Clement) rather than as a particular group identifier. We might finally also note here that Irenaeus's most explicit mention of those who "style themselves Gnostics" refers to the followers of Marcellina in Rome (a group not generally considered 'Gnostic' in the modern taxonomies)[26].

As well as highlighting the possibility of one being (or at least claiming to be) γνωστικος, regardless of the content of one's γνῶσις, Clement also demonstrates to us that the concept of γνῶσις can be utilised without the creation of a knowledge vs. faith dichotomy. Whilst it is of little surprise that Clement, who sought to deny any contradiction between the *proper* practice of philosophy and the true faith of Christianity, should take a similar view in respect to γνῶσις, arguing in *Stromateis* II.11 that "knowledge, which is the scientific demonstration of what is delivered according to the true philosophy, is founded on faith", and that "the highest demonstration… produces intelligent faith by the adducing and opening up of the Scriptures to the souls of those who desire to learn; the result of which is knowledge (γνῶσις)", it should be noted that references to the importance of 'knowledge' can also be found in several canonical texts[27]. In particular, Simone Pétrement's important work has highlighted that a significant part of the Pauline doctrine of salvation by faith is the assertion that an essential part of faith (πίστις) is the *knowledge* of the nature of the salvation that it brings, as revealed by Jesus on the cross; indeed, Pétrement argues, for Paul "the cross saves because it is a *teaching*"[28]. To be sure, a methodology of salvation reliant on faith in the Christ figure, made possible by the knowledge of his actions and divine nature seems to have formed a large part of the κήρυγμα and διδαχή of the early Church (e.g. John 6:48-63; 14:29-31, Acts 2:36-42; 10:39-43, Colossians 1:27f., etc.). What this observation unfortunately means for us is that we probably cannot use a group's usage of the concept of γνῶσις as any sort of criterion for classifying said group as 'Gnostic'. Given the importance attached to knowledge in parts of both the canonical and Patristic literature, it would surely be inaccurate

[25] M.A. Williams, 'Gnostic Religion?' (2005), pp.55-79. C.f. *Refutation* 9.4, where mention is made of 'Gnostic' tenets in the beliefs of the 'Jewish-Christian' sect of Elchasai. Again, the supposed 'Gnostic' doctrine here does not correspond to any of Hippolytus's other depictions of 'Gnostic' thought.

[26] Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.25.6. It is also worth noting that the term γνωστικοί does not actually appear anywhere in the Nag Hammadi texts. On the above discussion, c.f. also M.J. Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy* (2009), pp.12f.

[27] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* II.11, ANF translation (2007), p.765.

[28] S. Pétrement, *Separate God* (1990), pp.141-143. Original italics.

to class the 'Gnostics' as those who rely solely on 'knowledge', as opposed to other groups who rely solely on 'faith'[29]. To take this one step further, the flip side of the argument is that we also should not overlook the importance of 'faith' in at least some 'Gnostic' groups. Although there are still many questions to be answered regarding the identity of those 'Gnostics' whom Plotinus attacks in *Enneads* II, a key component of his attack against them is, as Marjanen succinctly puts it, that unlike proper philosophers, they do not believe that the τέλος of life can be reached purely through "wisdom and virtue, by means of patient study of the truth and keen striving after perfection"[30]. Rather, he accuses them of reliance on "salvific knowledge" given to them by God (what we might call a focus on revelation rather than reason)[31]. Of particular interest in these observations is the fact that Plotinus seems to be able to distinguish between his opponents (whom Porphyry identifies as 'Gnostics') and philosophy proper on the basis of the former not relying solely on knowledge achievable purely by the human application of reason, but also giving great importance to that which is revealed by God, which would otherwise be unknowable. The use of such a distinction should not be unfamiliar to any who have studied the philosophy of religion; indeed, such a criterion can be (and has been) used to help draw a distinction between the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Plotinus, and the use of Neo-Platonism by Augustine[32]. Certainly, we should be wary of taking Plotinus's polemic attack on his conception of the 'Gnostics' too historically, but it does not seem as though we have any real reason to suppose that most 'Gnostics' had a philosophical focus on only that which could be achieved by human reason alone; Irenaeus, for example, mentions that the 'Valentinians' believe that "the Holy Spirit taught them" their ideas[33]. Thus, despite the polemical claims of the heresiologists that 'heresies' were in general descended from philosophy, we can instead conclude that the 'Gnostic' approach to the question of revelation and reason seems on the whole to be closer

[29] Admittedly, it has not been unknown for scholars to utilise just such a distinction, and thus conclude that Marcion could not have been a 'Gnostic', as he focused on 'faith' rather than 'knowledge'. C.f. A. Marjanen, 'What is Gnosticism?' (2005), pp.1-53.
[30] A. Marjanen, 'What is Gnosticism?' (2005), pp.1-53. I include these mentions of the 'Gnostics' of Plotinus purely as a point of reference. It is still a matter of scholarly debate whether they represent any particular 'Gnostic' group (and whether we might be able to identify that group), or whether they are little more than a polemical creation, not representing a historical group, but simply being a means by which Plotinus can address his concerns with his abstract conceptions of 'Gnostic' thought. See further Marjanen's aforementioned article, and also A.H.B. Logan, *The Gnostics* (2006), pp.46-50. C.f. pp.147f., below.
[31] Note also that the *Tripartite Tractate* (generally regarded to be a 'Valentinian Gnostic' text) contains references to the importance of faith which to some extent echo the canonical (especially Pauline) sources; indeed, *Tri. Trac.* 128: 15-19 even asserts that *faith* in the Father unites one with Him in *knowledge*. C.f. J.D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism* (2001), pp.1-54.
[32] C.f. A. Louth, *Christian Mystical Tradition* (1981), pp.132-158.
[33] Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.2.6, ANF translation (2007), p.318. Incidentally, such Greek text as we have here inserts ἒν before 'Holy Spirit'.

to the 'orthodox' Church of the second century than to philosophy, and thus provides us with a useful criterion for establishing where Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy ends and where 'Gnostic' speculation begins, a distinction which could be particularly useful in relation to discussion of the δημιουργός[34].

Clearly there are a lot of issues surrounding the definition of what a 'Gnostic' is, and our taxonomic task is further complicated by the many assumptions that are often made *a priori* as to how 'Gnostics' practised and identified themselves, or even as to what their beliefs were. On the one hand, it does seem as though 'Gnostic' was a relatively well-known and widely used designation in the second century (recall that we have now seen it in both Christian and Pagan sources), a fact that might advocate against its rejection in modern scholarship. On the other hand, however, it must be admitted that the label of γνωστικος does not, in the second century, seem to include any real reference to the particular content of its object's thought or practice, and thus does not seem to aid us greatly in our taxonomic efforts. That so many seemingly diverse groups are linked together under one name seems more to be the work of the heresiologists than a historical reflection; indeed, as Marjanen sees it, given the sheer quantity of so-called 'Gnostics' in Epiphanius's *Panarion*, it appears as though by his time heresiology had come to use 'Gnostic' as a "general designation for all heretics", developing a model first found in Irenaeus[35]. Such an idea certainly seems quite plausible when one considers the similarly lax use several heresiologists made of the term 'Ebionites' to refer to any group they perceived as too 'Jewish', or even more the use of the term 'Jews' to refer to Arians[36]!

Now, the above observations suggest to me that in attempting to define the 'Gnostics', we are arguably trying to delineate some element of commonality which binds together a staggeringly diverse collection of texts and groups (few of which can be shown to be interconnected) and to distinguish them from every other form of religion current in the second century. One cannot help but wonder if it is even possible to achieve such a task of systemization, or whether any definition we eventually create will not merely be a taxonomic

[34] It was common, as Gérard Vallée [*Anti-Gnostic Polemics* (1981), pp.48f.] has demonstrated, for the heresiologists (however erroneously, and often anachronistically) to attempt to link 'heresies' with pagan philosophy, in order to "disqualify all heresies as being un-Christian", and to cast the heretics as κλεψίλογοι, "plagiarizing the Greeks". See also Tertullian, *Prescription* 7.
[35] A. Marjanen, 'What is Gnosticism?' (2005), pp.1-53.
[36] See the article by Sakari Häkkinen in A. Marjanen & P. Luomanen (eds.), *Christian 'Heretics'* (2008), pp.247-278. C.f. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.22.25.

unity foisted on the evidence, rather than an accurate reflection of historical reality. Therefore, I should like to propose that in order to reach a workable understanding of the 'Gnostics', we might be better served by inverting the question, asking not what the 'Gnostics' *were*, but rather what they *were not*. We have already noted that so-called 'Gnostic' speculation can potentially be distinguished from philosophical speculation on the basis of the former not sharing the latter's focus solely on human reason. From this, it follows that if we can define the 'Gnostics' as *not* a purely philosophical movement, we could potentially add more precision to that definition by determining what else in the catalogues of second century heresy they were *not* – thereby arriving, as it were, at a definition by negation.

At the forefront of this definition then, stands the obvious contention that the 'Gnostics' were not 'orthodox' Christians, or at least were certainly not thought to be so by the heresiologists. Granted, it is highly probable that many 'Gnostics' did consider themselves to be the 'true Christians', but for our taxonomic purposes this is hardly a helpful observation; after all, *every* second century Christian group would have made the same claim. If, however, we note that our best, and indeed virtually only, primary sources for the taxonomical groupings of the second century are the catalogues of the heresiologists, then it makes sense to take as a starting point the elucidation of exactly *where* into their catalogues the heresiologists placed the 'Gnostics', and obviously they did not place them amongst the 'orthodox'. Nor is it likely that they placed them amongst the 'intra-Christian sects'. This term is perhaps a very imprecise one, and is really only intended here to refer to those groups who held most aspects of belief and practice in common with the 'orthodox', and differed on perhaps only one or two matters. This is of course a very vague statement, and quite where one draws the lines between 'orthodoxy', 'intra-Christian sectarianism', and outright 'heresy' is a matter worthy of its own thesis. We might simply say that one could *potentially* include groups such as the Donatists, the Montanists, and even the Arians in this category. These groups were largely indistinguishable for anyone not theologically minded, and often presented the possibility of individuals, or even whole congregations *easily* moving from one of them to 'orthodoxy', or *vice versa*[37]. We can probably conclude that by and large 'Gnostics' were not considered by the heresiologists to be merely an 'intra-Christian sect', given the vast array of highly

[37] Again, this is a very brief sketch, which we cannot examine in overmuch detail at this juncture. Montanism in particular takes its place in this list largely because it was evidently close enough to 'orthodoxy' for Tertullian, that great combatant of 'heretics', to become attracted to it in later life.

divergent beliefs which the heresiologists ascribe to them, as well as the fact that the majority of the heresiological depictions of 'intra-Christian' disputes are to be found after the second century, with the rise of Trinitarian controversies[38]. A final group to consider are the so-called 'Jewish-Christians' often, as we have seen, generically identified as 'Ebionites'. To debate what exactly constitutes 'Jewish-Christianity' is another question (and indeed, Joan Taylor has raised the important issue of whether there was ever an actual 'Jewish-Christian' movement) but if we can accept, as Sakari Häkkinen does, that the heresiologists applied this sort of categorisation to any group which showed a tendency towards 'Judaising' (e.g. by continuing to practise some of the Jewish laws and rites), then it seems unlikely that any of those 'Gnostics' we have considered would be categorised as such[39].

As an example, if one compares, let us say, the contents page of Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen's excellent book *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'* with Michael Williams's table of groups generally considered 'Gnostic', one will see that once those groups who could be considered 'intra-Christian' or 'Jewish-Christian' (there are no 'philosophical' movements in this particular book) are removed, one is left with only groups that could be called 'Gnostic'[40]. In other words, a methodology of negation shows us that essentially every group which the heresiologists did not consider to be *purely* philosophic, 'intra-Christian', or 'Judaising' seems to become called 'Gnostic'[41]. If we recall that in Irenaeus the term 'Gnostic' becomes, as Williams states, "merely a category of 'false teaching' rather than a grouping defined by a list of phenomenological traits" (a development which Marjanen finds continuing throughout the later heresiologists) it then becomes tempting to wonder whether 'Gnostic' is little more than the 'Other' category of the heresiological catalogues[42]. To put it glibly, did the heresiological methodology just label 'Gnostic' any group that didn't easily fit into any other category? This does not seem improbable when we consider a) the vast differences we have seen between the many different groups labelled as 'Gnostic' and b) the heresiological advantages of associating many of the groups one is opposed to together, thus allowing the bad reputation of one to

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[38] See, for example, G. Vallée [*Anti-Gnostic Polemics* (1981), pp.67f.] on Epiphanius's division of his *Panarion* between the mainly 'Gnostic heresies' (sects 21-56) and the more recent, and often 'intra-Christian heresies' (sects 57-80).
[39] J.E. Taylor, 'Early Jewish-Christianity' (1990), pp.313-334; S. Häkkinen, 'Ebionites' (2008), pp.247-278.
[40] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), pp.34f.
[41] Unfortunately, for reasons of space we must here pass over the issue of Marcion. Whether he is to be considered a 'intra-Christian sectarian' or a 'Gnostic' by virtue of not fitting any other category, or whether he deserves a category all of his own is a question which deserves *at least* a whole paper devoted to it.
[42] M.A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (1996), pp.44; A. Marjanen, 'What is Gnosticism?' (2005), pp.1-53.

infect another whilst also creating, as David Deakle puts it, a *successio haereticorum* to stand in contradistinction to the *successio apostolorum*, where the diversity between the groups is portrayed as evidence of their falsity, as opposed to the *unified* truth of the 'orthodox' Church[43].

We cannot of course, as with so much in the second century, ever definitively prove this hypothesis. If, however, these conclusions do at least seem plausible, then we must surely re-evaluate exactly why we feel the need to create an overall definition of what a 'Gnostic' is. When we look at the evidence, it becomes apparent that the only sources we have that ever linked any of the groups together as being 'Gnostic' are the heresiological ones. Given the observations we have made about the heresiological methods, we should therefore seriously start to consider whether there ever was a 'Gnostic' group for us to define, or whether there were simply a lot of individual, separate groups, some of whom shared certain common ideas, but who were all classified together as 'Gnostic' purely on the basis of their not being anything else.

Although scarcely indisputable, this observation does at least suggest that a surer way forward might be to abandon (even if only temporarily) our search for an overall 'Gnostic' definition. Williams has already suggested something in this direction when he shrewdly observed that most attempted definitions of a 'Gnostic' end up actually providing a definition of only the 'Sethian' group, and that it is thus perhaps on the definitions of individual groups that we should focus[44]. This seems to me an excellent strategy, made all the more so if we have reason to doubt that there ever existed an actual 'Gnostic' group outside of the heresiological writings. In other words, rather than seeking to answer the question 'what is a Gnostic?', we should instead begin to focus on asking 'what is a Sethian?', 'what is a Valentinian?', etc. Do we think any of these groups truly existed, or were they simply extrapolations by the heresiologists from the names of certain figures (like the 'Cerdonians' of Epiphanius)[45]? What traits, practices, and beliefs do the heresiologists ascribe to each of these groups, and can we then identify any extant texts which match these descriptions, and thus may possibly have originated in, or at least been used by certain of these groups?

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[43] D.W. Deakle, 'Harnack & Cerdo' (2002), pp.177-190. See further Jaap Mansfeld's demonstration of the relative ubiquity of this method in late antiquity, *Heresiography* (1992), especially chapter 8.
[44] M.A. Williams, 'Gnostic Religion?' (2005), pp.55-79.
[45] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 41.1.1; Epiphanius himself includes 'Cerdonians' solely as a heading for his section on Cerdo. Cerdo is only actually called the founder of a sect of 'Cerdonians' in Pseudo-Epiphanius's *Anakephalaiōseis*.

Now, whilst we shall return to the above debate in the next chapter, let us here briefly switch our focus to another taxonomical issue relevant to our thesis, *viz.* the definition of the Kabbalah.

Kabbalah as 'Jewish Mysticism'

'Jewish mysticism' can arguably refer to over 2,000 years of diverse speculations, texts, practices, and movements, ranging from second temple era reflection on the first chapters of Genesis and Ezekiel, respectively referred to as מעשׂה בראשׂית (*Ma'aseh Bereshit*) and מעשׂה מרכבה (*Ma'aseh Merkabah*), to the periods of the Tannaim and Amoraim, from whence we find elements of this tradition preserved and developed in the Talmud (and especially the aggadah), through to the extended speculations of the Hekhaloth texts. In the medieval era, we also find the growth of 'speculative mysticism' in the Occident, and later also in Israel, running through to the seventeenth century rise of the Shabbateans, followed by the Frankists, and eventually the development of modern Ḥasidism (not to be confused with the German Ḥasidim of the early medieval period). Indeed, Gershom Scholem has argued that a direct chain of causation can be demonstrated between these chronologically disparate groups, to the extent that they can be seen to present a vein of 'Jewish mysticism' developing over time[46]. We shall have occasion to examine some aspects of this theory later (specifically the possibility that Merkabah speculation may have influenced the development of the Kabbalah), but for now I merely wish to highlight the wide arena denoted by the term 'Jewish mysticism', as a necessary precursor to identifying which part(s) of it might be defined as 'Kabbalah', for the purposes of this thesis.

Let us begin now at the end, as it were, by offering a definition of 'Kabbalah', one which I feel would be the most constructive for our investigation. By then elucidating the individual elements of this definition, we ought to be able to construct an operative model of what we mean by 'Kabbalah', as opposed to 'Jewish mysticism' writ large. Kabbalah then might be defined as a '*general 'mystical' trend, which arose in late twelfth to early thirteenth century Europe amongst Jews operating (and who continued to operate) within normative Judaism, and which placed major focus on the enumeration and functions of the ten* ספירוֹת (*Sefirot*)'.

[46] See especially Scholem's *Major Trends* (1961). C.f., however, Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.264-267.

The particular question of what constitutes 'mysticism' will be more deeply considered in chapter 3, so our comments at the present shall be restricted to the observation that the 'mystic' method typically involves some element of approach to the divine, through a model primarily focused on the immanent nature of the deity, which presents the possibility of the 'mystic' achieving some direct experience of the divine. It is perhaps not surprising that, as David Ariel notes, 'mystic' trends of this sort should have emerged in European Judaism when they did, as they formed a necessary counterpoint to the extreme transcendence of the divine implied by the Aristotelian rationalism of contemporary Jewish philosophers (Maimonides being the programmatic example)[47].

Certainly, such 'mysticism' was nothing new to Judaism, having been previously expressed in the Merkabah tradition, notably in the so-called Hekhaloth literature, which typically envisioned an ascent through the various heavenly 'palaces' (היכלוֹת) to reach the divine presence[48]. Also notable is the pietism of the twelfth and thirteenth century German Ḥasidim, potentially emerging, as with Kabbalah, in contrast to the extreme rationalism of philosophy. As Scholem notes, however, those "forms of Jewish mysticism that appeared... from around 1200 onward under the name 'Kabbalah'" exhibit such a noticeable difference to other forms of 'Jewish mysticism' that the question of their relation to each other has long troubled scholars[49]. What perhaps most noticeably marks Kabbalah as distinct from other strains of 'Jewish mysticism' is its characteristic focus on the *Sefirot* as a means for resolving the difficulty of maintaining the immanence of the divine, whilst not denying or reducing its transcendence. The particular term *sefirot* (derived from the verb *safar*, ספר, 'to count') first appears in the ספר יצירה (*Sefer Yetzirah*, the 'Book of Creation/Formation') where it is used to denote the ten primordial numbers, which along with the twenty two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are used by God to enact creation. It is not until the book *Bahir* (ספר הבהיר, 'Book of the Brightness') however, which first comes to our attention when it is published in Provence towards the end of the twelfth century, that we find the *Sefirot* (although not so-named) enumerated in something approaching the familiar Kabbalistic system, in which they are understood to represent the ten aspects of God which represent to

[47] D. Ariel, *Kabbalah* (2006), pp.96-100. In this context, it is interesting to note that Maimonides's son Abraham achieved great renown as a 'mystically-orientated' scholar. C.f., however, pp.200f., below.
[48] G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.5-8.
[49] Idem., *Origins* (1990), pp.6f.

varying degrees the immanent divine presence in this world[50]. We shall explore the nature and conception of the *Sefirot* later (see below, pp.59ff.), but for now let us note that although the exact details of their enumeration vary throughout the Kabbalistic literature, their nature as the ten immanent aspects of the divine remains a standard assumption of this 'mystical' trend. As such, I am therefore inclined to agree with Scholem that despite the first appearance of the *Sefirot* in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, it is the appearance of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which forms our best *terminus a quo* for the emergence of the Kabbalah, as this is the first extant work to enumerate the idea of the *Sefirot* according to what would become the familiar Kabbalistic conception.

The depiction of the *Sefirot* above is, by necessity, a rather generalised picture, presenting a relatively basic assumption of Kabbalah without the variances found in outcome of the individual speculations founded on this assumption[51]. Whilst we shall have occasion to examine these variances later, it is here useful to note that they are largely to be expected. Indeed, we have little real evidence that there was ever anything so distinct as an overall 'Kabbalist movement' or sect in this period; rather, what we have are a collection of texts, and records of individual thinkers, who whilst sharing a relatively common 'mystically-orientated' outlook, nonetheless did not cease to be anything other than normative Jews, and continued to function within their previous communities. Let us recall that Judaism has arguably long been a religion which defines its boundaries more by orthopraxis than by orthodoxy, and that whilst those attuned to Kabbalah may have held a different understanding of the reasons why they observed the halakhic injunctions, it is nonetheless the case that observe them they did, and thus did not distance themselves from their wider Jewish communities[52]. Indeed, as Ariel demonstrates, elements of modern Jewish liturgy (especially the Sabbath liturgy) can be seen to bear the marks of Kabbalistic influence, something which is much harder to imagine had the Kabbalists separated into a distinct sect[53]. This situation is perhaps somewhat analogous to those medieval philosophers who remained part of their

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[50] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.35ff. As Scholem notes, the precise dating of the *Bahir* and its sources, and the nature of its precise relation to later Kabbalistic thought is a complex problem. For our purposes here, however, it is sufficient to note that the book was at least *published* in Provence towards the end of the twelfth century, and enjoyed a degree of prominence amongst the Kabbalists (see especially *Ibid.*, chapter 2). C.f. E.R. Wolfson, 'Light through Darkness' (1988), pp.73-95, esp. pp.78-80, n.15.

[51] As one example, there was significant variance in the conception of the status of *Keter* in relation to *Eyn Sof*. See D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.70-75.

[52] As seen, for example, in the Kabbalistic re-interpretations of the concept of *kavvanah*, to express motivation for halakhic observance. See especially *Ibid.*, chapter 8.

[53] *Ibid.*, pp.106-111.

larger Jewish matrix regardless of the potential implications of their rationalist philosophy. An illustrative example might be found in Jacob Neusner's treatment of Nachmanides who, Neusner notes, forms as it were a bridge between these worlds, managing to encompass philosophy, 'mysticism', and halakhic observance seemingly without contradiction[54]. Given the above considerations, therefore, I would suggest that we are on surer ground if we view the Kabbalah as more of a trend or current of thought *within* normative Judaism, rather than as a separate sect. On this basis, I would consequently tend to locate the *terminus ad quem* of this 'classical' period of Kabbalah around the middle of the seventeenth century, with the rise of Shabbetai Zvi. In the Shabbatean movement we *do* find a distinct sect, motivated by its 'mystical' outlook towards anti-nomianism and the inversion of the halakhah, and thus representing a definitive break with normative Jewish tradition; the contrast between this 'mysticism' and that of the 'classical' Kabbalah outlined above should be obvious[55].

In sum then, for the purposes of our investigation we might profitably define 'Kabbalah' as that 'mystical' trend *within* normative Judaism, which although never an organised movement, existing primarily as individuals with shared or similar ideas, can nonetheless be identified by its continual underlying focus on the concept of the *Sefirot* as immanent aspects of the divine. By these criteria, we can locate the main period of the Kabbalah between the end of the twelfth century (the emergence of the book *Bahir*) and the middle of the seventeenth century (the rise of Shabbateanism). Our sources, therefore, will chiefly be those individuals or texts which emerged from amongst the Kabbalists of this period (e.g. Isaac Luria or the *Zohar*), or which enjoyed especial prominence and influence among these Kabbalists (e.g. the *Sefer Yetzirah*).

[54] J. Neusner, 'Philosophy to Mysticism' (1974), pp.213f.
[55] See, for example, G. Scholem's lecture on Shabbetai in *Major Trends* (1961), pp.287ff.

Chapter Two
Location and Construction: The 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians'

Following the conclusions of the previous chapter, it would seem profitable to set aside the concept of the 'Gnostics' as an overarching entity, and to attempt instead to more accurately locate and define particular 'groups' in Antiquity, without the distraction of attempting to synthesise them into the wider concept of the 'Gnostics'. Taken *in toto*, this undertaking of course goes far beyond the bounds of this thesis, and thus unfortunately cannot occupy us here. Instead, I propose to focus purely on *two* specific 'groups' of the second century, the so-called 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians', as I feel that within these two may be found the most profitable points for comparison with the Jewish Kabbalah[56].

If only from the usage of inverted commas in the above paragraph, it should be obvious that much of what has just been said will require greater exposition and justification if it is to be considered accurate. Indeed, there are two main points which require investigation: **a)** can we identify particular sources, groups, or individuals that might be considered 'Sethian' or 'Valentinian', and what are our criteria for doing so? **b)** to what extent can we actually speak of 'Sethians' or 'Valentinians' as being *groups*? I therefore propose in this chapter to treat each of these points in turn.

A

In the field of 'Gnostic' studies little, if anything, is straightforward or uncontroversial. Nonetheless, there is a relatively reasonable level of scholarly consensus regarding those Coptic sources which may be taken as constituting a so-called 'Sethian corpus'. As enumerated by Hans-Martin Schenke, this corpus comprises[57]:

The *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II.1; III.1; IV.1, BG 8502.2)
The *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II.4)
The *Gospel of the Egyptians* (III.2; IV.2)
The *Apocalypse of Adam* (V.5)
The *Three Steles of Seth* (VII.5)
Zostrianos (VIII.1)
Melchizedek (IX.1)
The *Thought of Norea* (IX.2)

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[56] My reasons for this supposition are outlined below, pp.61f.
[57] H.-M. Schenke, 'Gnostic Sethianism' (1981), pp.588-616. C.f. the list and discussion in B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.

Marsanes (X)
Allogenes (XI.3)
The *Trimorphic Protennoia* (XIII)

Of course, this list is hardly definitive; we *might* add *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II.5; XIII.2), by dint of the traditions it seems to share with *Hyp. Arch.*, and the 'Untitled Treatise' of the Bruce Codex, which evidences some dependence on *Marsanes*. There may even be a case for including *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III.3; V.1) as a 'Jewish Gnostic' text, potentially with some similarities to the theorised 'pre-Sethian' source underlying *Apoc. John*[58].

It is important to note that none of these texts uses the term 'Sethian' (a designation which, as we shall see, occurs only in the heresiological literature), but they may nevertheless be linked together by their shared themes or common worldview. As Schenke demonstrates, many (though not all) of these texts not only refer to Seth (either by name, or by an equivalent "such as 'child of the child' or 'Allogenes'"), but also view those who will be saved (understood as the readers of the text) as the descendants of this figure (the 'seed of Seth', the 'unshakable race', etc.)[59]. Of course, the occurrence of Seth alone is not sufficient to designate a text as 'Sethian'; Seth is after all a figure of Judaism, drawn from the Old Testament. As Birger Pearson has shown, what is distinctively 'Sethian' is not the presence of 'Seth', but the specific roles he plays in the texts, most notably as the progenitor of the 'Gnostic race' and revealer of divine salvific knowledge[60]. Beyond this, as Schenke demonstrates, the texts also generally share a "fundamental identity" between their cosmological and soteriological systems; thus "it is possible to identify a given writing as Sethian, even if Seth (for whatever reason) does not appear in it at all". Further, there may also be found certain elements which, although not common to all the texts of our corpus, nonetheless form links between some of its individual members. Amongst Schenke's examples, we might particularly highlight the presence of four 'lightgivers' *plus* a second tetrad, the use of the Coptic designation 'Pigeradamas' (ⲡⲓⲅⲉⲣⲁⲇⲁⲙⲁⲥ) to refer to the character of Adamas, and perhaps most interestingly, the occurrence of an 'obvious

[58] See, for example, B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81. C.f. A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.75ff.
[59] H.-M. Schenke, *op. cit.* For the identification of 'Allogenes' with Seth, see Epiphanius, *Panarion* 40.
[60] B.A. Pearson, 'Seth in Gnostic Literature' (2006), pp.52-83.

secondary Christianisation' of earlier sources[61]. Developing this point, Alastair Logan has convincingly theorised that by comparing the extant versions of the *Apoc. John*, including the source used in Irenaeus's *Haer.* I.29 (see below), we can identify several stages in a redactional process (including a 'Christianising redaction'), the last of which represents a 'Sethian redaction', intended to make pre-existing sources more applicable to 'Sethian' thought. As Logan demonstrates, the addition in this redaction of elements such as Seth's role as heavenly redeemer and progenitor of the 'Gnostic' race confirms for us that these were indeed fundamental concepts in 'Sethian' thought[62].

Beyond these sources, we should also take into account the heresiological evidence; after all, we could easily refer to our corpus by any name – it is largely due to the heresiological categorisation that we designate it as 'Sethian'. Perhaps most well known is Irenaeus's account of 'Gnostic' groups in *Haer.* I.29-31; in particular I.29 depicts a system remarkably akin to that depicted in the *Apoc. John* (so much so that we can conclude that Irenaeus either had access to a version of that text or at least, as Logan postulates, a common source which lies behind the *Apoc. John*) whilst the system of I.30 bears certain similarities to the *Hyp. Arch.* and *Gos. Eg.*[63]. Irenaeus himself does not use the term 'Sethian' (or indeed any group names) in his description of these systems but, as Frederik Wisse argues, "[l]ater heresiologists, beginning with Hippolytus, [who were dependent on Irenaeus's work,] did not want to leave the Gnostics of *Haer.* I.29-31 unnamed, and thus supplied the names Barbēlō-Gnostics (I.29), Ophites or Sethians (I.30), and Cainites (I.31)"[64]. Incidentally, this provision of sect names occurs first in Pseudo-Tertullian (*Against All Heresies* 2), and thus Wisse's chronology is based on his agreement with the theory that this work draws from Hippolytus's lost *Syntagma* (which seems to me a not unreasonable proposition)[65]. Wisse notes that the application of these names was derived not "from new information about Irenaeus's Gnostics", but was rather extrapolated from prominent themes/names in Irenaeus's text. Thus the application of the term 'Sethian' to our corpus is seen to derive from the

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[61] H.-M. Schenke, *op. cit.* Schenke finds this 'Christianisation' to be evident in *Apoc. John*, *Hyp. Arch.*, and *Melchizedek*.

[62] A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.45-56. Faced with Logan's arguments, I find myself unconvinced by Pétrement's assertion [*Separate God* (1990), pp.211-213, 387-419] that the line of development ran in the opposite direction, and that these concepts were originally 'Christian', primarily based on Johannine and Pauline theology.

[63] *Ibid.*, pp.49-55, 82-98, 120-129.

[64] F. Wisse, 'Elusive Sethians' (1981), pp.563-576. Following this heresiology, Theodoret appended the title "Περὶ Σηθιανῶν, ἢ Ὀφιανῶν, ἢ Ὀφιτῶν" to his version of Irenaeus's text (*Haer. fab.* 1.14).

[65] On state of more recent research concerning the *Syntagma* and Pseudo-Tertullian, see the 1st Appendix to J. Mansfeld's *Heresiography* (1992), pp.317-325.

correspondence of certain texts within it to Irenaeus's descriptions of 'Gnostic' groups, and the labels which later heresiologists invented for them. To be sure, this is scarcely the most accurate basis for our use of the term 'Sethian', but it is difficult to propose another name with which we might better label this collection of texts (many of which do, after all, rely heavily on the figure of Seth). As we shall see in part **(b)**, however, these observations are of vital importance in determining whether there ever existed a 'Sethian' *group* as such.

Irenaeus thus emerges as probably the most important of our heresiologists, as (i) he is the earliest one extant, upon whom our other writers were, to a greater or lesser extent, dependant and (ii) he most likely had access to some primary 'Gnostic' materials similar to those which we have, providing us with a useful tool for assessing his evidence. Further, as we shall see below, by virtue of his not providing sect names to his descriptions in I.29-31, he was probably more accurate in this matter than his successors were. Hippolytus again mentions the 'Sethians' in his *Refutation* (5.19-22), but I would argue that this account can be largely discounted. The description he gives of the 'Sethians' here scarcely corresponds to the other evidence (including what is probably his own account in the reconstructed *Syntagma*), and is primarily based on a text he names as the *Paraphrase of Seth*, which he believes contains the doctrines of the 'Sethians'. This text is unknown to us, although there does exist a *Paraphrase of Shem* (NHC VII.1), which although not identical to Hippolytus's evidence here, does bear enough similarity to make us wonder about a relationship of sorts between the two. In any case, the *Paraphrase of Shem* does not correspond to our 'Sethian corpus', and given Hippolytus's tendency to create names for sects by his own reasoning, we must suspect that he assumes that this text belongs to a 'Sethian' group purely on the basis of its title[66]. As Wisse puts it, had Hippolytus known the work as the *Paraphrase of Shem*, "he would most likely have created a new sect called the Shemites"[67]. In contrast Epiphanius, although undeniably dependant on earlier sources, does mention that he *may* have had personal contact with a group of 'Sethians' (*Panarion* 39.1.2); whether this group styled themselves 'Sethians', or whether this is Epiphanius's label is scarcely clear. In favour of self-designation, we might note that although this group had some similarity to Epiphanius's 'Archontics' (*Panarion* 40), he does treat them as separate groups. That said, Epiphanius was not beyond being creative with his enumeration of sects in order to create a list of 80, a

[66] See G. Strecker ['Jewish Christianity' (1972), pp.241-285] on Hippolytus's remarkable extrapolation of the character of the heresiarch 'Ebion' from the name 'Ebionites' (*Refutation* 7.35, c.f. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 3) a name originally derived from אֶבְיוֹן ('poor').
[67] F. Wisse, 'Elusive Sethians' (1981), pp.563-576.

number derived from Song of Songs 6:8f.[68]. It is also worth noting that he is not even wholly certain as to in which country he met these heretics (let alone whether or not they were actually 'Sethians'); further, whilst he claims that these 'Sethians' and 'Archontics' possess 'books of Seth' (39.5.1; 40.7.4), he also makes this claim of the 'libertine Gnostics' of *Panarion* 26, a statement which stands in stark contrast to the primarily ascetic stance found in our 'Sethian corpus', and indeed in almost all the Nag Hammadi texts[69]. Indeed, that the 'Archontics' immediately follow the 'Sethians' in Epiphanius's work, with the two accounts somewhat complementing each other, leads one to agree with the possibility raised by Bentley Layton that in one of Epiphanius's sources the material which he distributes between two chapters in the *Panarion* may have originally belonged to "a single document or report"[70]. One must then wonder whether he would have taken such an action had he actually met 'Sethians'. In any case, we shall return to Epiphanius's evidence below, when we consider the possible existence of 'Sethian' groups[71].

Let us now turn to Valentinus and his followers, who are perhaps most conspicuous by their appearance in all the principal heresiological sources, (and who indeed have several works specifically directed against them), although we also possess several primary sources from the 'Valentinians' themselves[72]. As Pearson notes, we have a few extant fragments from Valentinus himself, which although chiefly from letters and homilies (and thus not systematic mythological works), do contain a few allusions to his mythological system, whilst comparison of these fragments with the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I.3) also allows us to consider the possibility that this text may have been written by Valentinus himself, or at least by

[68] See, for example, G. Vallée, *op. cit.*, pp.65-68.
[69] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.8.1. C.f. S. Gero, 'Encratite Orthodoxy' (1986), pp.287-307.
[70] B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.191-193.
[71] It is worth briefly highlighting here that although Schenke's methodology and delineation of 'Sethian' thought have recently been rather heavily critiqued by Tuomas Rasimus [*Paradise Reconsidered* (2009)], I myself still tend towards the position of the former. Whilst Rasimus's work is clearly exhaustively researched, and at times undeniably insightful, in my opinion his methodology is occasionally too reliant on the statistical frequency with which certain terms occur, whilst I find it hard to concur with his hypothesis of a 'pre-Sethian' myth having emerged as an essentially Christian phenomenon (c.f. my own conclusions both here and in chapter 8 below). Furthermore, I do not share his more favourable opinion regarding the utility of the sectarian titles and divisions found in the heresiological sources, nor would I wish to privilege the heresiological evidence as highly as he does, not when it can be compared and contrasted with the primary Coptic evidence (c.f. also pp.76f. below regarding the evidence of Celsus).
[72] It should be mentioned that there are strong arguments against counting the 'Valentinians' among the 'Gnostics'; indeed, the heresiologists generally seem to view the two movements as parallel and related, but still distinctly separate. Note especially Morton Smith's article 'Gnostikos' (1981), pp.796-807, and its refutation in M.J. Edwards, 'Gnostics and Valentinians' (1989), pp.26-47. If, however, we disavow the usage of 'Gnostic' as a concrete term, as I have proposed, then this debate need not overly concern us here.

someone very close to him[73]. References to the doctrines of the 'Valentinians' are found throughout the heresiological literature (see below, pp.27ff.), whilst we also have "extensive quotations from the writings of Theodotus, a pupil of Valentinus" preserved in Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpta ex Theodoto*[74]. These last are particularly useful since, as James McCue has demonstrated, they can be used to largely substantiate Irenaeus's accounts of 'Valentinian' doctrine (as against Elaine Pagels's assertion that Irenaeus was deliberately inaccurate)[75]. Two important pieces of evidence (both of which potentially originated in Alexandria) should also be borne in mind: (i) the tractate *Eugnostos*, which although most likely pre-Valentinian, was probably known to Valentinus and may well have influenced his thought, and (ii) the commentary on John written by Heracleon, possibly "a member of the Valentinian school", extensive quotations from which are preserved in Origen's own commentary on that Gospel (written to rebut Heracleon's interpretation)[76]. As we shall see below, however, this latter source tells us little, if anything, of 'Valentinian' beliefs or practices; rather, it is of more use to us in determining the nature of the category 'Valentinian'.

We shall later have occasion to consider further the surviving 'Valentinian' literature, both on its own and in comparison with the heresiological accounts, in order to ascertain what we may know about the nature of the 'Valentinian' doctrines and the existence or otherwise of 'Valentinians' as a concrete group or school. It seems apt, therefore, to conclude this section with a brief list of those Nag Hammadi texts which are generally associated with the 'Valentinians', as enumerated by Pearson[77]:

The *Prayer of the Apostle Paul* (NHC I.1)
The *Gospel of Truth* (I.3; XII.2)
The *Treatise on the Resurrection* (I.4)
The *Tripartite Tractate* (I.5)
The *Gospel of Philip* (II.3)
The *Interpretation of Knowledge* (XI.1)
A Valentinian Exposition (XI.2)[78]

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[73] B.A. Pearson, 'Pre-Valentinian Gnosticism' (1991), pp.455-466. The fragments have been most recently collected and translated in Layton's *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.229-245.
[74] B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.
[75] J.F. McCue, 'Conflicting Versions?' (1981), pp.404-416. C.f. E. Pagels, 'Conflicting Versions' (1974), pp.35-53. See further *Appendix I* below, pp.102-105.
[76] B.A. Pearson, 'Pre-Valentinian Gnosticism' (1991), pp.455-466; Idem., 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.
[77] Idem., 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.
[78] The title 'A Valentinian Exposition' is of course an editorial addition, rather than being internal to the text.

B

Greater examination of the specific doctrines and practices of the ‘groups’ under discussion here will be undertaken later, in comparison with those of the Kabbalah, but it is first necessary for us to provide a few remarks as to whether we are justified in viewing the ‘Sethians’ and ‘Valentinians’ as specific *groups*.

Proving, or at least hypothesising, the existence of distinct groups from texts which do not explicitly describe their existence is at best difficult, and often tenuous. An appropriate comparison might be made with the vast amounts of scholarly ink which have been spent on attempting to describe the ‘Johannine community’ thought to sit behind the New Testament Johannine literature. With the ‘Sethian’ evidence we are further hampered by the fact that almost all of what we possess is of a speculative mythological character, and we are thus limited to dealing, as Wisse puts it, “almost exclusively in the area of the beliefs and literature [of the ‘Sethians’]”[79]. What little information we have regarding potential ‘Sethian’ practices is fundamentally unhelpful; whilst we can reasonably suppose from the repeated references in the ‘Sethian’ corpus to a baptism which typically includes a rite of five seals (which Logan suggests refers to a post-baptismal anointing with chrism, akin to Christian practice), that there were groups who practised such a rite, that is probably as far as we can go[80]. Let us recall that the term ‘Sethian’ is never found in any of these texts, and thus we can hardly claim that those who practised such a rite ever saw themselves (or indeed were ever seen by others) as ‘Sethians’. Indeed, in the second century context, such a rite of baptism and sealing with chrism is scarcely distinctive; Logan in fact suggests that this practice of sealing may have originated amongst the groups associated with these texts, and from there spread into ‘orthodox’ (or rather ‘proto-orthodox’) Christianity[81]. Whether or not such a theory is accurate, it nevertheless highlights the possibility of a certain fluidity between traditions in the second century world, in which context the rite of baptism provides little distinction as a group marker.

If our slender evidence pertaining to ‘Sethian’ praxis is of little aid to us, the more voluminous collection of doctrine and thought is ironically probably of even less use. It is as

[79] F. Wisse, ‘Elusive Sethians’ (1981), pp.563-576.
[80] Baptism is a central theme in *Zostrianos*, *Gos. Eg.*, and *Melchizedek*. See also *Apoc. Adam* 84:5-8; 85:30f., *Tri. Prot.* 45:17f.; 48:18-31; 49:26-34; 50:9f., *Apoc. John* NHC II.31:24 / IV.49:4, etc. C.f. H.-M. Schenke, *op. cit.* and A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.34-51.
[81] A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp. pp.34-51, 276-283.

well to remember that the designation of these texts as 'Sethian' on the basis of their central concepts serves only to (i) distinguish them from other texts at Nag Hammadi, and (ii) to potentially link them to certain heresiological reports. On the first point, all we identify by collecting this corpus is a certain common stream of thought or mode of thinking, which might be called 'Sethian'; it scarcely proves the existence of an organised 'Sethian' group. Much of what we have here is ideas, indeed relatively common ideas, which are quite capable of crossing between any groups that may have existed. Let us not forget that Seth is originally an Old Testament figure, recognised in orthodox Judaism, and potentially (as Schenke) of quite central importance to the Samaritans[82]. His importance is nothing new, and indeed Pearson is able to find every aspect of Seth in this literature as essentially deriving from Jewish sources[83]. Recalling our earlier observations regarding the *Apoc. John*, and the possibility that some version of this text seems to have existed in a pre-'Sethian' (and even pre-Christian) form, we can further highlight the potential for texts and ideas to cross boundaries between different groups, making it difficult for us to extrapolate the existence of *one* particular group from a text which may have held currency amongst many. In this context, we should also note that many of the concepts which might be called key 'Sethian' tenets were also later heavily utilised by the Manichaeans; we could therefore just as easily extrapolate their group from the 'Sethian' corpus as we could any group of hypothetical 'Sethians'[84].

As for the second point, we have already observed the doubtful nature of certain of the heresiological accounts, but certain points bear repeating here. Our earliest source, Irenaeus, does not refer to a group of 'Sethians'. Indeed, the important passage of *Haer.* I.29-31 scarcely gives any indication of 'Gnostic groups' at all; rather it reads more as Irenaeus's restatement of several texts which were enjoying currency at the time (e.g. the *Apoc. John*). It was presumably Hippolytus who later extrapolated the existence of sects from these texts, just as he did with his *Paraphrase of Seth*. Thus far then, we have no real evidence for a *group* of 'Sethians' in the heresiological literature. Epiphanius's evidence must also be somewhat suspect; presumably he builds his concept of 'Sethians' on the text of Pseudo-

[82] H.-M. Schenke, *op. cit.*
[83] B.A. Pearson, 'Seth in Gnostic Literature' (2006), pp.52-83.
[84] C.f. Idem., 'Seth in Manichaean Literature' (2004), pp. 268-282.

Tertullian's version of Irenaeus[85]. We have already seen that his account of having personally met 'Sethians' is questionable, as is his attestation of the usage of 'books of Seth' by three different groups. Even if Epiphanius is accurate, this does not help us; indeed it instead illustrates our point as to how texts and ideas might have currency amongst several different groups. We might accept the argument proposed by Michel Tardieu, that these three are simply variants of the same 'Sethian' group, but we must then admit that a group so variegated could scarcely be fully equated with our 'Sethian' corpus[86]. It seems unlikely that these ascetic and baptismal-centric texts would have held much currency for the Archontics, who apparently reject baptism (*Panarion* 40.2.6), or for the libertine 'Gnostics' of *Panarion* 26[87]. I am disposed to think, however, that Epiphanius is not providing us with accurate historical information here, and is rather simply extrapolating groups from such literary sources as he has; indeed, by his own admission, 'Sethian groups' had all but disappeared by the time of his writing (39.1.1). As Wisse argues, Epiphanius's account of 'Sethian' doctrines in *Panarion* 39 is simply a more systematic recapitulation of the source used by Pseudo-Tertullian, which as we have seen does not reflect any real evidence of 'Sethian' groups. Even if Epiphanius had actually met 'Sethians', the experience "had no noticeable effect on his account", and thus cannot provide us with any solid evidence[88].

What I wish to suggest by these observations is this: that the Coptic 'Sethian' texts present us with a rich and interesting vein of mythological speculation, but do not really provide us with any concrete sociological clues as to their origin. Further, our most reliable heresiological evidence turns out to be that of Irenaeus, which tells us nothing about any group organisation. A 'Sethian' movement, with well-defined beliefs and practices is not inconceivable, but nor is it in any way proven by the evidence we have. Ultimately, we have a collection of texts displaying a certain inter-relationship of concepts and ideas but, as Wisse highlights, we cannot tell if they stem from an overall 'Sethian' movement or from small groups/congregations of people sharing similar 'Sethian' ideas. Perhaps instead these texts are "the inspired creations of individuals who did not feel bound by the opinions of a

[85] Epiphanius does not seem to know of the 'Sethians' of Hippolytus's *Refutation*. From the textual evidence, it seems unlikely that Epiphanius actually used the *Refutation* in composing his *Panarion*, instead relying on other sources. C.f. G. Vallée, *op. cit.*, pp.63f.
[86] M. Tardieu, 'Seth et les Séthiens' (1977), pp.204-210. C.f. *Panarion* 40.7.5.
[87] Admittedly it could be that *Panarion* 40.2.6 refers only to the Archontics' rejection of the baptism of the 'orthodox' Church. This conclusion however raises further problems; the same statement is not made for the other two groups who apparently share the same literature as the Archontics. Is there a difference in baptismal attitudes between the groups, and if so, can they really all share the same baptismal literature?
[88] F. Wisse, 'Elusive Sethians' (1981), pp.563-576.

religious community", or perhaps many of them were never meant to express a group doctrine, but are rather intended for private meditation[89]. With the evidence we have, we simply cannot say.

When we consider the 'Valentinians', we find that the situation is not very different. Perhaps most noticeably, whilst the 'Sethian' literature is all either anonymous or pseudepigraphal, in several cases, as noted above, we have sources which we know to have been authored by specific 'Valentinians', or even Valentinus himself. Yet, ultimately, we are left with the same question as with the 'Sethians': do the sources we have represent a stream of works from one unified group, or do they instead represent, for example, the free thoughts of specific individuals, not beholden to a group doctrine? There is much that could be said on the nature and definition of the 'Valentinians', a topic on which there is still a great amount of scholarly work to be done. Unfortunately, there is only a certain amount which we can afford to treat here; an in-depth exploration of all the pertinent issues would require at least a thesis of its own. Thus, I wish here to simply outline a few essential facets of a responsible understanding of 'Valentinianism', so as to provide a necessary indication of how we should treat the 'Valentinian' evidence utilised in this thesis.

By surveying the heresiological evidence for 'Valentinian' beliefs, one might potentially identify certain thematic features which, by virtue of their recurrence in different heresiologists' accounts of different 'Valentinian' figures, could be thought to be fundamental tenets of a 'Valentinian' system; indeed, one might with some justification highlight the tripartite schema of salvation and the division of humanity into pneumatics, psychics, and the earthly, or the emphasis on the heavenly Plērōma, and the concept of an Ogdoad as 'typically Valentinian' features[90]. There are, however, two important *caveats*: firstly, even if 'typically Valentinian', these themes could scarcely be said to be *exclusively* so. Tertullian, for example, seems to identify himself as a 'pneumatic' in a similar sense, whilst the use of the heavenly Plērōma and Ogdoad is also to be found in other 'Gnostic' systems[91]. More important, however, is our second point, that we may well be remiss in attempting to draw a thematic structure from the heresiological accounts of the

[89] F. Wisse, 'Elusive Sethians' (1981), pp.563-576.
[90] See, for example, McCue's demonstration [*op. cit.*] of the agreement between Irenaeus's account of 'Valentinian' teachings, and the evidence of Clement's *Excerpta*.
[91] E.g. *Modesty* 21.16f., c.f. *Praxeas* 1. On Plērōma and Ogdoad, see, for example, *Apoc. John* NHC II.3:1-4:14, *Gos. Eg.* IV.50:6-22, BasFrA. C.f. also Epiphanius, *Panarion* 25.2.2; 40.2.3 and *Poimandres* 25f.

'Valentinians'. In an intriguing article, Michael Kaler and Marie-Pierre Bussières have convincingly demonstrated that amongst the heresiologists dealing with the 'Valentinians', only Clement may be thought to have understood membership of this 'school' or 'group' on a thematic basis (i.e. the expectation that all 'Valentinians' would hold a common set of shared beliefs)[92]. More usually, however, the heresiologists generally seem to define the 'Valentinians' by what might be called a 'genealogical' understanding (i.e. that a particular figure is seen as a 'Valentinian' simply because he was literally a pupil of either Valentinus or one of his pupils); such a construction of a 'Valentinian school', based purely on a master→disciple chain, implies nothing regarding the unity and conformity of thought within this chain; by way of analogy, recall that Aristotle was after all once a pupil of Plato[93]. Furthermore, the heresiologists often emphasise that these pupils frequently departed heavily from the thought of their teachers, each reshaping what they had learnt in their own way[94]. Of course, such a presentation of these figures should be expected from the heresiologists' method, as the unfaithfulness of the 'heretics' to their received teachings can then be aptly contrasted with the true Church's faithful preservation of the unified, apostolic doctrine (as, for example, Irenaeus argues in *Haer.* I.10). To be sure, it seems quite probable that in general the 'Valentinians' only existed within this genealogical construct; as Kaler and Bussières demonstrate, the name 'Valentinian' is almost certainly a pejorative term, applied to the 'group' solely by those outside of it, with the result that potentially quite different thinkers could find themselves grouped together under the name of the 'Valentinians', purely because they, or their teachers, had once been taught by Valentinus[95]. As an example, Kaler and Bussières highlight Heracleon, whom several of the heresiologists identify as a 'Valentinian' on the basis of an association between him and Ptolemy. Yet, as Kaler and Bussières note, there is nothing in the extant portions of Heracleon's commentary to suggest a commitment to 'typical Valentinian' beliefs. Indeed, Origen (who preserves this commentary) does not place any real emphasis on the status of Heracleon as a 'Valentinian'; rather, although he states (*Commentary on John* 2.100) that Heracleon is *said to be* a

[92] M. Kaler & M.-P. Bussières, 'Heracleon' (2006), pp.275-289. C.f. Clement's *Stromateis* IV.9.
[93] E.g. Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.11.1-3, Tertullian, *Val.* 4; 38, Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 4f., Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.1.1; 34.1.1; 35.1.1; 36.1.1.
[94] E.g. Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.11.1; 12.4; 13.1, Tertullian, *Val.* 4; 33-36; 39, Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.1.2; 35.1.2. Indeed, Irenaeus (*Haer.* I.11.1) gives a similar account of Valentinus, claiming that he took the teachings of the 'Gnostics' and reshaped them.
[95] M. Kaler & M.-P. Bussières, *op. cit.*

Valentinian, he leaves ambiguous whether either he or Heracleon consider that an accurate identification[96].

It does not seem impossible then that our most accurate definition of 'Valentinianism' might be to see it as no more than a taxonomic category imposed by others on those who were part (or were at least thought to be part) of a master→disciple chain which stretched back to Valentinus. Whether the term originated in the heresiologists, or whether they simply utilised a term current in general Christian circles to describe those associated with Valentinus, we cannot say. In any case, it seems highly unlikely that those to whom the term was applied saw themselves as such; as we noted above in relation to the 'Gnostics', most likely they, like everyone else, simply viewed themselves as 'Christians'[97].

This understanding of how the idea of the 'Valentinians' as a distinct group was formed can potentially then account for the difficulty of reconciling those heresiological reports which attribute notable differences in opinion to different individuals all identified as 'Valentinians', a difficulty which has often been countered with the complex supposition, largely drawn from Hippolytus's *Refutation* (6.35.5-7), that 'Valentinianism' was split into distinct Eastern and Italian schools of doctrine[98]. It seems rather that we might be safer in simply treating each of

[96] M. Kaler & M.-P. Bussières, *op. cit.* See especially Kaler and Bussières's discussion on Origen's use of the participle λεγόμενον in this passage. C.f. though Einar Thomassen's critique ['Heracleon' (2010), pp.173-210] of Kaler and Bussières's article (esp. pp.173f., n.7). I do not, however, find Thomassen's argument that Origen clearly considered Heracleon to be a 'Valentinian' wholly relevant to our purposes here; even if Thomassen is correct that this was Origen's view, as we have noted above such an assessment still likely relied primarily on Heracleon's reputed relation to Ptolemy in a master→disciple chain. Thomassen is correct in noting that the extant evidence of Heracleon's thought does not contain any description of a mythological system, but his assertion that the fragments of Heracleon's commentary preserved by Origen necessarily presuppose a system essentially similar to that of Ptolemy (c.f. Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.1.1 – 8.5) is unconvincing. As against Thomassen's rather dogmatic constructions of 'Valentinian' thought, the evidence for a heresiological methodology of genealogical association which we have highlighted here instead suggests a certain amount of divergence between each of the individual figures labelled as 'Valentinians'. Thus, even if Heracleon advanced a mythological system to some extent akin to other 'Valentinian' systems (a proposition which is perhaps not implausible, but is however, *pace* Thomassen, not reliably demonstrable from the available sources), we cannot really say, on the basis of the scant extant evidence, to what extent this system may have evinced dogmatic unity with other 'Valentinian' systems, and we have little real reason to doubt, therefore, that the identification of Heracleon as a 'Valentinian' was likely due in the main to his alleged association with Ptolemy. C.f. also n.97, below.

[97] Potentially, at least some of those called 'Valentinians' may have identified themselves as 'pneumatics', but as with Tertullian, this is not necessarily a sectarian term.

[98] On this point, see further the article by Joel Kalvesmaki ['Italian versus Eastern Valentinianism' (2008), pp.79-89], where he convincingly argues that this idea is largely untenable, being primarily based on heresiological extrapolations from often inaccurate or confused reports of what particular individuals associated with the 'Valentinians' believed. C.f., though, E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, (2006), pp.39-45, 248-268, 494-500 on diversity amongst 'Valentinian schools'. It seems to me, however, that Kalvesmaki convincingly refutes several of the assumptions upon which Thomassen's argumentation is based.

the 'Valentinians' listed in the heresiological literature as individual figures, who although potentially able to draw on the thought of their teachers, were nonetheless more concerned with developing their own thought than being beholden to a particular set of received doctrines; indeed, as we saw, it is arguably this very description that we find in much of the heresiology, except there it is phrased as an insult. We might thus account both for the occurrence of certain shared themes between some of these individuals, as well as for their noticeable differences and novelties. As we shall see later, this approach should be of especial use when we come to consider the peculiar doctrines of Markos, the supposed disciple of Ptolemy.

We should also make some brief remarks on that Coptic literature listed above which is generally associated with the 'Valentinians'. Of course, the anonymous nature of these texts generally prevents us from linking them to our 'Valentinian' figures by the genealogical method, and thus, as with our 'Sethian' literature, we can achieve little more than speculation, based on primarily thematic similarities between the texts and the doctrines of those who are reported as 'Valentinians' in the heresiological literature[99]. To be sure, if the contents of a particular text correspond relatively well to that which is reported of a particular 'Valentinian' figure in the heresiological literature, then we may well consider the possibility that the text originated either with them, or someone close to them. Indeed, as Pearson has noted, one might (not unreasonably) posit an origin for certain of these texts in Alexandria, an area in which we know several prominent 'Valentinian' figures (e.g. Theodotus, or Valentinus himself in the earlier part of his career) were active around the time when these texts may have been written[100]. Ultimately, however, we cannot prove any of these hypotheses. Furthermore, as we found with the 'Sethian' literature, these texts give us no reason to suspect the existence of an organised 'Valentinian' group. Again, we have no evidence that these texts weren't simply the work of, for example, free-thinking individuals, and certainly our observations concerning the relative non-existence of 'Valentinianism' as an organised sect must make us even more sceptical about presuming that these texts were ever intended for use within a particular 'group'.

[99] *Gos. Tru.* might constitute an exception, in that Irenaeus (*Haer.* III.11.9) refers to a 'Gospel of Truth' used by the followers of Valentinus. He does not, however, mention *which* followers these are, or what their doctrines are. Neither does he quote from or refer to the content of this 'Gospel'. We cannot therefore be absolutely certain that the text Irenaeus refers to is the same one which we possess.
[100] B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.

As a final point, if we now consider 'Valentinianism' to be largely a term imposed on a number of individuals, it should not be surprising that along with a paucity of evidence for 'Valentinian' group organisation, we find that very little is said concerning practice and ritual. There are some references to 'Valentinian' asceticism in the literature, but this was scarcely an uncommon practice, nor indeed one which necessarily required an organised group[101]. Otherwise, probably our best evidence would be the references to a "bridal chamber" in the *Gospel of Philip*, which Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley for one has postulated *may* reflect the idea and practice of some kind of cosmically-orientated marriage ritual: even if this were the case, however, we can but guess at what such a ritual would entail[102]. At any rate, given our above considerations on the relation of the Coptic texts to the 'Valentinians' we could not reasonably say any more than that the author(s) of *Gos. Phil.* potentially knew of such a ritual; we could scarcely extrapolate from that a practice common to *all* 'Valentinians'.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we seem unable to prove that either the 'Sethians' or the 'Valentinians' existed as clearly defined movements with set doctrines and practices. We have little or no reliable evidence that they possessed any real organisational structures; rather what we have are a slew of texts which potentially represent nothing more than the free adaptations and interpretations of largely speculative doctrines by individuals. At best, we might perhaps seek to classify the ideas on which these individuals focused, and the worldview from within which they operated. We might be safer to speak of a text or an individual representing a 'Sethian' or 'Valentinian' *mode of thought*, rather than as being part of an organised and clearly defined group. We can scarcely dismiss the suggestion that several people in the same area who shared a similar mode of thought might quite naturally gather together, collaborate and share ideas, and perhaps even preach their ideas to others, or even participate in some communal ritual expression of their thought. Yet this sort of informal community is far from being a 'Sethian' or 'Valentinian' *sect* or even *church*. Again though, this is just a supposition; the underlying fact is that the only aspect for which we really have any solid

[101] E.g. VFrE, *Flora* 33.5.13-15, Tertullian, *Val.* 1. Note, however, Irenaeus's (possibly polemical) ascription of libertine practices to the 'Valentinians' in *Haer.* I.6.3f. Generally, however, as a pro-ascetic outlook is almost ubiquitous in the Nag Hammadi texts, any such references in a particular text are taxonomically unhelpful.

[102] 'Bridal chamber' can be reasonably used in *Gos. Phil.* to translate the synonymic terms ⲛⲩⲙⲫⲱⲛ (Gr. νυμφών) in, for example, 65.11f.; 67.5,16, 30, and ⲡⲁⲥⲧⲟⲥ (Gr. παστός) in 69.1, 37; J.J. Buckley, 'Double Name' (1988), pp.211-227.

evidence is the primarily mythological and speculative beliefs expressed in the extant texts. The sociological, organisational, and even ritual aspects of the 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians' are condemned, through our lack of evidence, to remain purely hypothetical.

Although perhaps a somewhat disappointing conclusion in general, such a situation may prove to be relatively advantageous to our argument. What I wish to propose is this: given that the 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians' of the second century are separated from the medieval Kabbalah by a gap of some one thousand years, an attempt to investigate their connection based on a 'history of religions' model would be somewhat stymied from the outset. Now, if we are to lay aside any sociological constructs for our 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' thought streams, then we may also be able to set aside the necessity to prove any sort of formal or organisational connection between them and the Kabbalah, predicated on the notion that the chronologically latter must have somehow directly descended from the earlier. We might instead explore the relation between them through a 'history of ideas' model, and seek to investigate whether, and if so how, particular ideas and concepts, worldviews, attitudes, and modes of thinking might be found in common between 'groups' otherwise separated by time and space, and it is therefore this undertaking that shall hereon assume a major role in of our discussion.

Chapter 3
The 'Mystic' Impulse: The 'Gnostics', the Kabbalah, and 'Mysticism'

For the final piece of prolegomena to this thesis, it seems necessary to make a detour from our main focus to briefly consider the issue of whether one may reasonably speak of the 'Gnostics' as 'mystics', most especially in the context of the complex work which has been done by the history of religions and socio-anthropological schools on the definition and understanding of 'mysticism'[103]. In particular, as we shall see throughout the following chapters, the specific approach taken on this matter by Scholem notably informs his position as regards the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation. Now, it is perhaps apt to begin our examination with the application of some negation language (a feature which, we shall see, is often held to be a common facet of 'mysticism'); by this I mean that we should make clear at the outset precisely those questions which this chapter will *not* seek to answer. It is not my intention to attempt to argue that the 'Gnostics' are or are not to be regarded as 'mystics'; to do so would require an exhaustive examination of the classifications hitherto offered regarding what constitutes 'mysticism', an assessment and comparison of these taxonomies, and an attempt to relate them on a deep and precisely defined level to constituent elements of 'Gnostic' belief and practice, examined in contrast with similar elements in other religious traditions. Such an interdisciplinary and inter-religious examination is most certainly worthwhile (although, as we shall see, to date has yet to be fully undertaken within the study of religions school), but it goes far beyond the bounds of this thesis, or indeed even this sub-discipline. I therefore wish, for the time being at least, to lay aside the specific question of whether the 'Gnostics' were 'mystics', and to highlight instead the very fact that this question has arguably not yet really been fully addressed.

If one peruses the relevant literature on 'mysticism' (pertinent examples of which may be found in the bibliography), one finds that the 'Gnostics' are most conspicuous by their absence. That is to say that, regardless of whether or not the 'Gnostics' are to be properly regarded as 'mystics', scholarship in the area seems to have almost wholly overlooked them, thereby implicitly denying that they have a right to be considered 'mystic'; indeed, to my knowledge, Hans Jonas and Guy Stroumsa are the only scholars who have produced any

[103] With regard to the conclusions of the previous chapters, 'Gnostic' is for the moment used here merely as an editorial shorthand, reflective of the term's use in the scholarship on 'mysticism' (see below, pp.38f.).

serious work on the potentially 'mystic' nature of the 'Gnostic'[104]. On the rare occasion that the 'Gnostics' are mentioned in the scholarship of 'mysticism', it is all too often as a negative contrast to the proposed 'mysticism' of the Neo-Platonists: the 'mysticism' of the latter apparently being partly proven by their differences to the former, without any particular reason given why the former are not to be counted as 'mystics'[105].

Now, permit me to offer a contrast to this state of affairs; in similar bibliographies of 'mysticism', the Kabbalah is most noticeably present. Almost any treatment of 'mysticism' in a Jewish context would be hard pressed to avoid devoting substantial time to Kabbalah, and indeed it is occasionally taken as being *the* exemplary representation of 'Jewish mysticism'. I do not think one could, or indeed would argue that Kabbalah is not to be seen as 'mystical', and I certainly have no intention of attempting such a task here. Rather I merely wish to observe that, based on the evidence above, it seems that in the scholarship on 'mysticism', the Kabbalah is near-automatically included amongst the catalogue of 'mystic' traditions (without it felt necessary to justify *why* it is considered 'mystic'), whilst the 'Gnostics' are by contrast near-automatically *excluded*, again without any clear reason *why*; this seems to me an at least somewhat arbitrary state of affairs. Again, I do not wish to extensively debate whether the 'Gnostics' and/or the Kabbalah should or should not to be regarded as 'mystic': that is a topic for another thesis in another sub-discipline. What I wish to demonstrate here, however, is that in the context of so-called 'general characteristics of mysticism' there exist a number of *prima facie* correspondences between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah. Indeed, as I hope to show, it seems, at least on the surface, demonstrably possible that the 'Gnostics' possess several facets considered characteristic of 'mysticism'. Furthermore, I wish to argue that in certain instances, those 'general characteristics of mysticism' which the 'Gnostics' are seen to lack, are also lacking in the Kabbalah.

Let me stress that I am not, for the moment, concerned to show that these correspondences between the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah run any deeper than surface resemblances: to be sure, we shall later have occasion to examine these similarities in much greater depth (indeed, this undertaking will comprise the majority of the thesis), but for now I merely wish to briefly emphasise a few of them, in order to address the issue of the place of the 'Gnostics' in our

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104 E.g. H. Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism' (1969), pp.315-329; G.G. Stroumsa, 'Mystical Descents' (1995), pp.139-154; Idem., 'Esotericism to Mysticism' (1995), pp.289-309.

105 For a paradigmatic example of this circular logic, see W.R. Inge, *Mysticism* (1969), pp.138-158. C.f. R. Majercik, 'Plotinus' (1995), pp.38-61.

understanding of 'mysticism'. Whether or not either the 'Gnostics' or the Kabbalah are to properly be called 'mystic' is for our purposes here irrelevant; rather, the essential point is that if there are seen to be *any* similarities between them, however superficial, it must surely indicate that a far better justification than has hitherto been given is needed for why one is often considered 'mystic' and the other not. The case at the moment, in fact, seems to be that Kabbalah has been *a priori* considered 'mystic', whilst the 'Gnostics' have been *a priori* excluded, or at best overlooked. This raises, to an extent, the constant ontological paradox of taxonomy, *viz.* that a group definition is inevitably created on the basis of shared characteristics between different entities, and that this definition is then applied to determine whether each of these entities belong to the group. In such a context, one might potentially explain the current situation as one in which two entities that show more agreement between themselves than either do to the 'group definition' find that one (i.e. Kabbalah) is included in the group, for no better reason than that as the representative of 'Jewish mysticism', it formed part of an earlier group from which the 'shared characteristics' (which are the basis of the current definition) were derived. By contrast, the 'Gnostics', who were not originally considered, either remain overlooked, or are excluded for not adhering to enough of these 'shared characteristics'.

The above is merely a hypothesis on the current state of affairs for research on 'mysticism', and perhaps at best suggests the need for any definition of 'mysticism' to be formed in dialogue, so that whilst a general definition is used to critically assesses whether any specific example is 'mystical', simultaneous allowance is made for the continual modification of this definition based on the conclusions of these specific enquiries. What will be relevant for us to show, however, is that whether the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah are to be considered in or out of the 'mystic group', the same assessment must be made for both of them, unless a clear and non-arbitrary justification can be given for their separation.

It should of course be noted that we will perhaps be unlikely to find many, or indeed any *exact* correspondences between the two traditions, and would to a certain extent err in seeking them. As Scholem has perceptively demonstrated, it is largely inaccurate to view 'mysticism' as a standalone abstraction, as it inevitably "presents itself as a totality of concrete historical phenomena"[106]. That is to say, although a 'mystic' may well experience

[106] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.3-7.

an ineffable encounter with a nominally transcendent divinity (an encounter so personal and intense that human language, or even concepts of thought, may be wholly unable to express yet one iota of it), nonetheless their understanding of the experience, and the way in which they attempt to convey it to others, will inevitably be shaped by their own thought world, that is by their own philosophical or religious tradition. As such, even if we were to propose that every 'mystic' has, from an objective viewpoint, the same experience, for the 'mystic' themselves their subjective experience will be one relatable to their own religious context; as Scholem puts it, "[t]here is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system"[107]. Thus, for example, the Baal Shem Tov did not express his experience in the terminology of the Neo-Platonists, nor did Julian of Norwich hers in the Hebrew of the Torah: even were the experience the same (though I would not be so quick to claim that it was), its expression could only be through the world personally relevant to the individual 'mystic'.

The implications of this observation for our task should be clear. Although, as Scholem notes, we can attempt with some modicum of success to identify 'general characteristics' of 'mysticism', which occur across different traditions, we must remain mindful that our actual evidence will only ever be for the particular manifestation (or perhaps interpretation) of each experience within its subject's own religious paradigm[108]. We should therefore remain mindful of the difficulties of attempting to identify *exact* correspondences between traditions, whilst at the same time recalling the *caveats* given above on the difficulties of using 'general characteristics' distilled from variant sources as a basis for a group definition. Now, it should be noted that I propose later in this thesis to examine 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic paradigms, and to consider to what extent the traditions *are* separate; should the original thought worlds of the two be close, then we might expect their particular interpretations of 'mystical' experiences to be similarly close, so indeed something close to *exact* parallels might be locatable. For the moment, however, in the larger inter-religious context, let us simply note that, as Scholem proposes, 'mystic' characteristics identified within a particular religion should ultimately be understood as belonging to that religion, rather than as belonging to a 'general abstract mysticism'[109]. The corollary of this observation then, is that we can with some validity seek to identify certain *prima facie* correspondences between the 'Gnostics',

[107] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.6.
[108] *Ibid.*, pp.10-14.
[109] *Ibid.*, pp.3-7, 11.

Kabbalah, and to a lesser extent some of the more generally proposed characteristics of 'mysticism' writ large, explaining the differences between the individual expressions of these correspondences as attributable to the particular tradition from which they emerged. Even if these surface similarities are interpreted differently in their individual religious traditions, their existence should indicate for us the possibility that the 'Gnostics' are not to be so easily divorced from the current definitions of what is 'mystic', and that even if we wish to stop short of asserting outright that they deserve a place within the 'mystic' catalogue, we may well agree that they deserve the same estimation as the Kabbalah (whether that estimation be 'mystic' or not).

Now, as a starting point for our examination, I wish to make some mention of the level of 'individualism' often identified in the 'mystic' literature, and in so doing to provide a brief clarification regarding the terminology used in this chapter. Arguably, the very concept of 'mysticism' as a *personal* experience of the divine, one which the 'mystic' can often struggle to express to others, would imply that the individual aspect is more prevalent than the communal one within 'mysticism'; indeed, the notion of an organised dogmatic community of 'mystics' would seem surprisingly at odds with the concept of the charismatic, personal encounter with the divine[110]. To be sure, corporate or shared 'mystical' experience is not unknown (consider, for example, Augustine and Monica's shared experience at Ostia, or even certain aspects of Quaker spirituality), but the personal individual account certainly seems to be the most prevalent within the 'mystic' literature[111]. To give a few brief examples, consider that even two such closely linked 'mystics' as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross (the latter at one point being spiritual advisor to the former) are still routinely treated as individuals in the literature, rather than as two members of a community of shared 'mystical' experience (so to speak). It will also be noted that most discussions of so-called Neo-Platonic 'mysticism' are in fact inevitably discussions of the individual 'mystical' experiences of Plotinus (and occasionally Porphyry who, although he learnt from his master, nonetheless is

[110] Admittedly, one might argue that precisely this communal 'mysticism' constitutes the basis of modern Ḥasidism, though it is well to remember that for the Ḥasid the 'mystical' experience still retains a strongly individualistic locus in the figure of the *tzadik*. Furthermore, the extent to which the modern form of Ḥasidism can still be said to be representative of its 'mystic' origins is rather open to debate. See further, G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.325-350.

[111] Augustine, *Confessions* IX.10.23f. Granted that often an individual's account may well be written largely for the purpose of instructing others in 'mystic' practice. Nonetheless, such accounts are still the product of an individual reflecting on their own personal experience, which thus implies that the intended recipients of the account are other individuals who may have their own personal experiences, rather than the community at large. C.f. S. Biderman, 'Mystical Identity' (2000), pp.68-86.

seen to have had his own individual experiences)[112]. Indeed, although Meister Eckhart certainly had disciples and followers of his 'mysticism', this does not seem to have engendered a corporate 'mysticism' amongst their community; one does not generally hear talk of 'Eckhartism' or even of an 'Eckhart school'. In this context then, let us return to the conclusions of the preceding chapters, where we noted at least the *potential* for a similarly individualistic existence amongst both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalists.

Some clarification is needed here, as thus far in this chapter I have utilised the general term 'Gnostics'. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, however, this may be taken as largely a catch-all term, encompassing a vast number of *individual* writers, thinkers (and potentially even 'mystic' figures?) who cannot necessarily be shown to have shared any sort of communal identity; to a lesser extent, we saw that the same could also be said to the sub-categories 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian'. Now, in light of these conclusions, we can at least see a possible parallel to the concept of 'mystics' and their writings as highly individualised, with any teaching produced being directed towards similarly minded individuals rather than an established community; we might recall that this was the explanation we posed for the 'Valentinian' master→disciple chains[113]. I do not, of course, wish to propose a direct correspondence between these two observations, but rather to simply highlight the point that the highly individualised structures we identified within various conceptions of the 'Gnostics' would seem to potentially place them in this instance nearer to the realm of the 'mystics' than to that of an organised sect. It must at least be questioned, for example, whether on the available evidence it is not just as reasonable to label Valentinus a 'mystic' as it is Plotinus?[114]

We noted in the first chapter that a similar assessment may be made of the Kabbalah, wherein it is viewed as being more of an overarching trend comprising many individual thinkers rather than any definitive movement. The difference, perhaps, is that (as we previously mentioned) we do know of certain potentially 'mystic' texts (such as the *Zohar*) which enjoyed a relatively pre-eminent and common usage amongst many of these individuals, with the result that we can to some extent speak of 'the Kabbalah' in general as being 'mystically'

[112] C.f. R. Majercik, *op. cit.*; W.R. Inge, *op. cit.*, pp.138-158.
[113] See above, pp.27ff. Recall also the observations of F. Wisse, ['Elusive Sethians' (1981), pp.563-576] that it is at least not inconceivable that *some* of the Nag Hammadi texts may have originally been freely inspired individual creations, perhaps meant for personal meditation.
[114] E.g. VFrD, F, H. C.f. Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.37.7.

orientated. As we shall see, however, often when we wish to speak of a 'Gnostic' source which shows evidence of 'mysticism', we find that we can only identify that source with a particular thought stream or vaguely defined 'Gnostic group' (e.g. the 'Sethians'), or indeed even only with one particular individual[115]. That is not to say that, for example, some of the Nag Hammadi texts did not enjoy the same status amongst 'Gnostics' as, say, the *Zohar* did amongst Kabbalists: merely that we in general lack the evidence to make this claim with any certainty. We may therefore wish to avoid speaking of the 'Gnostics' *in general* as being 'mystics'; nonetheless, if we have evidence of at least some possibly 'mystic' figures or modes of thought which could *potentially* be labelled 'Gnostic' (or perhaps more accurately 'Sethian', 'Valentinian', etc.), then our argument holds true that these at least hold as much right as the Kabbalah to a place in 'mysticism' scholarship[116].

As an example, we might note it is perhaps axiomatic that a 'mystic' experience will involve some sort of schema of ascent and/or descent. That is to say if, as Scholem argues, the 'mystic' ultimately aims at bridging that "vast abyss, conceived as absolute, [which exists] between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and Man, the finite creature", then to do so must logically require either an ascent of the 'mystic' towards the divine sphere, or a descent of the divine into the realm of creation[117]. Jonas notes that a mythological system of ascent, phrased in the context of the "celestial journey of the returning soul" emerges as "one of the most constant common features in otherwise widely divergent gnostic [*sic*] systems"; we might, for example, highlight the post-mortem ascent of the soul to the heavens in *Apoc. John* (NHC II.1), an ascent which is made possible by the prior descent of the Pronoia, as well as a similar description given by Epiphanius of 'Archontic' beliefs in *Panarion* 40.2.8[118]. Now, it must be admitted that this conception of ascent, as a highly-mythological account of the soul's post-mortem return to the point of its origin, could not at first glance be said to exactly correspond to any idea of a 'mystic' experience as an inner journey achievable prior to the body's death; upon deeper examination, however, the two might appear to have a

115 E.g. BasFrC-E. The situation is also further complicated if we recall our earlier observation that the 'Gnostic' status of texts such as *Gos. Thom.* and *Gos. Mary* (which arguably have 'mystic' elements) is disputed.

116 By analogy, one may aver from speaking of Roman Catholicism as a 'mystic' movement, but the presence in its history of particular individual figures recognised as 'mystic' necessarily precludes the automatic exclusion of *all* Roman Catholics from the study of 'mysticism'.

117 G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.7f.

118 H. Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism' (1969), pp.315-329. C.f. also Idem., *The Gnostic Religion* (1991), pp.165-169, on the soul's ascent in *Poimandres*.

somewhat closer connection[119]. As Jonas argues, a creation myth, such as we find in several 'Gnostic' systems, reveals the order in which creation proceeded from the divine, and in so doing, also traces the path which humanity must follow in order to return; in this context, it should then hardly be surprising that creation myths across various cultures (including the Genesis accounts) inevitably begin with the divine source, and culminate in the creation of humanity[120]. It is surely not coincidental that, as Wisse notes in his introduction to the text, the *Apoc. John* focuses on "two basic questions: What is the origin of evil?" and "How can we escape from this evil world to our heavenly home?": as the text shows, it is essentially the inversion of the path traced in the first question which provides the answer to the second[121]. Jonas further highlights the potential parallels between such creation myths and the schema of creation by emanation, which can be found (along with its reversal as a path to the divine) in the 'mystic' conceptions of Plotinus (e.g. *Enneads* III.4.3)[122]. Similarly, as we shall see in later chapters, the Kabbalah (especially as found in the *Zohar* and its Lurianic development), often envisages a similar method of emanation, in which the light of the Infinite leads to creation via the *Sefirot*; as such, concentration upon and contemplation of the latter thus enables one to advance towards the former[123].

To be sure, the mythological accounts that we find here seem to express a somewhat different conception of the ascent to the divine (i.e. an externalised post-mortem ascent) than the more interiorised and currently-realised model that we find in Plotinus or even Augustine[124]. As Andrew Louth has demonstrated, both Plotinus and Augustine appear to view the "first step to God" as an intellectual movement "of withdrawal, introversion, concentration… [which] requires patience", in order to achieve "discovery of the self as a spiritual being that transcends the material order"[125]. In both, one might find a sense of what Louth calls "introspective self scrutiny", an attempt to turn one's focus inwards to the soul, and to ascend

[119] C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180, esp. pp.178-180.
[120] H. Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism' (1969), pp.315-329.
[121] F. Wisse, 'Apocryphon of John' (1990), pp.104-123.
[122] H. Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism' (1969), pp.315-329.
[123] See further pp.88ff., below. C.f. *Zohar* I.65a.
[124] I choose to introduce Augustine into the discussion here as, on the one hand, his 'mysticism' shows several potential similarities to that of Plotinus, whilst on the other, his tenure with the Manichaeans would have introduced him to mythologies not wholly dissimilar to those we are discussing here. In any case, one is usually hard pressed to discuss Plotinus in any vaguely Christian context without referring to Augustine. C.f. A. Louth, *Christian Mystical Tradition* (1981), pp.36-51, 132-158; G. Bonner, 'Augustine and... Western mysticism' (1987), Essay I.
[125] A. Louth, *op. cit.*, p.143.

through the soul, away from the body, towards the soul's source of existence[126]. In Book X of his *Confessions,* Augustine speaks of the interior man, the soul, as superior to the body, and of God as "higher than the highest element in my soul", so that "[t]hrough my soul I will ascend to him"[127]. Similarly, Plotinus exhorts others to forgo the material and rather to "mount to its archetype, to the yet more authentic sphere" for if man "is able to follow the leading of his higher spirit, he rises: he lives… that noblest part of himself… until he has attained the height"[128]. Despite this introversion, however, what we see in both these 'mystics' is something of a focus on the soul (understood as being in some way distinct from the body) as the vehicle for ascending to the divine from whence it originated, made achievable through the forgoing of the material; it is difficult not to see the similarity between this 'mysticism' and the 'Gnostic' mythologies we have highlighted[129].

Such an observation perhaps makes more plausible the hypothesis of Jonas, that what we find in the 'Gnostic' mythologies are essentially objectified expressions of that experience and understanding which in the later 'mystics' is expressed subjectively as an internal ascent; one might express it as the objective vision of the 'ascent *of the* soul' and the corollary subjective vision of 'ascent *through one's own* soul'. Indeed, for Jonas, the 'Gnostic' mythologies represent "a decisive step" in the transition from the Hellenistic mystery religions to 'mysticism'[130]. Stroumsa convincingly develops this argument further, proposing that by the time of late Antiquity, "both Augustine and Plotinus seem to reflect a major paradigmatic shift, [one] which was transforming the language of mystical expression and its basic metaphors"[131]. Thus the 'mystic' experience, argues Stroumsa, becomes expressed in a combination of metaphors: the pattern of ascent (such as we find in the 'Gnostic' mythologies) is maintained, but its achievement through a literal practice of descent, as found in several Hellenistic mystery religions (e.g. descending into a sacred cave, thereby mirroring the descent of the divine into creation which makes the 'mystical' experience possible),

[126] A. Louth, *op. cit.*, pp.133f.
[127] Augustine, *Confessions* X.6.9-7.12 (1991), pp.183-186.
[128] *Enneads* III.4.3, V.1.4 (1956), pp.187, 372f.
[129] C.f. also our comments above (pp.4f.) on the uses of 'dualism' in 'Gnostic' thought. Of course, we might also mention here something of the potentially practical methodologies of ascent in 'Merkabah mysticism', which itself may have had an influence on the Kabbalah. C.f. N. Deutsch, *Gnostic Imagination* (1995), pp.18-55, 68-79. See also pp.171ff., below.
[130] H. Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism' (1969), pp.315-329. Jonas also raises the question as to whether the later systems of the Kabbalah could have been the product of similar objective expressions of 'mystical' experiences. Although c.f. J.D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism* (2001), pp.93-125.
[131] G.G. Stroumsa, 'Mystical Descents' (1995), pp.139-154.

becomes understood in a sense of ‘descending inside’: i.e. ‘interiorising’ the experience[132]. Thus the original pattern whereby the descent of the divine makes possible humanity’s ascent to the divine is retained; where, however, the adherent of a ‘mystery’ religion might once have literally descended into a sacred place in order to better enable a spiritual ascent, the ‘mystic’ will now descend into their self in order to make that ascent to the divine. As Augustine expressed it, “*Intus Deus altus est*, the God within is the God above”[133].

Although we can scarcely definitively prove the particularly philosophical elements of this argument, it does nonetheless highlight for us that the mythologies of the ‘Gnostic’ systems and the interior ascents of ‘mystic’ figures need not be seen as separate entities. In fact, although the ‘Gnostic’ mythologies do generally envisage ascent as a post-mortem event, in so doing they are perhaps still in line with the thought of our ‘mystics’. To be sure, whilst both Plotinus and Augustine do conceive and experience ‘mystical’ ascent through the soul whilst the body still lives, they are also aware that such an experience is only transitory, and is at best a precursor and preparation for the post-mortem (or, within Augustine’s Christian context, potentially post-eschaton) fulfilment of this experience; only when one has died in this world can one fully and permanently ascend to the divine:

> “At that moment I saw your ‘invisible nature understood through the things which are made’ [Romans 1:20]. But I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I returned to my customary condition.”
>
> Augustine, *Confessions*[134]

We can see then a certain correspondence between the mythologies of the ‘Gnostics’ and the ‘mystic’ conceptions of Augustine and Plotinus: ultimately, all are agreed that a full and true ascent to the divine is only possible once one is fully divested of this world. The flip side of this statement is that whilst in this world one may still work towards approaching that post-mortem state, and indeed potentially increase the chances of achieving it; perhaps unsurprisingly, we also find all in agreement on this conception. We have already noted that for Augustine and Plotinus the active contemplation of the divine potentially serves as something of a precursor to the true post-mortem experience; surely then we should be cautious about assuming that any ‘Gnostic’ whose mythology was focused on the post-

[132] G.G. Stroumsa, ‘Mystical Descents’ (1995), pp.139-154.
[133] Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 130.12. Cited in G.G. Stroumsa, ‘Mystical Descents’ (1995), p.147.
[134] VII.17.23 (1991), pp.127f. C.f. *Enneads* VI.9.10.

mortem ascent of the soul would not therefore have practised some attempt at ‘mystic’ ascent whilst still alive. Indeed, it is worth recalling here our earlier *caveat* that, given our lack of evidence, we can say very little about praxis amongst the ‘Gnostics’, and we should certainly not assume that all who fall under this wide heading shared the same, or even a similar, ritual life. We might, however, indicate a few potentialities within specific examples.

We have previously mentioned the thesis of Hans-Martin Schenke that frequent references to baptism within the ‘Sethian’ literature might suggest that at least some ‘Sethians’ had a well-established baptismal practice[135]. Although not as well attested, Schenke also considers that there may have been for some ‘Sethians’ a “second sacrament, higher in degree and [unlike baptism] repeatable”, namely a “mystery of cultic ascension”[136]. Of course this is largely speculation, related to the frequent references in the texts to ascent, and particularly the ‘Sethian’ references indicating that a there is a heavenly counterpart to the earthly baptism, so that the one ritual necessarily prefigures the other[137]. We might also mention the possibility that the ‘Valentinian’ *Gos. Phil.* refers to some sort of marriage ritual predicated on relations to the heavens, but we recall our assessment that such a statement is tenuous at best[138].

Greater utility might perhaps be found in the work of the great scholar of ‘mysticism’ Ninian Smart. Although Smart’s work generally avoided a strict definition of how one might define an experience as ‘mystical’, there are, as Philip C. Almond locates, a few examples where Smart provides some grounds for definition[139]. In particular, Smart proposes that:

> “...a mystical experience is one which is reported by a class of persons generally referred to as ‘mystics’ – such men as Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, Plotinus, the Buddha, Śaṅkara and so on. Such men are characterized by spirituality and asceticism and pursue a certain method.”[140]

What Smart’s argument suggests is that the ‘mystical’ experience, unlike the simple ‘religious experience’ is not something that just happens; rather, those who would have such experience (i.e. the ‘mystics’) must practise a certain lifestyle, and follow certain methods in order to enable such experience. In other words, what Smart proposes is a definite element of

[135] See above, pp.24-27.
[136] H.-M. Schenke, *op. cit.* C.f. A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.34-51.
[137] Schenke cites in particular *Tri. Prot.* 45:17f.; 48:18-21.
[138] See above, p.31.
[139] P.C. Almond, *Mystical Experience* (1982), pp.43-68.
[140] N. Smart, *Reasons and Faiths* (1958), p.55. Despite Smart’s use of gender exclusive language here, I doubt he meant to suggest that only men might be ‘mystics’.

praxis to ‘mysticism’. This suggestion corresponds to Jonas’s argument that, as the move from mystery religion to ‘mysticism’ occurs (via our ‘Gnostic’ mythologies), those sacramental elements necessary for the earlier religion retain their necessity, but are transformed into individual preparations for ‘mystic’ experience; thus “ascetic preparations of all kinds exchange their ritualistic for a more directly personal function in the life of the self”[141].

Evelyn Underhill has devoted a great amount of attention to the question of ‘how mysticism is done’, and to the life lived, and the practical preparation of the person which, “however attained, is an essential character of the true mystic; without it, contemplation is an impossibility or a sham”[142]. Underhill gives as an example the ‘Christian mystic’, for whom charity and asceticism are necessary elements of the truly ‘mystic’ life. In this context, it is interesting to recall our earlier comments about the relative ubiquity of asceticism amongst the ‘Gnostic’ traditions. To be sure, we have already noted that asceticism is scarcely a unique identifier where group distinction or motive is concerned, but the presence of such a practice, frequently associated with ‘mysticism’, in many ‘Gnostic’ traditions should not perhaps be easily overlooked. Interestingly, Underhill is adamant that for the ‘mystic’ asceticism must be, and originally was regarded as, a “gymnastic of the soul, an education in those manly virtues of self-denial and endurance without which the spiritual life is merely an exquisite form of hedonism”, but laments that too often in Christian tradition it has come to be identified with mortification of the body[143]. Of course, even one who practises asceticism in this latter way may well be considered a ‘mystic’ by other definitions: it is worth remembering that both Underhill’s, and to some extent Smart’s argument is strongly predicated towards a very particular conception of the ‘mystic’ [144]. Where ‘Jewish mysticism’ is concerned, a somewhat different picture emerges. Eliott Wolfson agrees to an extent with Smart, essentially extending the latter’s definition to the ‘Jewish mystic’ who, like all ‘mystics’, is to be distinguished from the recipient of another type of religious experience by their use of “special techniques of a meditative sort... to induce the desired frame of mind”; for the ‘Jewish mystic’, however, these techniques do not necessarily include

[141] H. Jonas, ‘Myth and Mysticism’ (1969), pp.315-329.
[142] E. Underhill, ‘Essentials of Mysticism’ (1981), pp. 26-41.
[143] *Ibid.*
[144] For instance, c.f. Augustine’s (albeit biased) account of the mythological asceticism of the Manichaean *electi* in, for example, *Confessions* III.10.18.

asceticism[145]. The reason for this is relatively obvious, in that much of Judaism does not *generally* require asceticism (as defined in the narrow sense), as its utility is largely superseded by the requirement for halakhic observance[146]. Thus, for example, on the whole one does not find asceticism in Kabbalah; rather there is the importance of the halakha, obedience to which is motivated by a re-interpreted concept of *kavvanah*, as both the means for obtaining and (especially in the Lurianic system) rendering effectual the 'mystic' experience[147].

The importance of this observation, therefore, is as a caution against too hastily denying the 'mystic' credentials of 'Gnostics' on the basis of an asceticism primarily practised as mortification. Certainly some 'Gnostic' traditions (especially those with particularly 'dualist' thought) most likely practised asceticism in this way, although it is also worth noting that some texts, such as the *Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII.4), do express a conception of asceticism akin to the 'gymnastic of the soul'[148]. What we have seen above, however, is that potentially more important for the definition of a 'mystic' is that they utilise a technique: precisely what that technique is seems almost irrelevant. The person who wishes to stress the necessity of asceticism (especially practised in a particular way) for 'mysticism' must also then admit that their definition excludes many forms of Judaism from the realm of the 'mystic'[149]. In any case, let us here stress that although the presence amongst several 'Gnostic' traditions of a widespread practice which was associated, amongst other things, with 'mysticism' proves little, it does however provide further grounds for the necessity of properly considering the 'mystic' credentials of at least some 'Gnostics'.

Some brief remarks should also be made here concerning what seems to me to be a reasonably common use of language between certain 'Gnostics', the Kabbalah, and indeed

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145 E.R. Wolfson, 'Jewish Mysticism' (1995), pp.133-169.

146 To properly draw a distinction between asceticism and the halakha would be a far more complex task than I wish to undertake here. As a basic distinction one *might* argue that, in general, although it is calculated to ultimately lead to happiness, asceticism is understood as a chore, a means justified by the end. The halakha by contrast is *meant* to be regarded as a joy to observe, with the process being roughly as joyful as the result. C.f. M. Idel, 'Rabbinism versus Kabbalism' (1991), pp.281-296.

147 See D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, *passim* (and especially chapter 8).

148 The matter is somewhat complicated by debate as to whether *Silvanus* is properly 'Gnostic', purely 'Hermetic', or 'Hermetic' but with enough correspondences to 'Gnostic' thought for it to be included in Nag Hammadi (*if* one argues that this was a 'Gnostic' library). C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81 and G.G. Stroumsa, 'Mystical Descents' (1995), pp.139-154.

149 They must also admit that such an assessment is a matter of modern definition rather than ancient understanding; although one might feel that the practitioner of asceticism for mortification *should* not be aiming for a 'mystic' experience, that scarcely proves that this is not their aim.

that which is proposed as constituting 'mysticism' writ large. Steven Katz notes that paradox, and in particular "the paradoxicality of negation" is a favoured "exegetical and descriptive technique of mystical authors"[150]. Indeed, in both 'Gnostic' systems and the Kabbalah we certainly find a certain use of negation and avoidance of description where the highest God is concerned, but whilst Meister Eckhart, for example, spoke of the ineffable God (e.g. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.6), who can only be talked about paradoxically through the *via negativa*, our systems address the problem slightly differently: both 'Gnostics' and Kabbalists use negation to speak of the highest ineffable God, but rather than simply stating that which the highest is not (or indeed that which the highest is the perfect form of, and thus utterly distinct from its imperfect earthly form), they assert the ineffability of the highest by projecting those attributes which might otherwise be ascribed to it to a lower level of divinity (so to speak). In the case of Kabbalah, this involves the devolution of attributes and names which might otherwise be ascribed to the highest God (instead referred to as אין סוף, *Eyn Sof*, 'the Infinite') onto the ten *Sefirot*, conceived of (in a sense) as the personifications of these attributes; it is then understood that it is these which are referred to whenever scripture uses words to talk of 'God'. Ariel cautions, however, that as the Kabbalah is concerned to maintain the traditional Jewish unity of the monotheistic deity, the *Sefirot* are not to be understood as separate divinities (they are still part of God, albeit a lower part), and that only the totality of the ten *Sefirot* + *Eyn Sof* is to be truly regarded as 'God'[151].

Unlike these strictly 'Jewish mystics', however, several proposed 'Gnostic' systems (most notably those of the so-called 'Sethians' and 'Ophites') had no such qualms over abrogating monotheism, and were thus able, as Pearson's work demonstrates, to fully devolve the personifications and attributes of God witnessed to in scripture onto a lesser, separate Demiurge, a task which was most explicitly achieved in the literature by having the lower creature perform those actions and speak those words which were in the Old Testament ascribed to God (what Pearson calls a type of 'Gnostic' midrash)[152]. In this context, it may be interesting to note Stroumsa's thesis that Aḥer, the rabbinic arch-heretic (who was also said in the *Babli* to be one of the 'mystic' "[f]our [who] entered a garden") may have been guilty of a 'Gnostic' heresy; that is to say, his sin may have been to push the anti-

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[150] S.T. Katz, 'Mysticism... Sacred Scripture' (2000), pp.7-67.
[151] D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.66-74, 82-85. C.f. *Zohar* II.42b, 64b; G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.10-16.
[152] B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions' (2006), pp. 39-51. C.f. *Apoc. John* NHC II.11:15-22, *Test. Tru.* 48:1-49:7, Ex. 7:8-12; 20:5; 34:14, Num. 21:9, Deut. 5:9, Josh. 24:19 Compare also Deut. 4:24 and Hippolytus's account of Simon's teaching (*Refutation* 6.4).

anthropomorphism of God too far, to the point of postulating a Demiurge, thereby passing beyond the acceptable limits of basic Jewish monotheism[153]. We shall in any case return to this possibility at a later juncture, when we consider more deeply the potential ideological connection between 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah.

Now, developing the above points regarding the use of negation, we note that, by definition, language is a problematic tool for the 'mystic', who after all aims at the ineffable. That is not to say, however, that the 'mystic' necessarily accepts an absolute rejection of the utility of language (were this the case, then we would have no 'mystic' literature to work with). In a perceptive article, Katz demonstrates that although the 'mystic' may be forced to employ "a language [that] he or she knows to be... hopelessly inadequate to the descriptive task at hand", nonetheless they do manage to employ it, even if only in the extreme case of description by negation[154]. Katz proposes, however, that 'mystics' more frequently use language as a meditative technique: far from rejecting it, a 'mystic' might instead use the contemplation of language itself as a means to reach that which the language fails to fully describe. This may be achieved through repetition of mantras, or even through intensive contemplation on the very alphabet and its individual letters, which form the components of language[155]. Katz further argues that perhaps the most positive application of this method is to be found in 'Jewish mysticism', particularly as expressed in the Kabbalah: the conception found therein of the Hebrew alphabet as a quite literally divine system, and indeed the means by which God created, implies that for the 'Jewish mystic' the Hebrew language is less a tool for ascent, but more a divine object, in itself to be ascended to[156]. The language cannot therefore be considered intrinsically inadequate to express the 'mystic' experience; rather it is the human attempting to use this language who is inadequate. It is in this context then that the Kabbalist also attempts, as part of the 'mystic' experience, to penetrate through the 'outer garment' of the Torah (i.e. the words as one literally reads them) to reach the 'true Torah' contained within, a task which frequently involves both the rearranging of the letters of the Torah, as well as complex gematria[157].

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[153] G.G. Stroumsa, 'Aḥer' (1981), pp.808-818; *b.Ḥagigah* 14b. C.f. *Tosefta Ḥagigah* 2:1; D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.26-28.
[154] S.T. Katz, 'Mystical Speech' (1992), pp.3-41.
[155] *Ibid.*
[156] S.T. Katz, 'Mysticism... Sacred Scripture' (2000), pp.7-67.
[157] E.g. *Zohar* III.152a. We shall return to this point momentarily, in the context of allegorical re-interpretation of scripture by 'mystics'.

Of course, whilst the Kabbalah may represent the most positive extreme of this process, Katz also identifies comparable techniques in the utilisation of language in other 'mystic' traditions: one finds a certain amount of linguistic deconstruction in the Qur'ānic exegesis of Sufi 'mystics', who also engage in somewhat similar meditation on the letters of the alphabet; this latter technique is also located by Katz in the practices of Plotinus, as well as those of the Pythagoreans[158]. To these we might also add an analogous example from amongst the 'Gnostics', namely the alphabetical and numerical speculations attributed to the 'Valentinian' Markos and his followers by Irenaeus (*Haer.* I.14-16)[159].

If we have thus far largely argued for those characteristics which certain 'Gnostics' share both with general conceptions of 'mysticism' and to a certain extent Kabbalah, we now turn more towards those areas in which we find 'Gnostics' straying away from the broad definitions of 'mysticism'; yet, as we shall see, it is precisely in so doing that they move (at least on an ideological level) even closer to Kabbalah.

It may be apt here to provide a brief discussion of Scholem's particular model of religious traditions developing towards 'mysticism'; of course, this model is by no means considered definitive, and is open to dispute, but it arguably provides at least a useful illustration of how the 'mysticism' of a particular religious tradition *might* be situated within that tradition's historical context. Scholem proposes a three-tiered progression, in which the initial stage of a religion is to be seen as a 'mythic' stage. In this stage, the world is conceived as "being full of gods whom man encounters at every step and whose presence can be experienced without recourse to ecstatic meditation"[160]. In this first stage (which one might link to systems of 'shamanism' or 'animalism') 'mysticism' is unnecessary, as the divine can be freely encountered within the realms of mortal life. It is only in the second stage (which chronologically follows this 'mythic' stage) that a "vast abyss" is created between man and the divine. Scholem sees this stage as the emergence of religion in its "classical form", institutionalised, separating the now-transcendent divine from humanity[161]. In this stage, it is only the 'voice' of the divine that is able to cross the divide, establishing revelation as the means by which man knows the divine. Thus, we see a definite shift from a religion which

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[158] S.T. Katz, 'Mystical Speech' (1992), pp.3-41.
[159] Notably, Scholem [*Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.36-42] also refers to these doctrines of Markos, relating them to the traditions of *Shi'ur Qomah* (literally 'the measurement of the body [of God]') speculation. C.f. further pp.183f., below.
[160] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.7.
[161] *Ibid.*

holds its locus in nature, to one centred upon the "moral and religious action of men", as defined by divine revelation, and worked out in the reality of history[162]. It is in such a situation, Scholem proposes, that 'mysticism' arises as the third stage: the impetus of the 'mystic' is to recapture the encounter of the first stage, without, however, obliterating the developments of the second. 'Mysticism' does not, therefore, deny the existence of the abyss, but rather seeks to cross it[163]. The 'mystic' does not typically eschew their 'institutional' religion, but rather seeks a new level of encounter with the divine *through* that religion (and thus will conceive of their experience in the terms of their religion)[164].

Now, of course, I do not deny that Scholem's model may well be questioned: in particular it seems perhaps to be an overly dogmatic description of religious development, one which does not fully account for the fact that not all religions necessarily develop an 'institutional' framework which supplants the 'mythic' stage. It is for other scholars more qualified than I to answer whether, for example, Buddhism (in all its variants) or Shintō can be said to have ever developed into this 'classic' form. The particular utility of Scholem's model for us, however, is as an illustration of the fact that, in general, the 'Gnostic' evidence we have hitherto considered is most comfortably located, like the Kabbalah, in the third, 'mystic' stage. It is worth emphasising here that our previous discussions of 'Gnostic mythologies' should not be taken as implying that 'Gnostics' are to be located within the 'mythic' stage. As we have seen, a 'Gnostic' worldview (to the extent such a thing may be said to exist) conceives of a separation between the human and the divine that is more than mere geography; for the 'Gnostic', the divine sphere is not so approachable that Bellerophon may fly up to it on Pegasus, nor that the Æsir and Vanir might prevent the ingress of outsiders to Ásgarð by quite *literally* building a large stone wall. In this context then, we might be justified in seeing the 'Gnostic' mythologies as more akin to those of Plato, seen to some extent as symbols, pointing to the ultimate truths beyond them[165].

Rather than being part of the 'mythic' stage, therefore, we note that the 'Gnostic' thought streams generally recognise the absolute divide between the human and the divine, a divide which is, if anything, strengthened by the ascription of creation to a Demiurge. As we have seen, however, the 'Gnostics' move out of this 'institutional' stage by seeking to cross the

[162] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.7f.
[163] *Ibid.*, pp.8-10.
[164] *Ibid.* C.f. W.P. Alston, 'Literal and Nonliteral' (1992), pp.80-102.
[165] C.f. W.R. Inge, *op. cit.*, pp.130-133.

divide and facilitate an ascent to the divine, whilst still expressing this action within the terms of the 'institution'; as Scholem notes, the 'mystic' who acts thus obviously runs the risk of interpreting the religion in a way considered unacceptable, and thereby straying, in the eyes of the 'institutional' form, into heresy[166]. In later chapters, we shall consider the hugely interesting question of *which* 'institutional religion' the 'Gnostics' might be seen as developing from, but for the moment however, it is sufficient to observe that the 'Gnostics' seem to sit within the 'mystic' stage of Scholem's schema just as well as do the Kabbalists (around whom, of course, Scholem constructed his theory).

Developing this point, it is worth remarking here that in this chapter I have generally avoided speaking of the 'mystic' ascents of both the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah in terms of *union* with the divine. This may at first seem curious, as the ecstatic union between man and the divine is frequently cited as being one of, if not *the* central characteristic of 'mysticism'; indeed, Ruth Majercik even goes so far as to deny that Plato could be viewed as a 'mystic', solely on the basis that his writings do not convey "any sense of ecstatic union with the Supreme"[167]. Now, in general, we have little real evidence of any such sense of human-divine union in the 'Gnostic' literature. Even where a post-mortem ascent to the divine sphere, seen as the *telos* of all ascents is envisaged, we do not commonly find a conception that at the end of this ascent a union with the highest power is to be expected[168]. In this context, it is further instructive to examine the role of *love* in the 'Gnostic' systems. Often in combination with the conception of divine union, the scholarly literature on 'mysticism' frequently stresses the importance of the operation of love between man and the divine. In particular, Underhill argues that:

> "God is always personal..., an object of love, capable of response...[who] demands and receives from him [i.e. the 'mystic'] a total self-donation. This sense of a double movement, a self-giving on the divine side answering to the self-giving on the human side, is found in all great mysticism."[169]

To be sure, the conception of love is found within certain areas of the 'Gnostic' literature, most commonly expressed in bridal language; a sense, as it were, of celestial union with

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[166] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.9f.
[167] R. Majercik, *op. cit.* See also M. Smith, 'Nature and Meaning' (1981), pp.19-25; T. Penelhum, 'Unity and Diversity' (1981), pp.438-448; D. Knowles, 'Mysticism' (1981), pp.521-528. C.f., however, P.C. Almond, *op. cit.*, pp.144-146.
[168] C.f. above, pp.4-9, 39ff.
[169] E. Underhill, *op. cit.* See also M. Smith, *op. cit.*; D. Knowles, *op. cit.*

some aspect of the divine (not necessarily the highest God) in a form analogous to marriage. We recall the use of the 'bridal chamber' in *Gos. Phil.*, which might perhaps be compared with the conception of Christ as 'bridegroom of the soul', common amongst the medieval Christian 'mystics'[170]. Overall, however, such usage of love is scarcely ubiquitous within the 'Gnostic' literature; perhaps even more striking, such reference to love as there is tends to be wholly one way. That is to say, whilst examples of man's love for the divine might be located, the idea that the highest God expresses a deep love for humanity is notably absent; there is no 'double movement' of love here. Indeed, far beyond 'mystic' definitions, even such a statement as John 3:16 seems rather at odds with any general 'Gnostic' picture. It is worth noting that in the accounts of the highest God's intervention in the world for humanity, the fate of mankind is not usually listed as a direct motivation; rather it is the attitude of the highest towards σοφία (which is not necessarily an attitude of love; *mercy* is also a factor) that leads to the intervention[171]. Furthermore, the appeal of σοφία is transmitted through, or at least supported by, other intermediary heavenly figures, whilst the intervention once granted is not transmitted directly to the world, but rather to σοφία, so that she might atone for her error[172].

Given the above observations, it does not seem to me unreasonable to hypothesise that the general absence in 'Gnostic' thought of the idea of the highest God uniting with or even loving humanity (an idea which, we are told, is crucial to 'mysticism') may be due in part to the immense gulf between the highest and the created world found in 'Gnostic' systems. The logical corollary of interposing any sort of demiurgical figure between the divine and the human is the elevation of that divine to such a sphere of transcendence as to render impossible a full human relationship with it. This is but a theory; what is more important to note here is that much of the Kabbalah similarly lacks many elements of these 'typically mystic' concepts of union and a 'double movement' of love. The particular details of certain Kabbalistic systems will be discussed in more detail later, but let us for the moment note that, as with the demiurgical figures of the 'Gnostics', the interposition of the *Sefirot* in Kabbalah renders more difficult any union with the Infinite. To be sure, some Kabbalists did dare to posit such an idea, but the majority, as Ariel notes, did not conceive of anything higher than

[170] E.g. Bernard of Clairvaux's *De amore Dei* or *The Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ* by St. John of the Cross. C.f. also the use of marital imagery in the New Testament, e.g. Eph. 6:22-33, Rev. 19:7-9.
[171] E.g. *Apoc. John* NHC II.13:32-14:13.
[172] *Apoc. John* NHC II.13:32-14:13. C.f. NHC IV.22:5-7.

uniting with one of the *Sefirot*[173]. Similarly, whilst concepts of love and sexual union are potent factors in many Kabbalistic systems (especially the 'erotic union', *zivvug*, seen as a high level of *devekut*, the 'cleaving' of one's soul to the divine), such union rarely extends beyond the *Sefirot*; as Ariel highlights, the most common target for such union is the *Shekhinah* (i.e. *Malkuth*, the lowest *sefirah*), which is often described as a 'bridegroom'[174]. Indeed, it is quite logical for notions of love and erotic/marital union to be largely restricted to the *Sefirot*, as it is here that the male/female pairings of the divine are identified (recall that the Infinite must be, by definition, gender-neutral). More shall be said on this later, but it is here worth briefly considering two other points. Firstly, if the general schema of the Kabbalah envisages a process of creation through emanation (see above, p.40), then we should not be surprised that love is absent as a motivation for the highest divine action; in line with the philosophical background of the time, it was perhaps possible for the Kabbalist to view such emanation as a natural facet of the Infinite. That is to say, it is in a sense part of the essential nature of the Infinite to emanate: motivation for doing so is not a relevant concern. It is also worth bearing in mind, as our second point, that the Kabbalah generally existed within the bounds of normative Judaism, and postulated the *Sefirot* out of a desire to not allow the 'mystical' experience of the divine to impinge on the transcendence of the monotheistic deity. In this context then, the very idea of a full union with the divine becomes unthinkable[175].

If we have seen, therefore, that the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah seem closer to each other than they do to any general conception of 'mysticism' in respect to the ideas of divine union and reciprocal love, we might also extend this conclusion to their respective uses and conceptions of writing and scripture. We have already discussed the 'typically mystic' use of language found in both the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah, but we might also note that, unlike most 'mystic' traditions, neither of them seems to have produced much in the way of 'mystic autobiography'. Whilst we have in other traditions writings from the hands of the 'mystics' themselves detailing their *personal* experiences (e.g. Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, and even Porphyry and Augustine), we have little of this type of literature from either the 'Gnostics' (whose surviving writings are mostly anonymous) or the

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[173] D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.207-209.
[174] *Ibid.*, pp.208-210. See also pp.155ff. on the use of the *Sefirot* as part of a marital motif in Kabbalistic Sabbath liturgy, elements of which still survive in modern normative Judaism. C.f. B. McGinn, 'Language of Love' (1992), pp.202-235; G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.122f.
[175] D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, p.208. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.13ff.

Kabbalists (whose writings are often pseudepigraphical). Indeed, as we can plainly see from our prior observations of the literature, Scholem's observations in reference to the Kabbalah apply equally well to the 'Gnostics':

> "They [the Kabbalists] aim at describing the realm of Divinity and the other objects of the contemplation [*sic*] in an impersonal way... [t]hey glory in objective description and are deeply averse to letting their own personalities intrude into the picture. ...In general, it may be said that in the long history of Kabbalism, the number of Kabbalists whose teachings and writings bear the imprint of a strong personality is surprisingly small..."[176]

In place of this 'typically mystic' description of personal experience, what we find instead are objective speculative accounts, strongly based on scripture. It is somewhat interesting to contrast this situation with the argument of Friedrich Schleiermacher, that the truly religious man (who, for Schleiermacher, is one defined by his own experience of the divine) "is not the person who believes in a holy writing... but only the one who needs none and probably could make one for himself"[177]. Certainly, both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalists produced their own writings, but I would argue that these were in the main probably not conceived of as any sort of replacement scripture or revealed knowledge. Rather, they were essentially meditations on and exegesis of already existent scripture, albeit in some cases perhaps guided by 'mystic' knowledge. Even in these cases, however, this knowledge appears not as a new act of revelation, but rather as an act of *realisation*, coming to understand properly that which is expressed in the already revealed (but apparently not yet understood) scripture.

To elucidate, the scriptural basis underlying much of the 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic writing should already be apparent. Moshe Idel for one has demonstrated how the *Zohar* is essentially a heavily mythologised exegesis of scripture; the same could easily be said for much 'Gnostic' literature[178]. Indeed, Pearson in particular has highlighted how several important Nag Hammadi texts are essentially examples of 'Gnostic' midrash on the Old Testament[179]. It is also especially interesting to note, as Louis Bouyer does, that our first attested usage of the term μυστικός with a meaning akin to that which it holds today (as

[176] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.15f. With the 'Gnostics', it is well worth remembering that almost all our knowledge of specific individuals derives from the heresiological accounts, rather than the extant 'Gnostic' literature.
[177] F. Schleiermacher, 'Second Speech' (1988), pp.96-140.
[178] M. Idel, 'Zohar as Exegesis' (2000), pp.87-100. C.f. M. Fishbane, 'Zohar and Exegetical Spirituality' (2000), pp.101-117.
[179] B.A. Pearson, 'Gnostic Interpretation of the Old Testament' (1980), pp.311-319; Idem., 'Biblical Exegesis' (2006), pp.29-38; 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions' (2006), pp.39-51; 'Jewish Elements' (2006), pp.124-135.

opposed to its older usage in relation to mystery religions) is to be found in Origen (with analogues in Clement), in the context of the interpretation of scripture (the 'mystical' interpretation being one potential level of meaning)[180]. We might then with some justification argue that the literature of both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah is not to be considered revelation (something which, according to Scholem, is to be primarily located in the second stage), but rather the result of a 'mystically-inspired' *realisation* of what the already revealed sacred scripture really says (i.e. a 'mystical interpretation' of scripture), often accomplished with the aid of a symbolic mythology[181].

Now, on this conclusion it needs to be said that the situation is somewhat more ambiguous in the particular case of the 'Sethian Gnostics', as the 'Sethian' literature often explicitly identifies itself as being *revealed*, either to or by Seth[182]. On the one hand, Seth's function as revealer can hardly be denied; as Pearson demonstrates, it is intimately tied to his function as redeemer, since the 'Gnosis' revealed is to an extent considered salvific in itself[183]. On the other hand, however, it must be noted that, as we saw above, the content of this 'revelation' is generally predicated on a re-interpretation of already revealed scripture. Even if one views the 'Sethians' as largely rejecting the Old Testament, it cannot be denied that the literature still appeals to it (albeit in a re-interpreted form) to provide authority. In this sense, the attempt of, for example, *Apoc. John* (NHC II.15:1-3) to prove the existence of Yaldabaoth and the multiple archons by reference to Genesis 1:26 can be seen as the flip side of the attempt by *Jubilees* (2:1-3ff.) to explain this verse by positing that several angels assisted in the creation. Nor should it be overlooked that the very ascription of an especial role to Seth is dependent upon exegesis of Genesis 4:25 and 5:3. We cannot, however, really resolve this ambiguity, as to do would ultimately require some knowledge of how these 'Gnostic' texts were used by the so-called 'Sethians'; i.e. were they viewed, and thus revered, as revealed scripture, or were they understood as being more 'mystical interpretations' which showed the correct way to read the already existent Old Testament writings? Unfortunately, our current evidence does not allow us to conclude one way or the other[184]. As a side note, it is worth

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180 L. Bouyer, 'Mysticism' (1981), pp.42-55. C.f. Clement, *Stromateis* V.6 and Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.15 (compare also the Greek text of *De Principiis* IV).

181 C.f. M.J. Edwards, 'Naming of the Naassenes' (1996), pp.74-80.

182 See especially B.A. Pearson, 'Seth in Gnostic Literature' (2006), pp.52-83.

183 *Ibid.*

184 Of course, Epiphanius's evidence [*Panarion* 26; 39; 40] that certain groups composed, accumulated, and made use of books attributed to Seth does little to resolve this ambiguity. He does, however, bear witness to the practise of Old Testament re-interpretation amongst 'Gnostic' groups (e.g. 26.6.1-4).

recalling that whilst the *Apoc. John* at first appears to be revelatory, contained as it is within a frame story of the ascended Christ's appearance to John, it is open to debate whether this frame story is in fact a later 'Christianising' addition to a text which originally lacked this revelatory setting[185].

Interestingly, however, we may be able to mitigate this ambiguity a little by comparison with the Kabbalah. We have already remarked upon the similarity between instances of the 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic literature, and we do have evidence to at least make a reasonable argument that such literature was not generally understood within the Kabbalah as being revelatory. Like the normative Judaism within which it sat, Kabbalah viewed the Torah given at Sinai as the full and complete revelation; as we highlighted above (pp.45-47) the aim of the Kabbalists and their writings was thus not to supplant the Torah with any new revelation, but rather to 'mystically interpret' the given revelation (often through the use of gematria and other linguistic devices), in order to penetrate to its true depths, and to understand what it said beneath the outer facade of its literal text. As Scholem put it, to the Kabbalist the Torah is "a living organism animated by a secret life which streams and pulsates below the crust of its literal meaning". The Torah is not a static text; rather, "it is to be regarded as the living incarnation of the divine wisdom which eternally sends out new rays of light"[186]. It was in part this understanding of the Torah as a revelation already given, only waiting to be comprehended, which enabled the Kabbalah to remain within a normative Judaism which had generally accepted that the age of revelation had passed[187].

In any case, we have hopefully shown that both in the matter of their own literature, as well as in the related understanding of the use of scripture, the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah seem closer to each other than either of them do to those 'mystics' who produced highly personalised accounts. Indeed, we might further argue that in applying their experiences not to new revelation (which, as Scholem postulates, largely occurs within the second stage), but to approaching a deeper understanding of their own tradition, both the 'Gnostics' and the

[185] B.A. Pearson, '"Jewish Gnostic" Literature' (1986), pp.15-35. C.f. A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.45-56.

[186] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.14. In line with this approach, as Scholem notes [pp.28-34], the Kabbalists also evinced a similarly intense relationship with both the halakha and the aggadah, and even the liturgy.

[187] E.g. the well known account in *b.Baba Metzi'a* 59b. C.f. *Tosefta Sotah* 13:2; G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (2001), pp.61-63, 71-74. In comparison, it might be noted that the 'orthodox' Church in the second century also underwent a similar debate, most fully played out in the controversy regarding Montanus et al. and the 'New Prophecy'. C.f. also p.138, below, on the literal meaning of *kabbalah* as 'reception'.

Kabbalah sit well within the third, 'mystic' stage; whilst the 'Sethian' evidence admittedly presents a potential challenge to this view, we have seen that the worst we can say on this point is that the 'Sethian' situation is ambiguous[188].

As a final point, it is worth emphasising that, whilst we have located a number of *potential* similarities between the 'Gnostics', the Kabbalah, and 'mysticism' writ large, this estimation scarcely *proves* anything definite as regards the 'mystic' nature of the 'Gnostics', not least because, as we have previously demonstrated, 'Gnostic' is a highly indistinct term. In order to highlight these potential similarities, we have been forced to an extent to 'pick and choose' between the 'Gnostic' evidence; indeed, it does not seem as though any *one* 'Gnostic' system truly encapsulates all the 'general mystical characteristics' we have identified. Although we have been able to make more general statements regarding Kabbalah, as we at least know that certain sources (e.g. the *Zohar*) enjoyed widespread currency amongst many individual Kabbalists, that luxury has largely been denied us where the 'Gnostics' are concerned. Certainly, it is not inconceivable that a source like the *Apoc. John* might have enjoyed a similar status amongst variant 'Gnostics', but we simply do not have the evidence to prove or disprove that theory.

Conclusion

Permit me here to once again stress that whether the 'Gnostics' should or should not be considered 'mystics' cannot really be our concern here. I have not attempted to suggest that the 'Gnostics' were a particularly defined entity, nor that such an entity was or was not 'mystic'. What we have hopefully seen, however, is that within the wide sphere of 'Gnostic' thought there existed a) several elements which are at least *prima facie* somewhat akin to Kabbalistic thought, and b) that there can also be identified, albeit divided between variant individuals and groups, many of those characteristics often considered 'typically mystic'. As this chapter's focus has chiefly been the provision of an essential prolegomena for our wider thesis, by necessity we have had to, at this point, avoid debating the correspondences between our variant traditions in any great depth; rather, we have sought to question the general omission of the 'Gnostic' evidence from the scholarship on 'mysticism' to date, and to postulate instead the possibility of a closer relationship between the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah

[188] It should again be stressed that our evidence for any 'Sethian' *community* is quite sparse; if we reduce 'Sethians' primarily to individuals, then the extent to which there was an agreed upon canon of supposedly revealed 'Sethian' texts becomes a moot point. C.f. pp.24ff., above.

than this omission would suggest. For the remainder of this thesis, therefore, we shall attempt to explore this possibility, turning to a deeper examination of the potential relationships between the ‘Gnostics’ and Kabbalah. Our examination of the correspondence between these two *and* the wider sphere of ‘mysticism’ must, however, end here; that task is one for another thesis. It is merely to be hoped that, in the future, should the ‘Gnostics’ (or any particular subdivision thereof) be excluded from the ‘mystic’ catalogues, they will at least receive an explanation as to *why*.

Chapter 4

Conceptual Correspondence: The 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' Sources and the *Bahir*

A

As indicated in the preceding chapter, we turn now to a much deeper examination of the potential relationships between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah. We previously noted that any analysis which wishes to move beyond the observation of certain *prima facie* correspondences between traditions must exercise from the outset a careful discernment regarding both sources and taxonomy, so as to ensure that parallels are not located on the basis of a homogeneity erroneously forced onto disparate groups and individuals[189]. In chapter 2 we concluded that the 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' 'groups' (or better, 'modes of thought') provided perhaps the surest footholds in the taxonomic quagmire that is the 'Gnostics'; furthermore, as we have already seen repeatedly, it is generally amongst sources and individuals locatable within these modes of thought that we find the most frequent occurrence of *prima facie* correspondences with the Kabbalah. As such, it seems wisest to make the evidence of the 'Sethians' and the 'Valentinians' the primary 'Gnostic' focus in our analysis.

Of course, a similar level of discernment must also be brought to bear on those traditions which we have hitherto referred to, somewhat homogeneously, as 'the Kabbalah'. Certainly, as we saw in chapter 1, a higher level of agreement can be demonstrated amongst the Kabbalists than amongst the 'Gnostics' (not least because of our greater, and indeed clearer, level of extant evidence for the former), but it seems germane to provide here greater clarification regarding the nature of those sources which we shall be examining. As we previously noted, since we have evidence of sources such as the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and the *Sefer Zohar* being used by various different Kabbalists, we can speak with some level of validity of a commonality between different expressions of Kabbalistic thought. Moshe Idel notes that "classics of Kabbalistic literature", such as the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*, were studied by other Kabbalists to the extent that one can say that a "peculiar feature of Kabbalah... was its scholastic nature". As he highlights, individual Kabbalists were often "profoundly influenced" by earlier Kabbalistic writings, "either absorbing their ideas and elaborating upon them in their own works or writing commentaries upon them"[190]. Similarly,

[189] C.f. S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania' (1962), pp.1-13.
[190] M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), p.256.

Scholem demonstrates throughout his *Origins of the Kabbalah* how certain sections of *Yetzirah* were adopted into the *Bahir*, both texts serving to at least partly inform the Kabbalistic circles of Provence and Gerona, as well as directly influencing the *Zohar*, and thus much subsequent Kabbalah, which was developed from this widely-received text[191]. Indeed, it is as well to remember that the *Zohar* was to achieve a canonical status akin to that of the Talmud, a status which it still enjoys to this day amongst certain groups of Orthodox Jews and Ḥasidim. Furthermore, as we previously noted, although at times certain Kabbalists came overly close to what might be considered heresy (especially in the working out of the pantheistic implications of their speculation), in the main they strove to remain within the confines of normative Judaism, an approach which, of course, somewhat reduced the scope for differentiation and divergence within the Kabbalah[192].

It would also be prudent to mention here something of the character of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a book which, as we noted above, was utilised by various Kabbalists (and was, for example, the subject of a Kabbalistic commentary by Isaac the Blind), and which is also our first extant text to refer to the *Sefirot*[193]. As we saw, however, this book does not generally appear to be a reliable *terminus a quo* for Kabbalah, as whilst the cosmological philosophy it espouses was certainly amenable to the Kabbalists, the book itself does not seem to share this interpretation. As Scholem highlights, the *Sefirot* appear in *Yetzirah* as a representation of the "ideal numbers that contain within them all the powers of creation", consistent with the etymology of the term from *safar*, ספר ('to count'), yet in the *Bahir*, they appear rather to "signify the aeons, the powers of God, which are also his attributes"[194]. As we previously noted, it is this latter interpretation of the *Sefirot* which was to become somewhat normative for Kabbalah; whilst their particular enumeration and conception could vary between Kabbalists, this general understanding of the nature of the *Sefirot* remains relatively stable, thus once again suggesting a certain level of consistency within the Kabbalah. To be sure, it

[191] On the relation of the *Bahir* to the *Zohar*, see also G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.212ff. Note also the references in the *Zohar* (particularly in the section known as מדרש רות הנעלם) to Rabbi Reḥumai, a pseudepigraphic speaker from the *Bahir*. C.f. Idem., *Origins* (1990), pp.52f.

[192] See above, pp.16f. C.f. M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.250-253. Regarding pantheism, see especially G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.252f., 409, n.19, where the post-*Zohar* thought of Moses Cordovero, expressed in the formula "God is all reality, but not all reality is God", is seen to be strikingly similar to the pantheistic ideas for which Spinoza was later condemned.

[193] See above, pp.15-17. C.f. also G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.81-83, 308f.

[194] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.81f. It is, however, worth noting that although this conception, which corresponds to the later Kabbalistic *Sefirot*, is first found in the *Bahir*, the book itself uses the term only in §87. Otherwise, it generally discusses these ideas through reference to the מדות (*middoth*, 'qualities/characteristics') of God, thereby evincing an ideological shift from the *Yetzirah*'s conception of primal numbers to one of divine potencies or attributes.

is worth stressing that the *Yetzirah* appears more as a work of 'natural philosophy', and our oldest extant commentary on it is in fact by Sa'adiah Gaon, who interpreted the work in line with his rationalist principles[195]. The *Yetzirah* thus seems to be more a work which was open to a 'mystical' or theosophic interpretation (and therefore was of great interest to many Kabbalists), rather than a work which was itself intrinsically or originally 'Kabbalistic'. Indeed, a similar estimation might be made of Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* (which itself discusses the *Yetzirah* in some depth in Book IV) and *The Duties of the Heart* by Baḥya ibn Paquda[196]. We can, therefore, reasonably conclude, with Scholem, that the *Bahir* (which first emerges in the late twelfth century) serves as a probable *terminus a quo* for Kabbalah, as it is the oldest of our extant sources to enumerate that which would become recognizable as the Kabbalistic concept of the *Sefirot*[197].

Now, it is also worth noting that a potential exists to roughly divide Kabbalah between the theosophical speculation of the sort found in the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*, and the perhaps more purely 'mystical' Kabbalah (which one might call 'ecstatic' or 'prophetic' Kabbalah) best typified by Abraham Abulafia[198]. Of course, I should not wish to overplay this distinction, nor to suggest that it in some way implies a strict division between a Kabbalah seen purely theoretically, and one which is applied practically; given our conclusions in the previous chapter, we have seen that the separation of what might be called theosophic texts from 'mystical practice' is by no means a straightforward task. In this context, it is particularly relevant to consider that the older Hekhaloth literature (which Scholem sees as influencing at least the *Bahir*) generally envisages somewhat of a practical method of 'mystic' ascent through the heavenly 'palaces' (היכלוֹת)[199]. We shall have occasion to consider the validity of Scholem's thesis on this point at a later juncture, but for now the idea should at least indicate for us that a the idea of a practical / theoretical division in Kabbalah should not be enforced too rigorously[200].

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195 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.33-35.
196 *Ibid.*, pp.34, 221-224.
197 C.f. above, pp.15f.
198 See, for example, G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.119-126. C.f. also Moshe Idel's approach in *Kabbalah* (1988). It is worth noting that since Idel proceeds from a phenomenological perspective (as opposed to Scholem's philological-historical approach), he thus by necessity focuses somewhat more heavily than Scholem on this 'division' in the Kabbalah; indeed he largely subdivides his book according to it.
199 G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.10-13. C.f. M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.267-271.
200 In any case, such a distinction is made moot by the later developments of the Safed Kabbalists, in particular the Lurianic system which espouses a highly practical form of communal halakhic observance, understood as *tiqqun* ('restoration'), and thus intimately tied to a theosophical theory of cosmogony. See G. Scholem, *Major*

The reason why I raise these *caveats* here is that, whilst I do not wish to bisect the Kabbalah too strongly, I do wish to propose that there is good reason for somewhat excising so-called 'prophetic Kabbalists' such as Abulafia and Jacob ha-Cohen from our attempt to examine potential relations between Kabbalah and the 'Gnostics'. As Scholem demonstrates, where reason can be given for drawing such a division, the distinctive point is that, unlike much of the theosophic Kabbalah, which appears in a pseudo-mishnaic or midrashic guise, 'prophetic Kabbalists' do not generally attempt to couch their speculation in a cloak of received tradition (however spurious), but rather "lean frankly on divine revelation"[201]. On the basis of our previous conclusions, this distinction thus suggests several reasons why we might find the clearest comparisons with our 'Gnostic groups' in the more theosophic strains of the Kabbalah. As we have highlighted above (pp.24ff.), whilst we may attempt certain educated guesses, we generally have little solid evidence regarding practice or ritual amongst 'Gnostics'. Rather, our evidence almost wholly consists of surviving theosophic texts and heresiological reports of such doctrines (we recall that we found little, if any, reliable heresiological evidence for 'Gnostic' practice). When we further consider our observations in the previous chapter regarding the use in these 'Gnostic' texts of appeals to an authority based on a re-interpretation of scripture, we note that this form of 'Gnostic' midrash bears, as we concluded above, more comparison to the theosophic texts of the Kabbalah than to any schema of direct innovative divine revelation such as one might find in 'prophetic Kabbalah'[202]. Indeed, whilst certainly taking into account the *caveats* of the previous chapter regarding attempts to give a general definition of 'mysticism', it is worth noting that 'prophetic Kabbalah', although scarcely independent of its historical background, nonetheless may be potentially better examined as an outworking of the "purely mystical impulse" in Judaism; laudable though such an examination is, however, it unfortunately goes far beyond the aims of this thesis[203].

To restate my argument, I certainly do not wish to demarcate too heavily between theosophy and 'prophetic / ecstatic Kabbalah'; as we have noted, elements of the latter are certainly to an extent present in the former, and the situation *vice versa* is similarly true[204]. Rather, what I wish primarily to argue is that given the state of our 'Gnostic' evidence, our knowledge of the

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Trends (1961), pp.258ff. C.f., however, M. Idel's argument [*Kabbalah* (1988), pp.173-199] for the central importance of theurgy throughout the history of 'theosophic' Kabbalah.

[201] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.120.

[202] See above, pp.52ff.

[203] C.f. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* (1969), p.97.

[204] *Ibid.*, pp.96-100.

'Gnostics' is chiefly limited to theosophic texts, often with a scriptural basis (of some sort); we have seen above that this holds particularly true for our 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' sources. It seems, therefore, that our best method for assessing the relationship between these 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah would be to concentrate on those elements of the latter which most closely resemble in form our extant evidence for the former. Indeed, it is thus *perhaps* not wholly coincidental that our *terminus a quo* for the Kabbalah, the *Bahir*, is also precisely a similar sort of theosophic text which builds from scripture. We shall of course consider the implications of this observation in due course, but the final point that I wish to raise in this section concerns the chronological separation between our 'Gnostic' sources and the Kabbalah. Given this distance, we might reasonably suppose that were there to be 'Gnostic' influence on Kabbalah, such influence must therefore have entered it at an early stage. To suggest that 'Gnostic' influence only affected the Kabbalah at a later stage of its development not only dilutes the claim of a relation (as then the 'Gnostics' can only be said to have influenced one very particular, and indeed late part of the Kabbalah), but more importantly requires us to explain how an ancient thought stream, evidently amenable and adaptable enough to Kabbalah to influence it at a later stage, can have failed to make its presence felt at any prior point in Kabbalistic development. As such, we must logically consider that if 'Gnostic' influence can be found in the Kabbalah, then our most reliable evidence of it would be found at the beginning. Furthermore, since we have already observed, and will have cause to do so again in greater depth, that the theosophy of our earliest Kabbalistic source, the *Bahir*, noticeably informed much of the Kabbalah which followed it, it stands to reason that it is in this source that we should focus our attempts to divine any evidence of 'Gnostic' influence[205].

I propose, therefore, to primarily focus my examination on the evidence of the 'Sethians', the 'Valentinians', and the *Bahir*. Whilst reference to other areas of the 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic evidence will of course be made where necessary, the preceding arguments have hopefully shown that it is between these three source-groups that we find perhaps the closest relations of form, function, and date available to us, thereby providing us with our best chance of identifying reliable evidence of a direct connection between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah.

[205] In this I concur with the thought of Scholem, who devoted almost half of his *Origins of the Kabbalah* to the *Bahir*, and the 'Gnostic' elements which he claimed to locate within it.

B

Turning then to an examination of the possible relationships between the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah (as we have defined them for the purposes of this thesis), I take as my starting point an instructive article by Guy Stroumsa, in which he highlights the fact that a number of post-enlightenment scholars found cause to conclude that there existed some genetic relation between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah[206]. As Stroumsa demonstrates, this argument most often postulates a variation on the theme that, if one can "see a direct genetic link from various Jewish trends to Gnostic origins", and if one also views the Kabbalah as descended from these same "Jewish trends", then the Kabbalah and the 'Gnostics' can be said to share a common ancestor, even if they are not seen to be directly related[207]. Indeed, it is a form of this argument that Scholem proposes through analysis of the Hekhaloth literature, which he sees as dependant on earlier traditions (such as Merkabah speculation), and which, as we mentioned above, was itself, according to him, an influence in the development of Kabbalah[208]. Scholem relates this observation to the 'Gnostics' by postulating that if the earliest strata of the Hekhaloth literature are, on the basis of their seeming similarities to the 'Gnostics', dated to a period roughly contemporaneous with these 'Gnostics', then it becomes plausible to see the literature, or at least the traditions behind it, as having a direct influence on certain 'Gnostics'[209]. In any case, whilst Scholem's is perhaps the most complex and persuasive argument for a possible link between the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah, as Stroumsa's article demonstrates, it is scarcely the first.

We shall return in chapter 8 to consider Scholem's argument in greater depth, but for the moment I wish to highlight the point that, if numerous scholars have attempted to demonstrate a link between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, there must therefore exist at least some surface similarities between the two which suggest this link. Indeed, whilst we have already identified certain of these in the context of 'mystic' taxonomy, our scope is now wider, and our aim is twofold: (1) the identification of potential similarities between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah (as we have defined them), and (2) the examination of whether these are merely surface similarities, or rather the reflection of a thought stream at the heart

[206] G.G. Stroumsa, 'Gnosis and Judaism' (1992), pp.45-62.

[207] *Ibid.* See also B.A. Pearson's important article on Moritz Friedländer's argument for an Alexandrian Jewish background to the 'Gnostics' ['Friedländer Revisited' (2006), pp.10-28]. Note, however that, as Stroumsa's article highlights, this thesis is also found in the earlier *Genetische Entwicklung der vornehmsten gnostischen Systeme* of Johann August Wilhelm Neander.

[208] On this, see especially Scholem's influential monograph, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965).

[209] *Ibid.*, esp. pp.31-42.

of both traditions[210]. If the latter, then we shall be compelled to consider *how* both traditions developed these similarities, a question to which the simplest answer *might* be to posit a direct genetic link.

Let us now focus on the first of these points, namely the identification of similar theosophic ideas and motifs in both the 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' literature and the book *Bahir*. It is worth mentioning here that we would probably be best served in seeking to identify conceptual similarities rather than direct textual correspondences: the difficulties evident in a purely textual comparison of our 'Gnostic' sources (which are primarily extant only in later Coptic translations of Greek originals) and the Medieval Hebrew of the *Bahir* are obvious[211]. Furthermore, we note that the Hebrew of the *Bahir* is often heavily idiosyncratic, expressed in an at best convoluted syntax; indeed, even a near contemporary of the work, Meir ben Simon of Narbonne, asserted that the "language of the book and its whole content show that it is the work of someone who lacked command of either literary language or good style"[212]. To be sure, this comment is part of Meir ben Simon's polemical attack against both the *Bahir* and the early Kabbalah, yet it is certainly true that the language of the *Bahir* is frequently somewhat torturous. For the modern scholar, the situation is further complicated by the often fragmentary or corrupt variant manuscript witnesses to the text of the *Bahir*, witnesses which also demonstrate the highly changeable and fluid nature of the book, even after it emerged in a printed form[213]. Given the linguistic differences between our texts, therefore, we should not expect to find *exact* correspondences of syntax or terminology, and would probably be better served by concentrating more on looser similarities of concept, remaining aware that any given idea may be expressed slightly differently in each language.

As an illustrative example of the above point, let us consider the issue of the term *sarim* (שׂרים), as it appears in the *Bahir*. A plural, from the root שׂרר, *sarim* generally refers to those

[210] It is worth highlighting that both Scholem and the scholars examined in Stroumsa's article were working before widespread knowledge of the Nag Hammadi literature was available, and were thus unable to provide the same level of definition for their conception of the 'Gnostics' as we, hopefully, have done.
[211] Similarly, even if we were to compare the extant text of *Apoc. John* with the evidence in Irenaeus, we would still face the difficulty that our primary extant source for the latter is a Latin translation of the Greek original (to say nothing of the question of how accurately Irenaeus transmitted the text before him).
[212] Meir ben Simon's polemic on this point is found in an epistle incorporated into his *Milḥemeth Mitzvah*, the original text of which can be found in A. Neubauer, 'Bahir and the Zohar' (1892), pp.357-368. The translation given here is from G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.42f.
[213] C.f. D. Abrams, *Bahir* (1994), pp.*9-*15. The text of the *Bahir* used in this thesis is primarily from Abrams's critical edition, which is based on two of the earliest manuscript witnesses, Ms. Munich 209 and Ms. Vatican-Barberini Or. 110. Occasionally, however, the translations of individual scholars will be utilised, where to do so might serve an illustrative purpose.

in a position of authority and, according to Benjamin Davidson, can be translated in this masculine form as 'commanders', 'chiefs', 'nobles', or 'princes'[214]. In the context of 'mystical' or theosophical hierarchies, such as are found in the *Bahir* (especially sections 63-79), the particular term used in translation may have implications for the interpretation of the text, and it is thus of interest that Scholem generally treats *sarim* in this context as a synonym for 'archons'[215]. Such a translation is scarcely inaccurate, as the Greek ἄρχοντες carries a similar range of meanings, but one might question whether the use of a word which appears as somewhat of a technical term in our 'Gnostic' literature to translate the Hebrew implies a somewhat closer connection between the sources than may in fact be the case[216]. Indeed, it is worth commenting that although the Septuagint does use ἄρχοντες to translate *sarim* in *some* cases (e.g. Numbers 21:18, Isaiah 34:12), this is scarcely the only term it uses to render this word, and we might, therefore, be better served by translating occurrences of *sarim* in the *Bahir* directly to an English equivalent[217].

On this point there is not, at least for the moment, too much more that we can reasonably say. As the above translation has hopefully highlighted, it would seem wise to be wary of translating terms in the *Bahir* in such a way as to draw direct textual parallels with other sources, unless we can adduce further evidence that those sources were influential on the *Bahir*. As such, should our analysis demonstrate a genuine connection between our 'Gnostic' sources and the *Bahir*, then we may have cause to re-evaluate the possibility of translating *sarim* in the latter as 'archons'. For the time being, however, we must let that question hang. In a similar vein, we must temporarily defer judgement regarding which English word might best reflect the *Bahir*'s sense of *sarim*; as we shall observe later, the *Bahir* may potentially have been influenced by the Hekhaloth literature, which typically makes use of 'royal' language, especially in a somewhat allegorical sense (the word היכלוֹת does, after all, mean 'palaces'). Ergo, should we conclude that the Hekhaloth literature influenced the *Bahir*, then we may be justified in translating the occurrences of *sarim* in the latter as 'princes' or 'nobles', and interpreting the text correspondingly (incidentally, it may be worth noting that it is this translation of *sarim* which is usually adopted by English translations of the Old

[214] B. Davidson, *Lexicon* (1850), p.741.
[215] C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.76ff.
[216] C.f. H.K. Moulton, *Lexicon* (1978), pp.53f.; G.W.H. Lampe, *Lexicon* (1961), pp.241f. We recall, for example, that Epiphanius [*Panarion* 40] speaks of a sect of "Archontics".
[217] C.f. Prov. 8:16, which translates *sarim* with μεγιστανες, or Job 29:9; 34:19, which use ἁδροις.

Testament: both the *KJV* and the *RSV* routinely translate *sarim* in this way)[218]. At present, however, we shall let the matter rest, and simply restate the point that as *direct* textual-linguistic parallels between our texts are, by definition, unlikely, we should therefore be cautious to avoid translating in such a way as to transform rough synonyms into exact terminological correspondences.

Proceeding then upon a method of conceptual rather than textual comparison, we might remark, as Scholem does, upon the potential similarity of concepts in our sources regarding the use of 'fullness' or 'totality', both as something of a definite entity and as a technical term[219]. Terms such as 'fullness', (πλήρωμα / ⲡⲗⲏⲣⲱⲙⲁ) or 'the All' / 'the totality' (ⲡⲧⲏⲣϥ) can be found throughout our 'Gnostic' sources and, indeed, as we have previously noted, might be called a 'typical' (though not exclusive) feature of 'Valentinian' thought[220]. It is interesting then to compare this to the use of המלא ('the fullness') and הכל (lit. 'the whole', 'the totality') in the *Bahir*[221]. Beginning in §4 with an exposition on Deuteronomy 33:23 ("... and full of [ומלא] the blessing of the Lord..." *RSV*), the *Bahir* proceeds to discuss the concept of 'fullness' or 'totality', treating these as definite entities or elements of the divine (with the corresponding definite article), in a way that does not seem unfamiliar to our 'Gnostic' texts[222]. More specifically, however, there seems to exist an interesting similarity between the conception of this 'totality' or 'fullness' in the *Bahir*, and its conception in the 'Valentinian' thought stream; indeed, both the *Bahir* and our 'Valentinian' sources seem to conceive of this 'totality' as a definite existence, somewhat *distinct* from the divine existence which created it[223]. Whilst it is this 'totality' which both generates and encompasses all of created reality, ultimately it itself remains dependent solely on the divine, somewhat analogous to the way in which creation is wholly dependent on the 'totality'. This similarity cannot, however, really be said to exist in regard to our 'Sethian' sources; although

[218] E.g. Num. 21:18, Prov. 8:16, Isa. 34:12. Note that *sarim* generally occurs in the biblical text juxtaposed with a synonym (often the substantive form of נדיב) so as to form an intensive parallelism. Therefore, the decision as to which term to translate as 'nobles' and which as 'princes' is largely an editorial one. C.f. Num. 21:18, Job 34:18f., Prov. 8:16.
[219] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.68ff.
[220] C.f. above, p.27. See, for example, *Apoc. John* NHC II.3:1-4:14, *Gos. Eg.* IV.50:6-22, *Gos. Tru.* I.18:1-20:25. On 'Valentinian' thought, see J.F. McCue, 'Conflicting Versions?' (1981), pp.404-416.
[221] C.f. the entries in G.W.H. Lampe's *Lexicon* [(1961), pp.950, 1094f.] for ὅλος and πλήρωμα and the entries in B. Davidson's *Lexicon* [(1850), pp.380f., 488f.] for כלל and מלא. See also the entry for ⲧⲏⲣ⸗ / ⲡⲧⲏⲣϥ in W.E. Crum, *Dictionary* (1939), p.424.
[222] See especially sections 3-5, 7, and 14-15 of the *Bahir*.
[223] Compare, for example, the abovementioned sections of the *Bahir* (esp. §14) with *Gos. Tru.* I.18:1-21:29. C.f. also Irenaeus's account of the 'Valentinian' Ptolemy's thought in *Haer.* I.1.1-3.

conceptions of the ‘fullness’ or ‘totality’ are to be found in these sources (e.g. *Apoc. John* II.2:28-4:26, *Gos. Eg.* III.40:15-41:8), not only are they far less marked than in the ‘Valentinian’ sources, but more importantly they are not portrayed as being distinct from or created by the divine. Whereas in both the *Bahir* and our ‘Valentinian’ texts we find the ‘fullness’ portrayed as a creation of the divine, from which all other creation exists, in our ‘Sethian’ texts this distinction is not made; rather, the ‘invisible Spirit’ (i.e. the highest source of divinity in ‘Sethian’ language) *is itself* perfect totality, and itself emanates subsequent aeons (none of which, however, might be referred to as the ‘totality’ or similar). As previously mentioned, we shall consider at a later stage the extent to which Scholem might be seen to overly homogenise disparate ‘Gnostic’ thought streams in his analysis, but for the moment let us simply note that our current comparison of ‘Gnostic’ conceptions of the ‘totality’ with the *Bahir* is essentially a comparison based on ‘Valentinian’ evidence; it remains to be seen whether any further conceptual similarities we might highlight will also be identifiable in the ‘Valentinian’ sources.

To return to our main point, however, we note that there does seem to exist a certain level of similarity of concept between ‘Valentinian’ thought and the *Bahir*, a similarity which is perhaps even more striking if we directly compare examples of the two:

Gospel of Truth NHC I.19:7-20:22	*Bahir*, §14
“...It is he [i.e. the Father] who fashioned the totality [ⲡⲧⲏⲣϥ], and within him is the totality and the totality was in need of him... for what did the totality have need of if not knowledge regarding the Father?... so (it is) with the totality, which lay hidden while the Father of the totality was invisible, being something which is from him, from whom every space comes forth.”[224]	“...I [i.e. the Lord] have spanned the All [הכל], called it ‘All’, for on it depends the All and from it emanates the All; all things need it and look upon it and yearn for it, and it is from it that all souls fly forth. I was alone when I made it and no angel can raise himself above it...”[225]

Now, from this comparison several points become obvious. Firstly, as our earlier observations indicated, a *direct* textual comparison can probably not be made between these two texts, despite Scholem’s assertion that the passage from *Gos. Tru.* “reads like a parallel to

[224] Trans. H.W. Attridge and G.W. MacRae, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.38-51.
[225] Trans. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.71.

our *Bahir* passage"[226]. Even in English translation, the passages seem to evince far too much of a disparity, and indeed an indebtedness to their own cultural situation, to suggest that one could be the direct literary antecedent of the other (it is especially worth noting that this passage from the *Gos. Tru.* is an *edited* excerpt; the surrounding material that does not resemble the *Bahir* passage is not shown here). Rather, it seems that what we potentially have here is evidence of a particular concept being expressed in two different thought streams (and, indeed, languages). If this is the case, then both the similarities and the differences in the texts become explicable: the former being due to the nature of the shared idea, the latter understood as the inevitable consequence of the divergent paradigms in which this idea is expressed.

This observation continues to bear relevance as we proceed with an examination of the multiple powers of the *Bahir*. At least on a surface level, we might point to the potential comparisons between the numerous aeons or archons found in the mythic schema of much 'Gnostic' literature, and the enumeration of the *Sefirot*, which would become perhaps *the* distinctive feature of Kabbalah[227]. As we have already mentioned, whilst the conception of the *Sefirot* is recognisable in the *Bahir*, the term itself is all but absent; instead, when mention is made of a hierarchical schema in the heavenly realm(s), we more often find talk of the מדות (*middoth*), the 'qualities' or 'characteristics' of the divine[228]. Interestingly, however, in the *Bahir* this hierarchical construction is spoken of in different terms in different sections: we have already mentioned the occurrence of *sarim* in this context (c.f. also its use in §77), and we might also add other uses of 'royal' language to refer to this hierarchy, such as מלכים ('kings') in sections 19, 32, and 49, and כתרים ('crowns') in sections 23 and 101[229]. Indeed, in attempting to identify potential sources behind the *Bahir*, we seem to be assailed by a multiplicity of images and symbols, leading us to question whether they may really all be expressing more or less the same concept.

Now, as a potential way into this discussion, I should like to highlight some interesting textual observations which Moshe Idel has made concerning the occurrence and calculation

[226] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.72. Furthermore, Scholem then proceeds to draw another parallel with a passage from *Gos. Thom.* [Saying 75]; we have already noted the potential dubiousness of equating this text with *any* 'Gnostic' thought stream, and it certainly is not 'Valentinian'! See also below, pp.86f.
[227] C.f. above, pp.14ff.
[228] C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.81ff.
[229] C.f. *Ibid.*, pp.83-86.

of the number seventy-two in the *Bahir* as an accounting of the elements of the heavenly hierarchy, and the comparisons which may be made on this subject between the *Bahir* and other texts[230].

Eugnostos NHC III.83:10-15	*Bahir*, §63
"...Then the twelve powers, whom I have just discussed, consented with each other. <Six> males (each) (and) <six> females (each) were revealed, so that there are seventy-two powers..."[231]	"...These twelve stones are seventy-two, which correspond to the seventy-two names of God. What is the reason? {The biblical text} opened with twelve to teach you that God has twelve leaders, and each and every one of them has six powers. ...And what are these? The seventy-two languages..."[232]

As with our previous comparison, whilst the differences in language and *zeitgeist* between the two texts are obvious, equally striking is their potentially shared conception of seventy-two powers. Indeed, as Idel remarks, the usage of the number seventy-two, and especially its equation in the *Bahir* with the "seventy-two languages" is relatively exceptional, since the more usual "Jewish view assumes the existence of *seventy* languages or nations"[233]. I do not wish here, however, to focus overmuch on this potential distinction between the usage of seventy or seventy-two in the relevant traditions, since it must surely be admitted that the mere occurrence of one or other of these numbers, even if in a parallel context, cannot itself be counted as unique enough to produce such an exact level of correspondence as our methodology should require. To be sure, it might for example be questioned whether the usage of seventy-two instead of seventy is indicative of a Hellenistic influence upon Judaic thought; in particular, its occurrence in the *Eugnostos* passage cited above (a passage omitted in the parallel of *Soph. Jes. Chr.*) could potentially be viewed in relation to *Eugnostos* being, as Pearson puts it, "a Jewish Gnostic work written by a person well versed in Greek philosophy", likely originally composed (in Greek) in the Hellenistic-Jewish environment of late first century or early second century Alexandria[234]. Ultimately, however, if this use of seventy-two is ascribed to Hellenistic influence, then it arguably emerges as rather too

[230] M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.122-125.
[231] Trans. D.M. Parrott, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.220-243.
[232] Trans. M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), p.123.
[233] *Ibid.*, pp.123, 334f., n.90. Emphasis added. C.f. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* (1969), pp.61-65; *Shabb.* 88b.
[234] B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81. On the relation of *Eugnostos* to *Soph. Jes. Chr.*, see below, pp.166ff.

ubiquitous an example to clearly delineate any historical connection[235]. Instead, a more exact, and thus for our purposes perhaps more directly applicable area of focus is to be found in the observation that not only do both of the above texts speak of seventy-two heavenly powers, but furthermore they both calculate this number in the same way, by ascribing six powers to each of the original twelve (i.e. 12 x 6 = 72)[236].

When we turn, however, to the section of the *Bahir* immediately following, we find a somewhat different picture; although the perhaps unusual number of seventy-two is still present, the hierarchical structure to which it refers, and thus the method by which it is calculated, is noticeably different:

Bahir, §64

> "...All of them are no more than thirty-six forms, and all of them are perfected in thirty-two {forms}; thirty-two are given to thirty-two, and there remained {out of thirty-six} four; and they are sixty-four forms. Whence do we know that thirty-two were given to thirty-two? From the verse: 'for he that is higher than the highest watcheth [Eccles. 5:8]' – thus, there are sixty-four. But eight is {yet} lacking from the seventy-two names of God, and this is {alluded} in the phrase 'and there be higher than they [Eccles. 5:8]' – these are the seven days of the week. And one is {yet} lacking, and that which is {alluded} in the verse: 'Moreover the profit of the earth is for all [Eccles. 5:9]'..."[237]

As Idel notes, the concept of seventy-two is here calculated in a different way (64 + 7 + 1), built upon a reading of Ecclesiastes[238]. This then perhaps suggests that the exegesis (or, probably more accurately, eisegesis) here is secondary, and is an attempt to provide a reasoning for the already existent concept of the seventy-two. The question arises, however, as to why the calculation which is given here differs so from that in the preceding section. A potential answer might be found in a portion of another 'Gnostic' text, specifically *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II.104:31-105:20):

[235] Let us also highlight the possibility that in Antiquity the symbolic uses of the numbers seventy and seventy-two were potentially liable to be applied interchangeably, perhaps most especially in traditions which reflected a confluence of Judaic and Hellenistic thought. See, for example, the variant texts of Lk. 10:1, 17, the mission of the seventy (two) disciples. Note also that some traditions in fact give the number of the translators of the Septuagint as seventy-two (although, as the name itself evinces, the tradition of seventy is of course the more prevalent one). C.f. also Y. Liebes, 'Kabbalistic Myth' (1993), pp.65-92.

[236] Admittedly, as indicated in the excerpt, the fragmentary state of *Eugnostos* leaves it somewhat unclear as to how many powers each of the twelve 'reveal'; unfortunately this portion of the text is not paralleled in *Soph. Jes. Chr.* Although Douglas Parrott's reconstruction suggests the possibility that the text indicates each of the first twelve produced *twelve* powers (six male and six female), I find more convincing a reading that states that each of the twelve ultimately produced *six* powers (totalling thirty-six males and thirty-six females), as this seems the only way that the number seventy-two might be arrived at. C.f. D.M. Parrott, *op. cit.*, p.233 and M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.123, 334, n.83.

[237] Trans. M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), p.124.

[238] *Ibid.*, pp.123-125.

> "And as he had authority, he [Sabaoth] made himself first of all a mansion. It is huge, magnificent, seven times as great as all those that exist in the seven heavens. And before his mansion he created a throne, which was huge and was upon a four-faced chariot called 'Cherubin'. Now the Cherubin has eight shapes per each of the four corners, lion forms and calf forms and human forms and eagle forms, so that all the forms amount to sixty-four forms – and (he created) seven archangels that stand before it; he is the eighth, and has authority. All the forms amount to seventy-two. Furthermore, from this chariot the seventy-two gods took shape; they took shape so that they might rule over the seventy-two languages of the peoples. And by that throne he created other, serpent-like angels, called 'Saraphin', which praise him at all times."[239]

As is immediately obvious, this text bears a marked resemblance to Ezekiel 1, and thus by extension, potentially to forms of Merkabah and Hekhaloth speculation derived from that text[240]. We shall return to this point in a later chapter, but for the moment, what is more relevant is the fact that this passage, like §64 of the *Bahir*, calculates the seventy-two by the method of 64 + 7 + 1. What we have then, in essence, are two methods (seemingly each with a certain antiquity) for calculating the number seventy-two in a heavenly setting; yet both these methods appear together in the same medieval text. In this context, it becomes interesting to consider Scholem's argument that the *Bahir* should not be viewed as a single text; rather, it should be understood as "a redaction of partly contradictory sources"[241]. Indeed, Scholem argues throughout his *Origins of the Kabbalah* that the *Bahir* is composed of various strata, some significantly older than others, and that a multitude of sources (including some of great antiquity) are drawn upon in different sections, often being combined and re-interpreted in a variety of ways, with the result that we may be able to identify several instances which "suggest conflicting traditions that were simply juxtaposed in the *Bahir*"[242].

Whilst we shall return to this point again in chapter 8, in relation to a wider analysis of Scholem's hypothesis, let us note here that his argument offers a potential solution to the contradiction highlighted above. We might, as Scholem, suggest that if sections 63 and 64 are to be treated somewhat separately from each other, then their contrast is explained by the fact that they descend from two different sources; i.e., the concept of the seventy-two is seen

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[239] Trans. H.-G. Bethge, B. Layton, and Societas Coptica Hierosolymitana, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.170-189. C.f. *Hyp. Arch.* II.95:26-31.

[240] Incidentally, Idel [*Kabbalah* (1988), pp.124, 335, n.99] proposes that the number sixty-four in the *Bahir* passage above is drawn from a Targum of Ezekiel 1:6. This thus suggests the possibility that there might be another (probably Judaic) source which stands behind both §64 and *Orig. W.* See below, p.171.

[241] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.147. See, for example, Scholem's discussion [pp.139-147] on the enumeration of the *middoth* in sections 111-116 of the *Bahir*, where a combination of elements from older texts (including the *Yetzirah* and the *Raza Rabba*) can be identified.

[242] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.85.

as a rather ancient concept, but whilst §63 potentially draws from *Eugnostos* in its calculation of it, §64 potentially draws instead from *Orig. W.*, and thus there is no contradiction until these two traditions are redacted together in the *Bahir*. Although, if we recall here our observation that it is more likely that it was the concept of the calculation that was drawn upon rather than the text directly (as evidenced by the notable textual and paradigmatic differences in our examples), it might then be better to propose that these sections of the *Bahir* drew on the traditions behind our 'Gnostic' texts rather than the texts themselves. We recall also our earlier observations that the *Bahir* potentially contains a combination of images from the *Yetzirah* (e.g. the concept of the ideal numbers through which creation is accomplished) and the Hekhaloth literature (e.g. the use of 'royal' language in reference to heavenly powers); to these sources we might possibly now also add various examples of 'Gnostic' speculation. I say 'various examples', because it is worth noting that the 'Gnostic' texts we have referred to here are, if anything, nearest to 'Sethian' thought whilst, in our previous discussion of the concept of the 'totality', we found the closest parallels to the *Bahir* in 'Valentinian' thought[243]. If, however, the *Bahir* is proposed to have drawn from various sources and traditions, including several from Antiquity, then is it overly illogical to suppose that it similarly drew from a variety of 'Gnostic' thought streams?

Indeed, as Scholem demonstrates, the redaction together of various sources in the *Bahir* is also seen in the statements made therein regarding the left side of God[244]. In sections 76-79 particular abstract *middoth* of God (e.g. 'Power', 'Truth') are somewhat conflated with angelic *sarim*, a conflation which, as Scholem notes, "would be completely inconceivable in the later Kabbalah" [245]. Moreover, we find in these sections that the attribute of Power (גבורה), conceived of as one of the *sarim*, is placed on the left; for example, in §77 we read:

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[243] Although in general *Eugnostos* and *Orig. W.* are not usually included in the so-called 'Sethian corpus', they might potentially be linked to 'Sethian' thought, *if* one accepts the thesis that they share certain similarities of tradition with *Apoc. John* and *Hyp. Arch.* respectively. See above, pp.18f.

[244] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.147-151.

[245] *Ibid.*, pp.147f. Scholem observes that a similar motif is also found in §96, although there a different ordering of angels is given, suggesting again a multitude of sources and strata behind the *Bahir*. Similarly, Scholem highlights [p.147, n.154] that sections 76 and 79 appear to have originally been one piece, into which sections 77 and 78 were "awkwardly interpolated". §77 would probably be better placed following §79, which it seems to develop or interpret.

> "And who are these שׂרים? They are three. This teaches that the Power is the שׂר of all the holy forms on the left side of God, and that is Gabriel, and on his right Michael is שׂר over all the holy forms, and in the middle, which is the Truth, Uriel is the שׂר of all the holy forms..."[246]

Now, it is interesting to observe that in the later Kabbalah the left side of God is seen to represent the source of evil; indeed, evil is generally said there to stem from an overabundance of the divine attribute of stern judgement (*middath ha-din*), which occurs if this attribute (or in the later Kabbalah, *sefirah*) is not properly balanced with its opposite number on the right side, *Ḥesed* ('mercy')[247]. In this context, we then note that whilst the abovementioned sections of the *Bahir* do not equate the left side Power of God with evil, sections 107-115 speak not only of evil (רע) as a *middah* of God (most explicitly in §109) but, as Scholem demonstrates, also identify this *middah* with Satan and/or the primordial emptiness of the *tohu* and can be seen to place it upon the left of God[248]. Indeed, as Scholem elaborates, §113 appears as a parallel to §77, except with the presence of Satan instead; as such, therefore, we might well agree with Scholem that a "purely harmonistic interpretation would logically lead us to conclude that the *Bahir* identifies Gabriel with Satan". A more realistic explanation, however, would be that "there existed, on the subject of the left, two distinct traditions that were subsequently united or juxtaposed during the redaction [of the *Bahir*]... without aiming at any false consistency"[249].

It might then be interesting to ask whether a coalescence of these two traditions might lie behind the later Kabbalistic conception of evil as the result of the excess of the judgement of the divine left, but for our purposes here it is more useful to consider from whence came the concept of Satan and evil as being on the left of the divine. In particular, it is worth noting for the moment the evidence of *Orig. W.* II.106:5-16, a passage which almost immediately follows the one which we examined above:

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[246] Trans. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.147f. In reference to our earlier discussion of *sarim*, I have elected to retain the Hebrew here in place of Scholem's translation of 'archons'.

[247] See, for example, D. Ariel, *Kabbalah* (2006), pp.77-82. As Ariel notes here, the fifth *sefirah* is referred to both as *Din* and *Gevurah*, the two designations being largely interchangeable. C.f. below, pp.74f.

[248] Scholem [*Origins* (1990), pp.148f.] notes that sections 107-115, which are primarily concerned with the character of Satan, were probably an original unit, inserted here in the redaction of the *Bahir*. On the combination of the imagery of Satan, evil, and *tohu* see, for example, §109, which states that "...*tohu* is nothing other than the evil [הרע] that throws men into confusion until they sin, and every evil urge in man comes from there..." [trans. G. Scholem, *Ibid.*]. C.f. also §113, where Satan appears both as שׂר השׂטן and שׂר על תהו.

[249] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.151. C.f. E.R. Wolfson, 'Light through Darkness' (1988), pp.73-95; Y. Liebes, '*De Natura Dei*' (1993), pp.1-64.

"...And there was no one with him [Sabaoth] in the cloud except Sophia <the daughter of> Pistis, instructing him about all the things that exist in the eighth heaven... Now Pistis Sophia set him apart from the darkness and summoned him to her right, and the prime parent [i.e. Yaldabaoth] she put at her left. Since that day, right has been called justice, and left called wickedness..."[250]

What we find in this excerpt is an interesting conceptual parallel of the placement of the negative (personified as a specific figure), upon the left within a heavenly realm. Whilst we shall reserve judgement for the moment on the possible relationship this passage has to the *Bahir*, it is worth observing that not only do we have here a potential source for one of the traditions regarding the left, but it is also a source which we have previously considered in relation to another aspect of the *Bahir*.

Ultimately, since our aim in this chapter is primarily descriptive, we shall have to largely postpone any analysis of *how* or *why* these similarities seemingly exist until a later juncture. With this in mind, I should like now to turn to a brief examination of the equation of particular powers with certain stars, planets, limbs, metals, attributes, qualities, etc. in the *Bahir* and some 'Gnostic' texts. Again, although this matter will require further examination in subsequent chapters, it is necessary to provide a short descriptive outline here for illustrative purposes. It is worth noting that the *Sefirot*, in their central position in later Kabbalah, were consistently enumerated as particular divine qualities or elements and, as David Ariel states, they also represented "the ideal types of intellectual and moral qualities that are found in man"; the *Sefirot*, therefore, were generally associated both with the economy of the analogues of the divine qualities in humanity, and with the requisite limbs or organs thought to be responsible for the outworking of these qualities[251]. For example, the 4th, 5th, and 6th *sefirot* are generally agreed in the later Kabbalah to be *Ḥesed* ('mercy'), *Din* / *Gevurah* ('judgement' / 'power'), and *Tiferet* ('adornment'); these three form an 'ethical triad', and are aligned both with the human manifestations of these qualities, and with the hands and the heart, which are the parts of man which exercise them[252]. The Kabbalistic genesis of this idea can be seen in the *Bahir*, where, as Scholem demonstrates, the so-called

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[250] Trans. H.-G. Bethge, B. Layton, and Societas Coptica Hierosolymitana, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.170-189. C.f. the probable textual parallel in *Hyp. Arch.* II.95:31-96:3, "...And Sophia took her daughter Zoe and had her sit upon his [Sabaoth's] right to teach him about the things that exist in the eighth (heaven); and the angel {of} wrath she placed upon his left. {Since} that day, {his right} has been called life; and the left has come to represent the unrighteousness of the realm of absolute power above..." [trans. B. Layton, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.161-169]. Similarly, this passage follows immediately from the parallel given in n.239, above.
[251] D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.77f.
[252] *Ibid.*, pp.76-87.

'powers' in heaven are "represented by a combination or juxtaposition of anthropological, cosmological, and moral symbolism"[253]. In particular, Scholem outlines several instances where the 4th, 5th, and 6th powers are associated with a number of different themes, some of which I have listed below in tabular format; to these specific homologies, we might also add, as Scholem does, the more general association of the heavenly powers with "primordial images" of wine and milk (§93), the imagery of silver and gold (sections 34 and 38), and the limbs of man (e.g. sections 55, 114, 116)[254].

Bahir **section(s)**	**4th Power**	**5th Power**	**6th Power**
24, 77, 92, 94, 129, 131	Mercy	Judgement / Power	Truth[255]
35, 77, 96, 102	Right	Left	Middle
9, 29, 30, 40, 68, 96, 102	Water	Fire	Union of the two
92, 94, 131, 132	Abraham	Isaac	Jacob

As Scholem rightly observes, this association of images could well be the result of the combination, in the *Bahir*, of the cosmology of *Yetzirah* with elements of the Hekhaloth literature (including Merkabah and *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation); interestingly, however, he also postulates some analogues between these homologies and the 'Gnostic' sources[256]. I do not wish to dwell overmuch on this matter here, as we shall have occasion in later chapters to consider further the issue of homology, but for the moment let us briefly highlight a few examples which suggest that several of our 'Gnostic' sources shared with the *Bahir* a preference for equating the heavenly powers with a range of symbols.

In *Orig. W.* II.106:26-107:17, a passage following just after those we have already considered, we find a description of the creation in the heavens of a number of heavenly powers, both good and evil ones, who are identified with the names of various qualities and attributes (e.g. Jealousy, Wrath, Bitterness, Peace, Truth, Love, etc.). Similarly, in a lengthy passage of *Apoc. John* (II.15:1-19:12), we find a collection of angels, demons, and powers

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[253] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.140f.
[254] *Ibid.*, pp.138-147.
[255] Note that in the *Bahir*, the 6th place is more usually designated אמת ('truth'), rather than תפארת, as was common in later Kabbalah. This is perhaps reflective of an older tradition, such as we discussed above in relation to §77 of the *Bahir*.
[256] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.141. C.f. Idem., *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.31-42

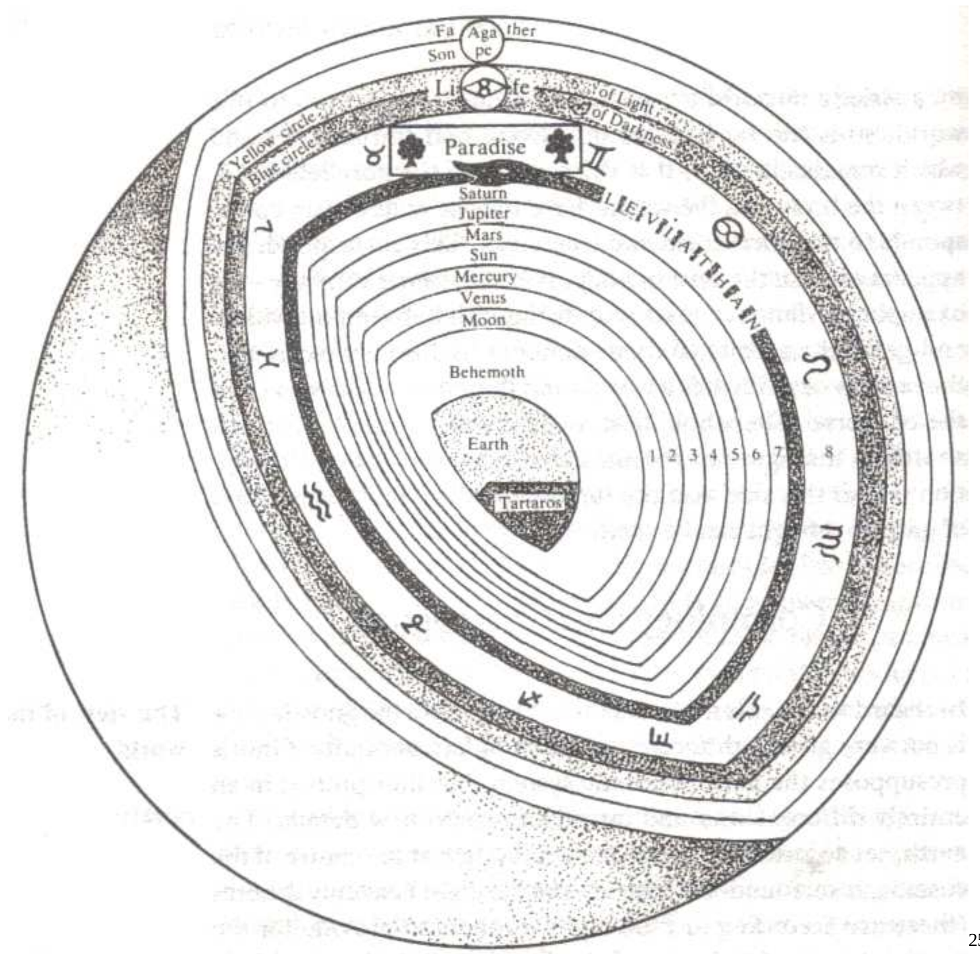
creating the material and natural body of man, each one creating a very specific part which therefore corresponds to it, whilst similarly others are described as creating, and thus having charge of, numerous negative passions (e.g. grief, jealousy, pride, fear, etc.), although in this passage the powers etc. generally possess names of their own (albeit these appear to be mostly *nomina barbara*). An exception, however, occurs at the beginning of the passage, where seven powers are described as creating the base elements of the natural soul (each creating that element which corresponds to itself); whilst these powers still possess names distinct from that which they create, their names are both intelligible, and in certain cases notably correspond to names which would later be attached to the *Sefirot*[257]:

> "...And the powers began: the first one, goodness, created a bone-soul; and the second, foreknowledge, created a sinew-soul; the third, divinity, created a flesh-soul; and the fourth, the lordship [ⲧⲙ̅ⲛ̅ⲧ̅ϫⲟⲉⲓⲥ], created a marrow-soul; the fifth, kingdom [ⲧⲙ̅ⲛ̅ⲧⲉⲣⲟ], created a blood-soul; the sixth, envy, created a skin-soul; the seventh, understanding [ⲧⲙ̅ⲛⲧⲣⲙ̅ⲛ̅ϩⲏⲧ], created a hair-soul..."[258]

As a final example, we might also briefly mention the diagram, reproduced on the next page, which was described by Celsus and Origen in the latter's *Contra Celsum* (VI.24-38), and which Origen attributes to a sect of 'Ophites'; Celsus, of course, did not apparently make a distinction between this group and the 'orthodox' Christianity which Origen defends. Although the nature of the source requires us to place the reliability of this account somewhat below what we have found preserved in our primary 'Gnostic' sources, it is an interesting example of the potential homologies that might be made in 'Gnostic' theosophy. Particularly remarkable is the syncretism of the system, which places both the Zodiac and elements from Hellenistic mythology alongside more biblically-based elements such as the Leviathan (c.f. Job 41:1-34, Psalms 74:14; 104:6, Isaiah 27:1). Let us note especially, however, the enumeration of eight heavens, an example of the conception of the Ogdoad, (c.f. above, p.27), and the association of each of the lower seven heavens with an archon who bears responsibility for it, and is also equated with a planet. Furthermore, as we saw in the *Apoc. John* passage above, the enumeration of a particular seven powers, and their equation with a symbol or element which they represent and are responsible for, seems to be a common

257 Whilst we are told that the soul created by each power corresponds to its particular characteristic (presumably expressed in its name), the logic of these homologies is far from being immediately apparent to us.

258 *Apoc. John* II.15:13-23, trans. F. Wisse, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.104-123. Interestingly, note that parallel versions of this passage in NHC III.22:23-23:6 and BG 8502.49:15-50:4 give 'providence' (πρόνοια / ⲡⲣⲟⲛⲟⲓⲁ) as the fourth power, 'kingdom' (ⲧⲙ̅ⲛ̅ⲧⲉⲣⲟ) as the fifth, 'understanding' (using instead the Greek loanword σύνεσις / ⲥⲩⲛϩⲉ̣ⲥ̣ⲓⲥ) as the sixth, and 'wisdom' (σοφία / ⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ) as the seventh.



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motif. It is worth noting that our previous discussion regarding homologies in the *Bahir* applied primarily only to the lower seven powers; as Scholem highlights, it is these seven "with which the *Bahir* is chiefly concerned", and indeed they are there "emphatically treated as constituting a separate whole"[260]. Taken as a group of seven, once again several equations are made, including their identification with the seven days of the week and of the Creation (sections 54, 55, and 105) and with the seven praising times of Psalm 119:164 (sections 41 and 45); they are also, as we mentioned above, equated with the limbs of man[261]:

Bahir, §55:

"...What are the seven of which it is said (Gen. 1:27): "He said to him: we count as one {the place of} the circumcision and the wife of man; his two hands – three; and his torso – five; his two legs – seven, and to them correspond their powers in heaven..."[262]

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[259] This version of the diagram is reproduced from K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* (1984), pp.68f.
[260] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.138.
[261] *Ibid.*, pp.138-142. C.f. Y. Liebes, '*De Natura Dei*' (1993), pp.1-64.
[262] Trans. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.141.

As such, we seem to once again find a possible similarity of concept between the theosophy of the *Bahir*, and that of certain of our 'Gnostic' sources. I wish to stress here, however, that this similarity need not necessarily demonstrate a connection, or at least not that connection which we are primarily interested in investigating; such equation of heavenly beings with earthly elements is, after all, scarcely unique to either 'Gnostic' or Kabbalistic systems, whilst the above passage perhaps more immediately suggests *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation[263].

To give a brief *précis* of our observations thus far, we have identified several potential examples of contact between 'Gnostic' thought streams and the *Bahir*; in particular, I wish to highlight the fact that possible parallels to *Orig. W.* have occurred repeatedly, *perhaps* suggesting this text as the most likely source for 'Gnostic' influence. More shall be said on this later, but we should offer here a few *caveats*, so as to avoid prematurely drawing too optimistic an opinion regarding the 'Gnostics' and the *Bahir*. As we noted above, whilst we are unlikely to be able to identify direct *textual* parallels between our sources, a comparison of specific conceptual ideas could help us to locate related texts, and by approaching the matter in this way, we have managed to identify points of similarity. What is notable, however, is that we do not find in the *Bahir* a consistent reproduction of elements from any *one* 'Gnostic' thought stream; indeed, as we saw, some sections of the text seem closer to 'Sethian' thought, others to 'Valentinian'. Although the stratified nature of the *Bahir* suggests the possibility of borrowings having been made from several traditions, it is more difficult to demonstrate a clear chain of transmission if the latter sources do not appear to stand in real continuity with any one particular thought stream. Indeed, alongside the 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians', we have also highlighted the possibility of influences from 'Gnostic' texts potentially separate from those groups, *Eugnostos* and *Orig. W.* (the latter of which is in fact our most constant source of similarity), as well as possible, or in some case quite probable, influences from the Hekhaloth literature, Merkabah and *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation, and *Yetzirah*. One might then be forced to question whether the *Bahir* could essentially be a highly syncretic text, formed from a redaction of several sections, each drawing from different sources. The answer to such a question cannot, however, be properly surmised without consideration of whether it is possible, and if so how, that any of these older sources might have been transmitted to the writer(s) of the *Bahir*. As previously

[263] As indicated above, we shall return in subsequent chapters to consider further points related both to the use of homologies and to the role of the *Shi'ur Qomah*.

indicated, we shall move to examine this matter in later chapters, but I wish for the moment to highlight the problem that if one focuses on specific examples of similarity, then such conclusions as are raised must by necessity be restricted to the incidentals of any system. The paradox of the matter is that whilst a focus on the specific is certainly the surest way to proceed, true demonstration of the influence of one system on another, as opposed to mere demonstration of syncretism in the later system, requires a similarity between the 'overarching theme(s)' of both systems. By definition, however, such themes cannot be identified in highly specific examples, and thus whilst comparison of them may be both necessary and fruitful, such an exercise does carry a far greater danger of straying into the realm of 'parallelomania'. It is thus to this consideration that I wish to turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 5
Correspondence and Coincidence:
Kabbalistic and 'Gnostic' Systems, and the Question of Ubiquitous Ideas

As noted in the last chapter, we have hitherto concentrated chiefly on very specific instances of potential textual-conceptual similarities between our sources; it may now therefore be somewhat germane to offer some careful observations concerning potential similarities between the broader motifs of our 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic thought streams. In doing so, however, we must strive to avoid the dangers of 'parallelomania', a term outlined in an important essay by Samuel Sandmel, a few observations from which it is highly worth reproducing here:

> "We might for our purposes define parallelomania as that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction. The key word in my essay is extravagance. I am not denying that literary parallels and literary influence, in the form of source and derivation, exist... I am speaking words of caution about exaggerations about the parallels and about source and derivation...
>
> An important consideration is the difference between an abstract position on the one hand and the specific application on the other... Detailed study is the criterion, and the detailed study ought to respect the context and not be limited to juxtaposing mere excerpts. Two passages may sound the same in splendid isolation from their context, but when seen in context reflect difference rather than similarity." [264]

Now, the application of Sandmel's *caveats* to our study should be immediately obvious. As we have noted above, simply identifying potential similarities between our sources does not in itself prove that the 'Gnostics' directly influenced the Kabbalah. Moreover, as we have observed, the particular context of the textual examples previously cited should not be overlooked; most especially, we recall that the *Bahir* appears as a highly stratified redacted work, which less evinces a clear overall position, but rather appears to contain a polyphony of different ideas, often varying from one section to the next. Similarly, whilst we have adduced comparisons in several 'Gnostic' sources, it has been surprising to realise that in the wider context these sources do not all belong to the same 'Gnostic' thought stream, but seem instead to reflect more a highly selective borrowing of individual elements from disparate sources. Indeed, as we saw above, it may well be that the difference between our sources is more striking than the similarity.

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[264] S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania' (1962), pp.1-13.

An especial utility of these *caveats* comes, however, if we bring them to bear on some of the broader similarities that we might find in our sources; as we mentioned previously, the sources themselves cannot necessarily be said to perfectly adhere to such a broad picture. In particular, we note that if one speaks of a broad definition of 'Kabbalistic theosophy', whilst many of its constituent elements may find their genesis in the Kabbalah within the *Bahir*, they sit there alongside other, often competing, ideas and motifs which would not generally be included in this definition; our earlier discussion on the uses of *middoth* and *sarim* in the *Bahir*, which would eventually become the 'typically Kabbalistic' idea of the *Sefirot*, is a prototypical example of this. Furthermore, as we also saw demonstrated in slightly different contexts in chapters 1 and 3, as a definition or description is broadened to take into account otherwise disparate sources, so it becomes less specific to the tradition it aims to represent, and becomes on an abstract level barely, if at all, distinguishable from numerous other traditions, thought streams, or philosophies.

As an illustrative example of this point, lets us recall the arguments made above in chapter 3 in relation to the schema of ascent and descent in 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic thought[265]. As we observed, viewed in a broad perspective both of these thought streams evince similar concepts of an economy of creation enacted through a descent from the highest level of divinity, which in turn provides a pattern for ascent, in a sense the return of the soul, through this schema, to approach the divine. As we also noted, however, such a schema could, to an extent, be said to be a relatively common element of 'mysticism', and we highlighted comparable examples in the writings of Plotinus and Augustine[266]. Now, by recalling these earlier conclusions here, I wish to introduce several observations which may prove determinative for our thesis. Firstly, it is immediately notable that we can generally only make comparisons of this sort by reference to the wider, perhaps more abstract 'over-arching ideas' of the systems we aim to describe. To elucidate, whilst in the last chapter we purposely focused on specific incidents of conceptual (though for obvious reasons not precise textual) correspondences between our sources, it seems logical to conclude that if we are to reasonably speak of any *real* influence of 'Gnostic' thought on the Kabbalah, we should need to demonstrate a certain level of similarity not only in regard to incidental occurrences, but also in regard to the broader motifs or, as it were, the basic theosophic assumptions of these respective thought streams. That is to say that, apart from identifying reasonably exact

[265] See above, pp.39ff.
[266] E.g. *Enneads* III.4.3, V.1.4; Augustine, *Confessions* X.6.9-7.12.

textual correspondences between our sources, if we are to show that the 'Gnostics' had a *determinative* influence on the development of the Kabbalah, then we must show that each operated within roughly comparable broad systems. Our second observation, however, is that, as our discussion in chapter 3 highlighted, it can be particularly difficult to prove that these broad, and indeed somewhat abstract correspondences, necessarily demonstrate the influence of one system upon another. We identified such similarities between a number of so-called 'mystic' systems, and noted that they may better be explained as the outworking of a general schema of 'mystic' development in different religious contexts rather than as proof of the direct dependence of one 'mysticism' upon another. Moreover, as Sandmel's above *caveats* caution us, when one seeks to identify such abstract correspondences, it is far too easy to devolve into parallelomania, seeing proof of direct dependence where there may be none. This leads us to our third observation, namely that since, as we have argued, the *Bahir* is generally our earliest extant text for the Kabbalah, it is there that we must look for proof of 'Gnostic' influence. We note, however, that since the *Bahir* seems to be a highly stratified and often contradictory text, it is difficult to speak of it as expressing any one overall system; this fact of course also applies to our 'Gnostic' sources since, as we saw, such examples of correspondence as we have located do not belong all to the same 'group', but are rather often drawn from a variety of sources, be they 'Sethian', 'Valentinian', or neither. In this context then, I wish to highlight in this chapter the interesting possibility that between these 'Gnostic' sources and the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, there exists a far higher level of abstract correspondence than we have hitherto seen. The relatively late date of Luria's thought within the Kabbalah, however, makes it perhaps much more unlikely that there could have been any dependence between these two systems, and therefore suggests that we must either dismiss the validity of these proposed similarities, or else ascribe them to either mere coincidence, or potentially the independent development of similar ideas in diverse groups, an idea akin to our discussion in chapter 3 of the 'general characteristics of mysticism'. We shall return to this discussion regarding the Lurianic Kabbalah later in this chapter, but for now I wish to highlight my final observation, that in any given case where we identify potential similarities, it surely behoves us to either formulate a reasonable hypothesis regarding the connection of the relevant sources, or else to search for another explanation, one not dependant on the concept of direct genetic dependence.

To expand on the above points, I wish here to offer a few brief examples of potential correspondences between the systems of our 'Gnostic' sources and those of the *Bahir* (the latter, as we have argued, being perhaps the only Kabbalistic source for which we might argue that direct descent from the 'Gnostics' is a possibility); what I wish to highlight in so doing, however, is that in each case there exist crucial differences in the systems, and as such we may be better served in postulating their independent, as opposed to related, development.

As a first example I wish to offer a consideration of Scholem's hypothesis that the occurrence in some sections of the *Bahir* of two somewhat different yet seemingly related *middoth* (specifically the 2nd and the 10th), which are both identified as חכמה (*Ḥokhmah*, 'wisdom'), evinces a clear genetic relationship between these sections and the 'Gnostic' concept (primarily, but perhaps not wholly, 'Valentinian') of the 'double-Sophia'[267]. Now, I do not wish to obscure our investigation at this point by concentrating too heavily on the respective theosophies of the 'Gnostic' 'double-Sophia' and the role of *Ḥokhmah* in the *Bahir*, but what I do wish to argue is that the level of correspondence between the two which Scholem highlights is by no means enough to prove, nor indeed automatically suggest, any level of direct relationship. To take then, briefly, each of these theosophies in turn, we begin with the idea of the 'double-Sophia' in the 'Gnostic' texts, and the suggestion that 'Valentinian' thought in particular seems to conceive of two 'wisdoms', a higher and lower one, of which the lower is generally responsible for the erroneous creation of the Demiurge figure. It is perhaps, however, worth noting that amongst our primary 'Valentinian' sources, we have surprisingly little attestation of this idea or indeed of 'Gnostic' myth in general. Arguably the clearest outlines of cosmogonical myth we have in our primary 'Valentinian' sources are to be found in the texts the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I.5) and '*A Valentinian Exposition*' (XI.2), but in neither of these is the concept of the 'double-Sophia' as responsible for creation readily apparent. Indeed, *Tri. Trac.* generally expounds its myth using the imagery of ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ, in place of the perhaps more common 'Gnostic' ⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ (and in any case, generally uses only a singular *Logos*), whilst although *Val. Exp.* does use the figure of Sophia, the fragmentary nature of the text (especially in the section 31:1-33:32) makes it difficult to conclude that a 'double-Sophia' is mentioned. As such, our clearest version of 'Valentinian' myth is probably, therefore, the presentation by Irenaeus (*Haer.* I.1.1 – 8.5) of Ptolemy's version of Valentinus's system (see further *Appendix I* below, on the question of the reliability of this account)[268]. According to this myth, wisdom (Sophia), the last of a group of twelve aeons, recklessly sought to know her parent, and in so doing inadvertently generated Achamōth, the

[267] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.91-97.
[268] C.f. also Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.11.1; 21.5.

lower wisdom, who in turn generated the Demiurge, and thus the creation. Whilst this account of a 'double-Sophia' is, as we have noted, clearer than anything found in our extant primary 'Gnostic' sources, we might also make mention of an illustrative passage from *Gos. Phil.* (II.60:10-15), which seems to speak specifically of two wisdoms, (although this interpretation is not necessarily straightforward, see further *Appendix II* below):

> "Echamoth is one thing and Echmoth another. Echamoth is Wisdom simply, but Echmoth is the Wisdom of death which is the one which knows death, which is called 'the little Wisdom'..."[269]

Similarly, as Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley for one has observed, *Gos. Phil.* also potentially makes an equation between the 'higher' heavenly figure of Wisdom, and the 'lower' earthly figure of Mary (although, again, on this see further the observations made in *Appendix II*)[270]. The particular intricacies of the systems outlined here need not, however, draw our focus for the moment; for our current purposes it is simply necessary to note the presence in these texts of the idea of two 'wisdom' figures, a 'higher' and a 'lower'.

Let us now then contrast the above observations with Scholem's analysis of the *Bahir*, and his argument that in the text the designation of *Ḥokhmah* as a *middah* is applied in two different ways, thereby creating what he sees as a corresponding idea of higher and lower manifestations of wisdom[271]. As Scholem notes, in the later Kabbalah a reasonably clear distinction would be made between *Ḥokhmah*, the 2nd *sefirah*, the 'wisdom of God', and the 10th *sefirah*, which as the manifestation of the divine presence on earth, embodies in a sense the earthly forms of the divine qualities, including, for example, the 'wisdom of Solomon' (i.e. earthly wisdom, which stands both in contrast, yet also in relation to, the divine wisdom)[272]. Such a level of separation is not yet, however, apparent in the *Bahir*; for example, a constant symbol of the 'wisdom of Solomon' is generally lacking in the text, and indeed in §44 the last *sefirah*, which would later be more commonly identified as מלכות (*Malkuth*), is instead referred to as חכמת אלהים. Now, whilst I see no real reason to dispute Scholem's argument that the more implicit distinction contained in the *Bahir* most likely formed the genesis for the later Kabbalistic development of this point, I am not, however,

269 Trans. W.W. Isenberg, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.139-160.
270 E.g. *Gos. Phil.* II.59:11-60:1; 63:30-33. J.J. Buckley, 'Double Name' (1988), pp.211-227. C.f. also K. Rudolph's response to Buckley in the same volume, pp.228-238.
271 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.91-94.
272 *Ibid.* Note that these could also be used as symbols for the idea of a heavenly and earthly Torah, or for the Written and Oral Torah (see, for example, §3 of the *Bahir*, and p.55 above). C.f. D. Ariel, *Kabbalah* (2006), pp.75-81, 90-102, 143f.

convinced by his thesis that this schema of a higher and lower *Ḥokhmah* bears a close enough relation to the 'double-Sophia' of our 'Gnostic' texts as to demonstrate a genetic connection. Although on a *prima facie* level the occurrence of two 'wisdoms' in both systems might seem to indicate a probable connection, it seems to me that the differences between the two are somewhat more striking than their similarities. At perhaps the most basic level, it is as well to recall that, generally speaking, in the 'Gnostic' texts the Sophia figure is rarely presented in a wholly positive light. Indeed, in the *Gos. Phil.* text above, we potentially have a 'lower Sophia' described as the "Wisdom of death", whilst the account in Irenaeus speaks of this figure in even more unflattering terms:

> "...because she alone had been left without, she then resigned herself to every sort of that manifold and varied state of passion to which she was subject; and thus she suffered grief on the one hand because she had not obtained the object of her desire, and fear on the other hand, lest life itself should fail her, as light had already done, while, in addition, she was in the greatest perplexity. All these feelings were associated with ignorance. And this ignorance of hers was not like that of her mother, the first Sophia, an Æon, due to degeneracy by means of passion, but to an {innate} opposition {of nature to knowledge}. Moreover, another kind of passion fell upon her (Achamoth) [*sic*], namely, that of desiring to return to him who gave her life. **2** This collection {of passions} they declare was the substance of the matter from which this world was formed. For from {her desire of} returning {to him who gave her life}, every soul belonging to this world, and that of the Demiurge himself, derived its origin. All other things owed their beginning to her terror and sorrow..."[273]

The 'lower Sophia' figure presented in this account is thus portrayed somewhat unsympathetically, and indeed, is shown to be in some sense indirectly responsible for the presence of evil in the world, an accusation that may also be extended to the 'higher Sophia' who is, in turn, responsible for Achamōth's generation. Furthermore, the very appellation 'Sophia' appears as a potentially rather ironic title, as far from wisdom, it is the ignorance of both the 'higher' and 'lower' Sophia that is stressed. Now, whilst this observation scarcely proves anything, it must surely lead us to suspect whether the Kabbalah (which, after all, remained largely within normative Judaism) would have consciously adopted the motif of the 'double-Sophia' from a 'Gnostic' tradition, given that the motif within that tradition is so strongly tied to this negative evaluation. Indeed, given that *Ḥokhmah*, as we have seen, is equated in the *Bahir* with both divine wisdom and the Torah, we must seriously wonder whether a medieval Jew, remaining within normative Judaism, would not have found the correlation of this term with the 'Gnostic' 'double-Sophia' at best alien, and at worst insulting. Of course, this is merely supposition, but it does serve to highlight the fact that the

[273] Irenaeus *Haer.* I.4.1f., ANF translation (2007), p.321.

two *middoth* of *Ḥokhmah* in the Bahir are wholly without the negative connotations that are found in what Scholem adduces as 'Gnostic' parallels to this motif. Again, that is not to say that this 'Gnostic' 'double-Sophia' exists as a purely negative conception, simply that it is not a wholly positive one, an estimation which could scarcely be made of the Bahir's *Ḥokhmah*, and that given this stark difference between the two motifs, one must surely be led to reconsider the level of probability that they might be directly related.

We shall return to the above point in a moment, but I wish to briefly recall here our earlier observation that in order for one to reasonably argue for a direct dependence from the 'Gnostics', it may well be necessary to show that the ideas contained in the *Bahir* can be shown to have all originated from the same 'Gnostic' thought stream. In this context, we then note that a potentially fatal flaw in Scholem's thesis arises when one considers that although he begins his argument with reference to the 'double-Sophia' as an idea of the 'Gnostics', "especially those of the Valentinian school", he quickly abandons these sources in order to draw comparisons between the *Bahir* (especially §90) and the *Acts of Thomas*, in particular that portion of the latter text which incorporates the *Hymn of the Pearl*[274]. Now, it is important to stress that this latter text is essentially a part of what might be called the 'Thomas literature', a body of writings which, whilst they might bear certain parallels to some elements of 'Gnostic' systems, do not, as Bentley Layton argues "necessarily presuppose such a system", and indeed show "no unmistakeable signs of being Valentinian or classically gnostic [*sic*]"; rather they presuppose little more than "an uncomplicated Hellenistic myth of the divine origins of the self"[275]. Furthermore, the *Acts of Thomas* itself does not really make use of the idea of a 'double-Sophia'; rather, it refers purely to the fall of the soul into the human body. It seems to me, therefore, that when Scholem refers to the usage of motifs potentially similar to those of the *Hymn of the Pearl* in §90 of the *Bahir* (which refers to the 10th *middah*, i.e. the 'lower' *Ḥokhmah*), he can hardly be said to have proven that the 'double-Sophia' is a motif in the *Bahir* adopted from the 'Gnostics'[276]. Indeed, if anything, one might argue that what this shows is simply the independent existence in the *Bahir* of a motif of two *middoth* identified as *Ḥokhmah*, a motif to which 'Gnostic' (or in actual fact 'Thomasine') influences were appended! We shall return to certain points of

274 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.93-95.
275 B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.360. C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81; G. Filoramo, *Gnosticism* (1990), pp.7-13. Note that those systems which Layton identifies as 'classically Gnostic' roughly correspond to those which we have defined as 'Sethian'. C.f. the analysis in M.A. Williams, 'Gnostic Religion?' (2005), pp.55-79.
276 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.94f.

this analysis in later chapters, in the context of discussions regarding the 'independence' of ideas, but I wish here to once more stress that nothing in Scholem's argument really seems to me to suggest that the two *Ḥokhmah* in the *Bahir* and the 'double-Sophia' in 'Valentinian' literature are remarkably similar, much less directly related[277].

In spite of the above conclusions, however, the fact still remains that in the *Bahir* we do find these two *Ḥokhmah* which, even if in important ways distinct from the concept of the 'double-Sophia', do bear some analogical resemblance to it, and it thus behoves us to ask whence originated this duality of wisdom in the Kabbalistic text. In line with the observations made at the beginning of this chapter, what I wish to suggest is at least the possibility that these *roughly* similar concepts could have originated independently in two different contexts. As an illustrative example, Jonathan Z. Smith, in his work on religious taxonomy, has argued for the possibility of an understanding of certain religious systems as expressing an above / below duality: which is to say that the 'above' (i.e. the heavenly realm/s) might serve "ideologically as a template for the 'below'". Smith argues for the possibility of a "vertical myth, which overlays the horizontal reality", and thus to some extent leads to a conception of the possibility of ascent to the ideal world above, either as a means to itself, or as a method of acquiring divine knowledge for use on earth[278]. The particularly interesting aspect of these observations, however, is that they are not intended to apply to one particular religion or thought system, but rather to serve as a general assessment of the relatively constant way in which human expressions of religion and/or myth repeatedly function.

Now, we mentioned in the previous chapter the homologies made between the *middoth* of the divine in the *Bahir*, and their analogous versions in the human sphere; similarly, we also noted the evidence in the 'Gnostic' texts of potential homologies between the heavenly beings and the elements of mankind[279]. If we also recall the observations made earlier regarding the schema of ascent and descent in both our 'Gnostic' systems and the Kabbalah, then it seems at least possible that we might here be dealing with the sort of religious or mythic systems that Smith describes[280]. If this is the case, then we may potentially be justified in applying certain 'general religious characteristics' to our various systems, as a

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[277] C.f. below, pp.110.
[278] J. Z. Smith, 'Here, There' (2004), pp.323-339.
[279] See above, pp.74ff.
[280] See above, pp.39ff.

possible explanation for the rough similarities of concept which we identify between them. Whilst I shall return to this idea in significantly more depth in later chapters, what I wish to briefly suggest at this juncture is the possibility that what we have found here in our sources are a number of examples of an above / below duality, where what exists 'below' (usually, but by definition not necessarily, in the human sphere) is essentially modelled on the form of what is 'above'. Of course, the logic of this system presupposes that what is 'below' must obviously be less perfect than what is 'above'; which is not to assume that what is above *is* perfect, simply that it is more so than its lower counterpart. Viewed in this way then, we might explain both the dual *Ḥokhmah* of the *Bahir* and the 'double-Sophia' of the 'Valentinian' evidence; we might also add, by way of comparison, both the passage from *Gos. Phil.* mentioned above (63:30-33), where the earthly figure of Mary potentially emerges as a counterpart to the heavenly wisdom, and the 'Sethian Gnostic' duality of the heavenly Seth and the earthly Seth[281]. Given this rather wide field of examples, let me therefore once again stress that an advantage of this method is that it does not presuppose any absolute qualitative valuation of the entities it encompasses, only a relative one. As such, therefore, whilst the 10th *middah* can be said to be inferior to the 2nd, both can still be evaluated positively; similarly, whilst the 'higher Sophia' is thus seen as superior to Achamōth, they are still both, as we saw above, regarded in a rather negative light. The advantage of this comparative method over a theory of direct dependence, which to an extent requires that a similar assessment be made of both motifs, should thus be obvious. I do not, however, wish to attempt at this point to draw any major conclusions regarding the utility of this method for the wider scope of our thesis; it is after all, almost by definition somewhat hypothetical. It does, however, raise the possibility that where we encounter instances of similar, but scarcely exact abstract correspondences, we may be better served in postulating independent development along similar lines rather than direct dependence.

In light of these observations, it is perhaps now germane to offer here, as indicated earlier in this chapter, a brief synthesis of the Kabbalistic system of Isaac Luria, with particular reference to the role played in this system by concepts of exile and divine tragedy. As I hope to show, the central role given to these themes in the Lurianic system, whilst largely new to the Kabbalah, may present a surprising parallel to the mythologies of the 'Sethians' and

[281] E.g. *Apoc. John* II.9:11-24; 24:35-25:16, *Gos. Eg.* III.54:1ff. C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Seth in Gnostic Literature' (2006), pp.52-83; J.J. Buckley, *op. cit.*, pp.211-227.

‘Valentinians’. As we have previously argued, however, the relatively late date of Luria within the Kabbalah potentially decreases the possibility of a direct dependence on the ‘Gnostic’ sources, a conclusion also supported by the noticeable differences which we might locate between the Lurianic and ‘Gnostic’ systems. Nonetheless, as we shall see, it is perhaps the Lurianic formulation of Kabbalah which is in abstract closest to our ‘Gnostic’ evidence, thereby suggesting a certain level of plausibility for our theory of the independent, yet somewhat complementary development of otherwise diverse theosophic systems.

Let us first note that there exists no specific written espousal of Isaac Luria’s system by the man himself; apart from a commentary on that section of the *Zohar* known as the *Sifra di-Tseniutha* (‘Book of Concealment’) which, as Scholem highlights, contains little thought that may be called peculiar to Luria, we possess no real writing of his comprehensively dealing with his theosophy, and indeed it is doubtful whether he ever produced one[282]. We are thus primarily reliant on those writings of Luria’s disciples which purport to record the thoughts and sayings of their teacher, specifically the writings of Ḥayim Vital and Joseph ibn Tabul, along with a number of anonymous texts which refer to Luria’s teachings. As Scholem argues, since several of these writings appear to have been “written independently of each other”, in particular those of Vital and Tabul, who seem to have been somewhat antagonistic rivals, we can therefore reasonably conclude that elements common to multiple versions “may safely be regarded as the authentic Lurianic doctrine”[283].

Now, although we cannot, unfortunately, afford in this thesis to delve too deeply into the fascinating theosophy of the Lurianic Kabbalah, what I wish to highlight here is the central position given in Isaac Luria’s system to the concept of exile, and the view of creation as stemming from a primordial divine tragedy, the negative effects of which must subsequently be corrected by the inhabitants of the resultant created world. The Lurianic schema essentially begins with the assumption that since the divine is infinite, it must logically encompass and pervade all potential existence; therefore, if creation is something that is not identical with the divine, then it could not have come into being within the all-encompassing divine. As such, the Lurianic system proposed that in the primordial state prior to creation,

[282] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.253f. As Scholem notes, [*Ibid.*, p.386, n.9] the slightly strange title *Sifra di-Tseniutha* is essentially a metaphrase in the *Zohar*’s Aramaic of the Hebrew מגילת סתרים. Regarding Luria’s works, there are also extant several commentaries on certain passages from the *Zohar*, as well as his mystical hymns, which are even today common in several Sephardic prayer books; unfortunately, none of these contain enough theosophic details to be relevant to our purposes here.
[283] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.254.

the divine underwent a self-imposed ‘contraction’ (צמצום, *tzimtzum*), withdrawing from a part of existence in order to generate a space in which creation could occur; arguably, this withdrawal can be viewed as the first instance of exile in the Lurianic system[284]. Following the *tzimtzum*, the divine light of the infinite flowed down through the vessels of the *Sefirot*, and through this process creation was effected; unfortunately, however, the intensity of the light was too great for the less-divine containers of the *Sefirot*, and thus occasioned the cosmic tragedy referred to in Lurianic Kabbalah as the ‘shattering of the vessels’. The vessels of all but *Keter*, *Ḥokhmah*, and *Binah* (the three highest *sefirot*, and therefore the ones most akin to the infinite divine) ‘shattered’ under the force of the divine light, and their fragments (קליפות, *qelippot*), along with the now splintered ‘sparks of the divine light’, fell into ‘the abyss’ (i.e. the primordial space, or at least part of it, resulting from the *tzimtzum*, and therefore to some extent the location of the created world), another occurrence of exile in the Lurianic system[285]. The result of this cosmic tragedy is that the flow of divine light is disrupted, and thus so too is the proper ordering of creation: that the people of Israel are in exile is perhaps the paradigmatic illustration of this fact, an instance of earthly exile mirroring the occurrence of exile in the heavenly sphere[286]. The task required, therefore, of both the individual and of the corporate communion of Israel, is one of restoration (תיקון, *tiqqun*), returning the exiled elements of the divine to their rightful place, and restoring the correct flow of the divine light, so as to effect the reordering of creation into its proper

[284] E.g. Ḥayim Vital, *Peri ‘etz ḥayim* (*PEH)*, Hekhal I, Shaar 1. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.260-264; D. Ariel, *Kabbalah* (2006), pp.173-175.

[285] E.g. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal I, Shaar 1; Hekhal 2, Shaar 8, 11. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.265-268; D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.175-179. It is worth noting that Moshe Idel [*Kabbalah* (1988), pp.264-267] disputes Scholem’s assessment of the importance of exile in the Lurianic system, as he feels that this conclusion owes too much to Scholem’s overly dogmatic view of systemic progression from the 1492 Expulsion→Lurianic Kabbalah→Shabbetianism→Ḥasidism and ignores the fact that the Ashkenazic Luria *may* have seen the mass exodus of Sephardim to the Holy Land post-expulsion in a theologically positive light. Whilst I generally agree with Idel’s *caveat* that to connect the Expulsion with Luria’s thought is to interpose psychology between history and theosophy, a thesis that is not easily proven (given that the extant Lurianic works do not explicitly refer to the Expulsion), I remain unconvinced that the Expulsion and Lurianic Kabbalah are wholly unrelated. Although the theme of exile is often recurrent in Jewish thought, that it takes a more prominent role (even if not *as* prominent a role as Scholem claims) in the Lurianic Kabbalah than it did in any pre-Expulsion Kabbalah does not seem to me coincidental. Furthermore, the subsequent spread and relatively wide appeal of Luria’s system (despite the original protective esotericism of his disciples) suggests a certain amenability of his thought to post-Expulsion Jews, an amenability more easily explained if Luria’s theosophy was *to some extent* dependant on the fact of the Expulsion. In any case, our focus here merely requires a recognition that there is, as we have seen, *some* element of exile in Luria’s thought, such as may correspond to ‘Gnostic’ usages of exile (which, incidentally, are not generally particularly explicit) in their systems. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.256-258, 273-278, 284-286; M. Idel, ‘Particularism and Universalism’ (1992), pp.324-344.

[286] C.f. also our observations above, pp.87f., regarding the common occurrence of an above / below duality in certain religious systems.

design[287]. This is generally seen to be accomplished through the observance of the halakha, as whilst the mere act of observance is itself effective in restoring the flow of the light, greater efficacy in the accomplishment of *tiqqun* is achieved through halakhic observance coupled with the proper 'mystical intention' (*kavvanah*), the latter being based upon a true, which is to say theosophical, understanding of the reason and role of one's action[288]. Ultimately, therefore, the Lurianic system envisages the true role of the Jew as essentially theurgic, restoring, or indeed completing the divine and undoing the original cosmic tragedy, thereby redeeming the world: as the exile of the divine on earth is negated, so too is the exile of Israel[289].

Admittedly, the above is but a brief outline model of the particularly complex Lurianic system, but for our present purposes it should suffice as a workable summary of Luria's thought which, as we shall see, potentially holds a closer degree of similarity to our 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' systems than any other strand of Kabbalistic theosophy which we have hitherto encountered. In particular, let us note the schema of a divine tragedy, which occasions a fall, and ultimately leads to the exile and isolation of elements of divinity on earth, from whence they must be returned to their proper place in the divine sphere. We can note a certain conceptual similarity with our 'Gnostic' mythologies, insofar as they present creation as the result of the heavenly tragedy of Sophia's inadvertent or ignorant generation of a lower power (most commonly Yaldabaoth in the 'Sethian' systems, or the 'lower Sophia' amongst the 'Valentinians'), and her accidental transmission (which we *might* view as an exile) of some part of her divine power into this being, and from there into mankind, from where it can be redeemed and allowed to return to its proper heavenly place[290]. We might also add to this a particular example from Ptolemy's myth, as recorded in Irenaeus, wherein the 'lower Sophia', Achamōth, is effectively exiled from the Plērōma (an event which in turn leads to the creation of the material world), until such time as her exiled power is returned unto her:

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287 E.g. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal 5, Shaar 26; Hekhal 7, Shaar 42. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.273-281; D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.179f.

288 E.g. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal 5, Shaar 26. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.274-278; D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-154, 179f.

289 E.g. Vital, *Sefer ha-mitzvot*, v.9, *Shaare kedushah*, helik 3, Shaar 2. C.f. M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.179ff; G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.273-284. Note that the ideas of *tiqqun*, *kavvanah*, and their theurgic application are by no means unique to Luria; they are already clearly present in the *Zohar* (e.g. II.57a, III.294a-b). What is unique, however, is Luria's especial focus on their role in repairing a divine tragedy. C.f. D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp. pp. 149-154, 206ff.

290 E.g. *Apoc. John* NHC II.9:25-10:23; 19:15-20:9; 25:9-26:7, *Hyp. Arch.* II.87:4-20; 96:17-97:20, Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.1.1 – 8.5, etc.

> "When all the seed shall have come to perfection, they state that then their mother Achamoth [*sic*] shall pass from the intermediate place, and enter in within the Pleroma [*sic*]... The spiritual seed, again, being divested of their animal souls, and becoming intelligent spirits, shall in an irresistible and invisible manner enter in within the Pleroma, and be bestowed as brides on those angels who wait upon the Saviour..."[291]

Now, whilst it should be self-evident that the thematic system of the exile and redemption of divine elements outlined above scarcely forms an *exact* correspondence to the Lurianic system, it does seem to me that we have at least identified a closer *conceptual* similarity with our 'Gnostic' systems than we have so far seen in any earlier strains of the Kabbalah. That we have not identified any precise correspondence should hardly be surprising, not least because of the relatively late date of Isaac Luria (1534-1572) within the development of the Kabbalah; if we also here recall Sandmel's *caveats* regarding 'parallelomania', then I believe we can reasonably conclude that the thematic similarity identified above attests not to a genetic relationship between the 'Gnostics' and this late branch of Kabbalah but rather, as we have argued, to the independent development of complementary ideas[292]. Indeed, in this instance, even Scholem argues that:

> "...the form in which Luria presented his ideas is strongly reminiscent of the Gnostic myths of antiquity. *The similarity is, of course, unintentional*; the fact is simply that the structure of his thoughts closely resembles that of the Gnostics."[293]

In support of this thesis, therefore, I now wish to turn to an examination of the precise level of similarity between our 'Gnostic' systems and the Lurianic Kabbalah. As I hope to demonstrate, it should in each instance be observable that whilst there may exist certain conceptual similarities, ultimately it is the differences between the two systems that are far more noticeable, to the extent that rather than explaining the correspondences as the latter system re-describing its genetic antecedent within a different paradigm, it may well be more logical to speak of the independent development of systems that to some extent resemble

[291] Irenaeus *Haer.* I.7.1, ANF translation (2007), p.325. C.f. *Apoc. John* II.13:32-14:13.
[292] See also above, pp.86f., where we noted, in the context of the 'Thomas literature', the relative ubiquity of the idea of a heavenly soul (or similar) falling / being exiled into creation, there to await redemption. C.f. B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.360.
[293] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.260. Emphasis added. Interestingly, Idel [*Kabbalah* (1988), pp.112-122] argues that a genetic connection between the 'Gnostics' and the Lurianic Kabbalah *can* be demonstrated. His hypothesis, however, largely rests on the observation that Monoïmus (a heretic described by Hippolytus in *Refutation* 8.5-8), the 'Untitled Treatise' of the Bruce Codex (which we have identified as *perhaps* definable as 'Sethian', since it evinces some dependence on *Marsanes*), and the Lurianic Kabbalah all espouse a roughly similar depiction of Adam as primordial man, constituted as a decad, and containing all creation within himself. I am, however, disinclined to agree with Idel on this point, both on the basis of our prior observations regarding the late placement of Luria's thought in the Kabbalistic spectrum as well as the fact that speculation regarding a primordial man is arguably a relatively universal concept (c.f. pp.97ff. below).

each other, *perhaps* due to a certain outworking of a particular widespread religious consciousness[294].

In the first place, it is worth highlighting that the Lurianic system expresses its conception of divine power through the imagery of ‘light’ (אור); this stands in noticeable contrast to our ‘Gnostic’ systems which, as we saw above, whilst expressing a similar conceptual system, do not generally utilise any ‘light’ motif, preferring instead to speak of the divine elements in terms such as ‘spirit/breath’ (usually either **ⲚⲒϤⲈ** or **ⲠⲚⲀ̅**), or even simply ‘power’ (**ϬⲞⲘ** or **ⲆⲨⲚⲀⲘⲒⲤ**)[295]. As we shall have occasion to note later (below, pp.161ff.), the use of such terms in ‘Gnostic’ texts seems to in many cases be the result of inference drawn from the Old Testament creation narratives, a source which, of course, would also have been highly familiar to Luria. As such, therefore, should one wish to propose that the Lurianic Kabbalah *was* directly related to ‘Gnostic’ thought, then one must first supply an answer to the question of why Luria should have rejected the scripturally based motifs of his sources in favour of a different motif of ‘light’. Let us add now another point to this observation, specifically that whilst, as we saw, ‘Gnostic’ and Lurianic thought share a similar concept of a divine tragedy, a stark contrast arises in that the latter, quite unlike the ‘Gnostics’, does *not* structure this tragedy around the ‘fall’ of Sophia; the same arguments which we adduced above against the identification of the ‘Gnostic’ Sophia with the *middoth* of the *Bahir* also apply here. Indeed, even should one attempt to identify the 2^{nd} and 10^{th} *sefirot* of the Lurianic system (in which, to be sure, the exile of the 10^{th} *sefirah*, as the community of Israel, is stressed) with the concept of the ‘double-Sophia’, it must be admitted that the correspondence is far from exact[296]. Along with the objections we made earlier regarding such an identification, we also note that in the Lurianic system in particular it is not simply the ‘lower wisdom’ of the 10^{th} *sefirah* which ‘falls’ in the primordial tragedy, but rather, as we saw, it is *all* of the lower vessels which shatter. Furthermore, in contrast to our ‘Gnostic’ texts where, as we saw above, the object of the fall is either Sophia as a single entity (primarily ‘Sethian’) or *both* persons, in turn, of the ‘double-Sophia’ (primarily ‘Valentinian’, most especially Ptolemaic),

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[294] In this context, see also below, pp.110, on the relatively widespread idea of the transmigration of souls, a concept which is arguably common to both ‘Gnostic’ thought and Lurianic Kabbalah, as well as several Hellenistic mythologies and philosophies, and even potentially some strata of the *Bahir*.

[295] E.g. *Apoc. John* NHC II.19:15-20:9, *Hyp. Arch.* II.87:4-11, Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.5.5f. C.f. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal 1, Shaar 1, 7.

[296] E.g. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal 7, Shaar 42, *Sefer ha-mitzvot*, v.9, *Shaare kedushah*, helik 3, Shaar 2.

in the Lurianic Kabbalah it is precisely the vessel of *Ḥokhmah* which, as one of the highest three, does *not* shatter, and is instead able to properly receive the divine light[297].

It is also here perhaps worth briefly considering one of the most controversial elements of Luria's thought, namely the suggestion that the potential origin of evil is to be found within God. As Scholem notes, the existence of *Din* within the divine implies a quality of stern judgment, which is brought to the fore in the act of *tzimtzum* (insofar as this is an act of judgement, which is seen as "the imposition of limits and the correct determination of things")[298]. According to Luria's system, the potential of evil is admixed within the *sefirah* of stern judgment, thereby engendering the inherent weakness towards the light in the lower *qelippot*, leading to their fracture. As such, Scholem argues, the primordial tragedy is thus to be seen as essentially cathartic, a necessary 'accident'; in order to cleanse evil from within the *Sefirot*, it was necessary to eliminate the *qelippot*, thereby allowing evil to take on "a real existence and separate identity"[299]. Of course, the genesis of this idea can be seen in the earlier Kabbalistic ideas which we examined in chapter 4, regarding both the concept of evil as an aspect of God (as we saw in the *Bahir*), and the later development of evil seen as resulting from an unbalanced excess of *Din*[300]. What is astounding, however, in Luria's system is that, as Scholem notes, it seems "to suggest a dualistic conception of God, i.e. one of the most serious heresies"[301]. Furthermore, if we understand the primordial 'shattering' as a necessary cathartic exercise, then the work of *tiqqun* appears not as restorative, but rather as a work of completion; that is to say, the implication is that the divine itself was in the primordial state already flawed, and it is not until the *tiqqun* is complete, and the 'sparks have been raised' without their original contamination by evil (which now exists apart from them in a separate form), that the divine will actually be perfected! It is perhaps, therefore, scarcely surprising that later Kabbalists attempted, as Scholem notes, to mitigate somewhat the conclusions of Luria's system, arguing instead that rather than originally existing within the *Sefirot*, from whence they were necessarily expelled, instead "the powers of evil developed out of the scattered fragments of the vessels". Similarly, whilst Luria's original cathartic system depicts the 'shattering' as a necessary, and thus somewhat foreseen and controlled, event, later depictions stressed instead the chaotic, almost accidental nature of the

[297] C.f. above, pp.83-86, 90.
[298] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.262f.
[299] *Ibid.*, p.265-268. C.f. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal 2, Shaar 8-9, 11.
[300] See above, pp.72ff.
[301] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.267.

event, so that the "emphasis was gradually shifted from the lawful to the catastrophic nature of the process"[302].

Now, this observation becomes relevant to our thesis when we consider that it is arguably these later mitigations of the Lurianic system, stressing the primordial separateness of evil and its somewhat accidental generation, which appear closer to our 'Gnostic' systems than Luria's original cathartic concept. In the first instance, if we recall our observations in chapter 4 regarding the use of 'totality' language to describe the highest divinity, we can, however, see that the pantheistic implications of this thought are not generally worked out in the 'Gnostic' texts[303]. Instead, evil is usually only found to emerge with the 'fall' of Sophia and the creation of the Demiurge figure, events which are attributed to Sophia's failure to conform to the will, or obtain the consent of higher divinities; the logical implication, therefore, is that these higher powers are essentially good, and evil is thus brought into being apart from them[304]. Furthermore, as we have already noted, this 'fall' of Sophia appears as essentially a tragic *accident*, albeit one of her own causing; it does not generally appear as cathartic, and the events which succeed it are thus presented as merely *restoring* the correct order of things as they were before this 'fall', rather than in any sense perfecting the higher divinities, who are already, and eternally, perfected[305]. Given these considerations, therefore, the observation that Luria's original schema was in this matter radically different from those of many 'Gnostics', and was only subsequently diluted to a state where it more resembled these earlier systems, might once again argue for the possibility of our thesis of a general pattern of independent developments.

Following on from this, let us also observe that whilst it may be true, to some extent, to say that both our 'Gnostic' sources and the Lurianic Kabbalah regard the creation as in some sense tragic, due to it being the result of a cosmic catastrophe (intended or not), the particular ways in which these systems regard this tragic nature are noticeably different. In the 'Gnostic' sources which we have just examined, the material world emerges as a largely unintended creation, the result of Sophia's similarly misguided generation of the Demiurge,

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302 G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.266-268.

303 See above, pp.66ff.

304 E.g. *Apoc. John* NHC II.9:25-10:28; 13:13-14:13, *Hyp. Arch.* II.94:4-26, Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.2; 4-6.

305 E.g. *Apoc. John* II.13:32-14:13; 19:15-20:35; 23:20-35; 24:35-32:5, *Hyp. Arch.* II.87:4-88:15; 96:15-97:20, Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.1; 7. C.f. above, pp.83ff. A particular exception might, however, be noted in the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I.5) which not only speaks in reference to ⲗⲟⲅⲟⲥ rather than ⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ, but also repeatedly stresses that the cosmic tragedy and all that followed was both necessary and intended.

who in his arrogance and/or ignorance formed our world; as such, the ultimate redemptive goal is for the divine element in man to leave this world (including the material body), and ascend to its proper place in the heavens[306]. By contrast, as we saw above in reference to the concept of *tiqqun*, the Lurianic system does not view creation itself as inherently tragic; rather, the tragedy lies in the disordered state of creation, which is a result of the 'shattering of the vessels' which was required to expel evil from the divine[307]. Thus, if the created world is flawed, then it is necessarily so, and only for a temporary period; once the work of *tiqqun* (or indeed, perhaps more properly תיקון עולם) is completed, then the flow of the divine light will be restored, the divine will be perfected, and the world will be ordered as it should be, which in the Lurianic formulation includes the cessation of Israel's exile, and in a sense the dawning of the 'messianic age'[308]. Again, therefore, we see an essential difference between the otherwise seemingly similar concepts of 'Gnostic' mythology and Lurianic Kabbalah, in that whilst 'Gnostic' thought generally sees the very existence of the world as a tragedy to be escaped, the Lurianic view, whilst perhaps viewing the world as tragically disordered, nonetheless evaluates the creation itself as fundamentally good, and simply in need, so to speak, of redemption. As a final point of contrast, we might also add the argument of Moshe Idel that 'Gnostic' thought was essentially theoretical, as it viewed salvation as effected through the acquisition of theosophical knowledge, whereas for the more theurgical strains of Kabbalah (of which the Lurianic system is perhaps *the* pre-eminent example), this knowledge was simply a precursor, primarily necessary only insofar as it informed one's actions: "[f]or the Gnostic, the knowledge of one or another cosmogonic scheme was part of the salvific gnosis that enabled him to escape this world; for the theurgical Kabbalist, the theosophical scheme was a blueprint for his modus operandi"[309]. Although there is something persuasive about Idel's contention in the context of our discussion, I am generally inclined, however, to reserve judgement on this point; as we observed in chapter 1 there remain questions as to whether or not certain 'Gnostic' circles viewed γνῶσις alone as sufficient for salvation. Furthermore, as we have previously noted, our lack of concrete evidence regarding the form, role, and status of both ritual and praxis amongst the 'Gnostics' should lead us to be wary of assuming that they were by and large wholly theoretical in their focus[310]. Although, in the

[306] E.g. Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.5-8. C.f. also the references from *Apoc. John* and *Hyp. Arch.* given in the previous note.
[307] C.f. above, pp.90f.
[308] E.g. Vital, *PEH*, Hekhal 1, Shaar 1, 6; Hekhal 7, Shaar 48. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.273-278.
[309] M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.261-264.
[310] C.f. above, pp.8f., 24ff.

main, it is only theosophical 'Gnostic' texts that remain extant, this should not necessarily lead us to assume that practical elements of ritual and theurgy were not as common to the 'Gnostics' as they were to the Lurianic Kabbalists[311].

Ultimately, therefore, whilst we certainly do seem to find that the Lurianic Kabbalah offers correspondences to the 'Gnostics' not found in earlier Kabbalistic strains, both the late date of Luria and the important differences between his system and those of the 'Gnostics' seem to render unlikely any hypothesis of direct dependence; rather, however, it may be that the situation we have outlined better serves instead to support our thesis of independent, though somewhat analogous, development.

Now, in light of the above arguments, I wish finally in this chapter to make some very brief comments on the potential application to our field of the work done by the school of comparative mythology. Such comments as are given here will be necessarily succinct, as whilst we shall return to this hypothesis in far greater depth in the later chapters of this thesis, I for now merely wish to highlight the possibility of this line of inquiry, in particular in relation to the concept of the primordial man. Admittedly, as we noted in chapter 3, both our 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic sources might be better described in essence as 'theosophical' rather than 'mythical', specifically insofar as they are seen to belong more to the third, 'mystic', phase of Scholem's schema of religious development than to the original 'mythic' phase[312]. It is, however, nonetheless undeniable that our texts frequently express their theosophic concepts through somewhat of a 'mythological narrative', a fact which has to some extent enabled our methodology of seeking to identify correspondences between general and specific concepts rather than attempting to locate direct textual parallels. Indeed, if we define 'myth' as a linguistic form which, as Mircea Eliade puts it, "expresses in action and drama what metaphysics and theology define dialectically", then we can surely see the potential application of a comparative mythological approach to the cosmological and cosmogonical narratives which we have hitherto been exploring[313].

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311 On this point, see also the considerations below, pp.141ff., regarding the potential acquaintance of 'Gnostics' with 'alchemy' and the *Hermetica*, especially given that examples of the latter were also found at Nag Hammadi.

312 See above, pp.48-50.

313 M. Eliade, *Comparative Religion* (1958), p.418. C.f. also Y. Liebes, '*De Natura Dei*' (1993), pp.1-64 and M. Idel, 'Rabbinism versus Kabbalism' (1991), pp.281-296 on the role of 'myth' in Judaism and the Kabbalah.

I raise this point here primarily because it seems to me that in relation to the question of potential parallels between disparate groups, systems, or cultures, the work done to date in the sphere of comparative religions and mythologies has generally evinced a more laudably cautious methodology than has often been the case amongst scholars studying the relationship between the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah (as my argumentation in this and preceding chapters hopefully demonstrates). Indeed, to give an example, the scholar of mythology John McKinnell strongly cautions that wherever we draw comparisons, we must differentiate between what is simply "[s]elf-evident similarities of detail", what is evidence of "[d]irect borrowing from one culture into another", and what is an "[i]ndependently occurring example" of a "universal human pattern"[314]. In a comparable observation, E.O.G. Turville-Petre concedes, in the context of his work on Nordic religion, that it "is often difficult to know whether a motive [*sic*] is pagan or Christian, or whether it was common to both traditions": surely a similar *caveat* could be applied to several aspects of our inquiry[315].

We shall, as I have mentioned, return to this point at length in later chapters, but for the moment I wish to utilise a brief application of this comparative method in order to illustrate the difficulties inherent in arguing for filiation between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah *solely* on the basis of conceptual similarities in their mythological narratives. We have previously noted a series of potential correspondences between our texts, based upon the occurrence in each of various series of homologies, including their relation to the constitution of the body of the primordial man[316]. In this context, however, it may be instructive now to consider an interesting work by Bruce Lincoln, in which he provides an analysis of the homologies made regarding primordial man, seen as a microcosm of creation, in a highly varied series of mythic texts including, amongst others, *2 Enoch*, *Puruṣasūkta* (found in the *Rigveda* 10.90), and the Nordic *Grímnismál*[317]. Lincoln notes a surprising level of correspondence between the equations made in these texts, many of which he is even able to compare in tabular format, an example of which I reproduce on the following page for the purposes of illustration and comparison.

[314] J. McKinnell, *Both One and Many* (1994), p.25.
[315] E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion* (1964), p.282.
[316] See above, pp.74ff. C.f. also p.92, n.293.
[317] B. Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society* (1986), pp.1-40.

Semantic analysis of homologies: microcosm → macrocosm[318]

	Microcosmic alloforms								
Text	Flesh	Bone	Hair	Blood	Eyes	Mind	Brain	Head	Breath
	Macrocosmic alloforms								
Grímnismál 40-41	EARTH	MOUNT	TREES	SEA	---	---	CLOUD	HEAVEN	---
Rigveda 10.90	---	---	---	---	SUN	MOON	---	HEAVEN	WIND
"Poem on the Dove King"	EARTH	STONE	---	---	DAWN	MOON	---	---	WIND
Škend Gumānīg Wizār 16.8-20	EARTH	MOUNT	PLANTS	---	---	---	---	HEAVEN	---
Metamorphoses 4.655-662	---	STONE	FOREST	---	---	---	---	TOP OF COSMIC MOUNT	---
II Enoch 30.8	EARTH	STONE	GRASS	DEW	SUN	---	CLOUD	---	WIND
Code of Emsig	EARTH	STONE	GRASS	WATER	SUN	---	CLOUD	---	WIND
British Museum MS.4783 fol.7a	EARTH	STONE	---	SEA	SUN	---	CLOUD	---	WIND
Discourse of Three Saints	light of world	STONE	---	SEA	SUN	---	CLOUD	---	WIND
Aitareya Upaniṣad 1-2	---	---	PLANTS	---	SUN	MOON	---	---	WIND
Greater Bundahišn 28	EARTH	MOUNT	PLANTS	SEA	SUN & moon	---	endless light	HEAVEN	WIND
Peri Hebdomadōn 6	CLAY	STONE	---	RIVER	---	MOON	warm soil	---	AIR
Empedokles	EARTH	STONE	LEAVES	---	---	---	---	---	AIR & aither

[318] Excerpted from B. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p.21.

It is of course immediately obvious that the correspondences identified in the table are neither necessarily exact between themselves, and furthermore bear no overwhelming similarity to the systems of homologies which we identified in the previous chapter. What is important to recall, however, is that as we previously saw, neither are the correspondences between the anthropological equations in the *Bahir* and in the 'Gnostic' texts particularly exact either: indeed, we noted that the anthropology in the *Bahir* suggested in the first instance *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation rather than 'Gnostic' theosophy[319]. What I aim to demonstrate here, however, is that the very concept of making equations between the constitution of man (particularly the archetypal primordial man) and various aspects of the created world is in fact a relatively ubiquitous and recurrent theme in a number of different systems; indeed, Lincoln does also highlight that in a number of these texts the equation is also made between these entities and various aspects of the heavenly and planetary systems, much as we saw to be the case in the previous chapter (although the precise homologies do differ between sources)[320].

Now, Lincoln concludes that from these comparisons proof can be adduced for the existence of a common Indo-European proto-myth which is expressed in a somewhat different variation as it is received in each culture[321]. I myself am not, admittedly, convinced by this argument, as it rather seems to me that the question must first be answered why such homologies could not have been arrived at independently. It must, surely, be conceded that the general scheme makes a certain logical sense, and thus precludes the possibility of any great level of variation. Almost regardless of culture, one would surely be more likely to equate the primordial blood to liquid (e.g. water, or the sea) than to any solid aspect of the world. Similarly, given that flora sits atop earth which sits atop stone, whilst hair sits atop flesh which sits atop bone, it is hard to see how any ancient mythmaker could ever have conceived of an order of equations other than that which seems naturally implied.

It does not, therefore, seem impossible to me that within this logically restricted system disparate cultures could have independently developed similar ideas[322]. This hypothesis then

[319] See above, pp.77f. The question of whether *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation is in turn related to the 'Gnostics' will be addressed in chapter 8 (see below, p.179ff.).
[320] B. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, pp.20-36. C.f. also G.G. Stroumsa, 'Form(s) of God' (1983), pp.269-88.
[321] B. Lincoln, *op. cit.*, pp.8-15, 35-40.
[322] On this, c.f. also the demonstrations by Margaret Clunies Ross, [*Prolonged Echoes* (1994), pp.171f.] and E.O.G. Turville-Petre [*op. cit.*, pp.42-50] concerning Askr and Embla and the self sacrifice of Óðinn respectively, and how these episodes in Nordic mythology seem to have coincidentally developed into concepts that were seen as comparable to Christianity by later writers, despite the fact that the narratives themselves remained fully explicable within the context of their original paganism.

further raises the question that since both the 'Gnostics' and Kabbalah certainly shared the Old Testament, and potentially also some Judaic speculative traditions, how much more likely is it then that the two could have developed similar concepts independently of each other?[323]

Conclusion

We have in this chapter and the one preceding it noted certain potential correspondences between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah; what remains then is to address the question of *how* such correspondences could have occurred. As indicated above, it seems to me that the initial assumption should perhaps be that any instance of correspondence is to be taken as an example of independent development, and therefore primarily coincidental. If this position is taken in the first instance, then to dismiss it one must arguably demonstrate either, or preferably both, a) an *exact* correspondence between the sources, one which renders them so close as to make coincidence highly improbable, and/or b) a secure chain of transmission which proves, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that either one source received and utilised the ideas of another, or else that they both received their ideas from an earlier common source. In relation to the first of these points, I believe we have seen that in general the correspondences between the 'Gnostic' sources and the earliest work of the Kabbalah, the *Bahir*, are not exact enough to rule out the possibility of independent development. Indeed, we located the closer correspondences in the later Lurianic system, but not only were these still far from being exact, furthermore the greater difficulty in demonstrating a relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the later Kabbalah that largely bypassed the earlier Kabbalah only serves to advocate more strongly for a thesis of independence. To be sure, we did in a few instances, primarily involving *On the Origin of the World*, identify a few similarities that were close enough to merit further investigation (and we shall return to them at a later juncture), but in the main it seems that the only remaining option to oppose a thesis of independent development is the establishment of a secure chain of transmission, and it is thus to this exercise that we shall now turn.

[323] As we have seen, the image of the primordial or heavenly man (in some form) is a relatively common one. I thus remain somewhat sceptical of Gilles Quispel's attempt ['Ezekiel 1:26' (1980), pp.1-13] to prove that the manifestation of the כבוד of God in the form of a man in Ezekiel 1 is necessarily linked to the figure of the *Anthropos* in 'Gnostic' and 'Hermetic' literature. C.f. M.J. Edwards, 'Hebraism, Hellenism' (2001), pp.222-226.

Appendix I

The Reliability of Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.1.1 – 8.5 as an Account of 'Valentinian' Myth

A few brief comments should be made here regarding this passage which, as Bentley Layton highlights, was "the best-known account of gnostic myth until the discovery of the Coptic manuscripts"[324]. It should first of all be remarked that we cannot exactly take this account as an archetypal version of 'Valentinian' myth: as we saw in chapter 2, the particular construction 'Valentinian' seems to denote more a vague master→disciple chain rather than any particular dogmatic unity, a fact that Irenaeus and other heresiologists utilised in order to contrast the doctrinal differences amongst the 'heretics' with the Church's faithful preservation of the unified, apostolic teaching[325]. As such, the system recounted here is said to be that of one Ptolemy, a follower of Valentinus, and differs to an extent from that of his master. Of course, the particular level of difference between the two is hard to calculate since, as Layton notes, "Valentinus's teaching is known [to us] only in very sketchy form", being preserved primarily in Irenaeus's concise account (*Haer.* I.11.1), and in brief mythological references scattered throughout the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I.3; XII.2) and a few isolated fragments[326]. Otherwise, we are reliant on Irenaeus's fuller account of Ptolemy's myth, insofar as we can hope to identify what of it accurately reflects Valentinus's teaching since, as Layton puts it, "some details are doubtless due to Ptolemy's own creativity"[327]. As indicated in chapter 2, however, for our purposes it is less relevant to determine *how* precisely Ptolemy's system relates to that of Valentinus; since it is the former that has been best preserved, it is thus to it that we must look for a useful source to compare examples of 'Valentinian' thought (as we have defined this term) with the Kabbalah. The more important question for us, therefore, is whether or not we can conclude that Irenaeus faithfully and accurately recorded Ptolemy's system.

Now, as we have previously seen, James McCue has convincingly refuted the argument of Elaine Pagels that Irenaeus intentionally misrepresented his sources to better conform to his heresiological method[328]. Whilst, as we noted above, it is certainly true that Irenaeus laid stress on the differences between 'heretical' groups and opposed these to the true unified

[324] B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.276.
[325] See above, pp.12, 27ff.. E.g. Irenaeus, *Haer.* I.10; 11.1; 12.4; 13.1.
[326] B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.215-264, 276f.
[327] *Ibid.*, p.221.
[328] See above, pp.23, 27ff. C.f. J.F. McCue, 'Conflicting Versions?' (1981), pp.404-416; E. Pagels, 'Conflicting Versions' (1974), pp.35-53.

faith, it does not seem to me that we have any real reason to suppose that he deliberately manufactured these differences: indeed, as Mark Edwards has noted, our ability to compare the extant Coptic recensions of *Apoc. John* with the myth recounted by Irenaeus in *Haer.* I.29 has shown the latter to be "an honest reader and capable critic"[329]. It must also be considered that if Irenaeus were inclined to inaccurately report levels of disagreement between 'Valentinians', then one would have expected him to provide a much fuller account of Valentinus's system so as to better contrast with Ptolemy's; that he provided so little information specifically regarding the system of the heresiarch rather suggests that he constrained himself quite closely to reporting only what was contained in his sources.

If therefore, we accept that Irenaeus represented his sources with a reasonable degree of accuracy, we must thus inquire as to what those sources were, and to what extent they themselves were accurate. Frederik Wisse has convincingly argued that Irenaeus utilised a source (or sources) of earlier heresiological material, which he interwove, not always seamlessly, with his own primary knowledge of 'Valentinian' groups[330]. Indeed, in the preface to his work (*Haer.* I.Pref.2) Irenaeus speaks of personal interaction with certain self-proclaimed 'disciples of Valentinus' (ὡς αὐτοὶ λέγουσιν Οὐαλεντίνου μαθητῶν), and notes that he has read certain of their 'writings' (ὑπομνήμασι)[331]. As Wisse highlights, "Irenaeus' [*sic*] overriding concern was to expose and refute the Valentinians of his own time. It is only in the process of accomplishing this task that he introduces other heresiarchs and sects"[332]. Further, as Einar Thomassen notes, often, especially in the first few chapters, when Irenaeus speaks of 'Valentinians' he seems to have in mind those 'followers of Ptolemy' who are his immediate opponents; that he begins his work with an extensive eight-chapter portrayal of their system would seem to confirm that they were at the forefront of his mind[333].

We are now then in a position to present a rough outline of the potential sources behind Irenaeus's fullest accounts of the 'Valentinian' systems. Whilst I agree with Thomassen that the preface identifies the 'followers of Ptolemy' with those 'heretics' who are currently teaching, I would modify his argument in line with Wisse to suggest that Irenaeus's use of

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329 M.J. Edwards, 'Gnostics and Valentinians' (1989), pp.26-47.
330 F. Wisse, 'Nag Hammadi Library' (1971), pp.205-223. The contentious issue of whether or not this earlier heresiology was Justin Martyr's lost *Syntagma* need not be addressed here.
331 We are fortunate here that the Greek text has been preserved in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 31. C.f. E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed* (2006), p.10.
332 F. Wisse, 'Nag Hammadi Library' (1971), pp.205-223
333 E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed* (2006), pp.9-22.

this term, at least in the preface, is intended to also include Markos and his disciples, since it is they to whom he refers as having caused trouble "in our own district of the Rhone"[334]. We might then agree with Wisse that it seems logical that the long section concerning Markos and his disciples (I.13-21) is, by virtue of its "vivid detail and unusual length", most likely drawn from Irenaeus's personal interaction with this group of 'Valentinians' (presumably in the Rhone area)[335]. It then perhaps naturally follows that such ὑπομνήματα as he obtained, he most likely obtained from this group, and these, as Wisse contends, formed the basis of the first section, I.1-8. Such a supposition would then explain Irenaeus's placement of Ptolemy's system at the start of his work, as if he obtained a description of this system from the Marcosians who, by his own admission, were his current adversaries, he would naturally have seen it as an antecedent to their 'heresy', thereby justifying both its placement at the start of his work and his identification in the preface of his current opponents as 'followers of Ptolemy'. If this hypothesis is accepted, then we can also note that the brief account of the system of Valentinus in I.11 and the similarly concise description of the systems of Ptolemy and Colorbasus in I.12 probably derive from an earlier heresiological source used by Irenaeus, not least because the report of I.12 essentially forms a doublet, showing "no awareness... [that Ptolemy's system has] just been treated in detail in eight lengthy chapters"[336].

It therefore seems reasonably probable that we can identify several sources in the first part of Irenaeus's work, including primary writings originating from the objects of his attack; that the 'Valentinian' systems he presents here are not generally paralleled in the Nag Hammadi literature might simply be explained by our lack of extant primary sources for 'Valentinian' mythologies. Alternatively, we might suspect, in line with Wisse, that if Irenaeus obtained his information first-hand from these groups, what he received was not the "Gnostic holy books meant only for internal consumption" such as were found at Nag Hammadi, but rather "something like Gnostic missionary preaching either in oral or written form". Thus, as Wisse puts it, in Irenaeus's account "of the disciples of Valentinus we do not see the sects from the inside but from the outside, as they want to appear in their missionary effort"[337]. I personally prefer to leave this particular question open to debate, as it must be admitted that Wisse's

[334] E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed* (2006), pp.9-11, esp. n.6; F. Wisse, 'Nag Hammadi Library' (1971), pp.205-223; Irenaeus *Haer.* I.13.7, ANF translation (2007), p.336.
[335] F. Wisse, 'Nag Hammadi Library' (1971), pp.205-223.
[336] *Ibid.*; C.f. E. Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, (2006), pp.17-22.
[337] F. Wisse, 'Nag Hammadi Library' (1971), pp.205-223.

argument holds only if the Nag Hammadi texts are seen to be 'holy books' intended for intra-community use alone. As we have previously noted, the actual purpose of the Nag Hammadi texts is far from clear, especially since they seem to stem from a variety of different 'Gnostic' (and possibly even non-'Gnostic') milieus[338]. Furthermore, the *Gospel of Philip*, which was found at Nag Hammadi, does present a potential parallel, albeit a rather limited one, to Ptolemy's system as found in Irenaeus (see further *Appendix II* below). It is also worth noting that, as we have seen, Irenaeus did have access to *Apoc. John*, or at least a source related to it, suggesting that he was able to acquire at least some 'Gnostic holy books' (to use Wisse's term).

Ultimately, however, given our observations here it seems that we have little reason to doubt that Irenaeus had access to some primary accounts and first-hand experience, and that in spite of his interweaving of sources, he nevertheless relatively accurately portrayed the systems which he received, thereby preserving for us a form of 'Valentinian' mythology that would otherwise be lost.

[338] See above, pp.2-6.

Appendix II
Some Compositional and Linguistic Issues in the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II.3)

As we have seen, the brief passage *Gos. Phil.* 60:10-15 holds a place of particular importance, as the sole attestation in the Coptic ‘Gnostic’ literature of Irenaeus’s report of Ptolemy’s system as containing the concept of a ‘double-Sophia’ (*Haer.* I.4-8), the lower form of which is identified as Achamōth[339]. It therefore seems germane to offer a few very brief comments on the passage and its placement within the wider text.

> **ⲕⲉⲟⲩⲁ ⲡⲉ ⲉⲭ̅ⲁ̅ⲙ̅ⲱ̅ⲑ̅ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲕⲉⲟⲩⲁ ⲡⲉ` ⲉⲭ̅ⲙ̅ⲱ̅ⲑ̅ ⲉⲭⲁⲙⲱⲑ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ ϩⲁⲡⲗⲱⲥ ⲉⲭⲙⲱⲑ ⲇⲉ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ ⲙ̅ⲡⲙⲟⲩ ⲉⲧⲉ ⲧⲁⲉⲓⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲥⲟⲟⲩⲛ ⲙ̅ⲡⲟⲩ ⲧⲁⲉⲓ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲙⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲉⲣⲟⲥ ϫⲉ ⲧⲕⲟⲩⲉⲓ ⲛ̅ⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ**[340]

It is as well to note first, as Layton does, that *Gos. Phil.* cannot really be called a cohesive, or even a necessarily consistent work. Layton refers to the text as more of an ‘anthology’, “containing some one hundred short excerpts taken from various other works... [which, to] judge from their style and contents... were sermons, treatises, or philosophical epistles (typical Valentinian genres), as well as collected aphorisms or short dialogues with comments”[341]. Even from a brief perusal of the text, the validity of this statement can be plainly seen, and it is not always immediately clear what, if any, methodology the compiler(s) followed in arranging the pieces. In spite of this, however, certain themes and keywords do recur in many sections of the text (we have previously noted the repeated usage of a ‘bridal chamber’), so that one *may* be able to speak of certain overarching thematic ideas in *Gos. Phil.*, or to at the very least suspect that the sections were not just chosen and arranged randomly[342].

With this observation in mind, it then becomes interesting to look at the placement of our passage in the text. It sits in between a number of sections, often allegorical or contemplative, regarding the relationship between parent and child, between holy and evil, and between the righteous creator/ruler and the ruled. This is not the place to undertake any particularly deep analysis of these texts, as they are generally unrelated to our enquiry into

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[339] See above, pp.83ff.
[340] Excerpted from B. Layton, (ed.) and W.W. Isenberg, (trans.), ‘The Gospel according to Philip’ (1989), pp.142-215. An English translation is given above, p.84.
[341] B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.325f.
[342] See above, p.31. Layton [*Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.326f.] provides an instructive list of the occurrences in *Gos. Phil.* of certain important keywords and themes.

'Valentinian' mythology, but it should be immediately apparent that this passage regarding the relationship between wisdom proper and the 'little wisdom' can be seen to fit rather appropriately into the wider context here. In particular, Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley has highlighted that *Gos. Phil.* frequently makes use of differing but complementary names for a variety of characters, most especially the text's "primary female metaphors", the Holy Spirit, Sophia, and figures of Mary, all of whom "seem to play similar parts and often appear outrightly identified with one another"[343]. Buckley argues that the "varied appearances [of these figures]... can all be correlated", and indeed if one looks at the surrounding sections of the text (59:6-60:33), it is noticeable that all these names are present, and perhaps most noticeably are also found in comparable dual (or even triple) roles shortly before our passage[344]:

59:10f.
ⲙⲁⲣⲓⲁ ⲅⲁⲣ ⲧⲉ ⲧⲉϥⲥⲱⲛⲉ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲧⲉϥⲙⲁⲁⲩ ⲧⲉ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲧⲉϥϩⲱⲧⲣⲉ ⲧⲉ
For Maria is his sister and his mother and his union [alternatively 'partner' or 'companion'].

59:12f.
ⲡⲡ̄ⲛ̄ⲁ̄ ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲁⲃ ⲟⲩⲣⲁⲛ̀ ⲡⲉ ⲛ̄ⲇⲓⲡⲗⲟⲩⲛ
The Holy Spirit is a double name.[345]

In this context then, the occurrence of an apparent 'double-Sophia' seems relatively logical, and to read the passage in this way would make sense. Admittedly, as Buckley notes, the use of ⲕⲉⲟⲩⲁ to render both 'one thing' and 'another' could present some ambiguity as to whether these two entities are meant to be seen as separate or the same, especially given the close similarity of the two names. Although both readings are somewhat possible with this use of ⲕⲉⲟⲩⲁ, given the context of the surrounding passages, and the focus on primarily female figures who occupy multiple roles whilst yet remaining both separate in accordance with their roles and united/similar in their figure and name, I tend to conclude that this passage is meant to express a 'double-Sophia', albeit perhaps in a way more amenable to *Gos. Phil.* and its general tone[346]. Furthermore, Layton notes that ⲉⲭ̄ⲁ̄ⲙ̄ⲱ̄ⲑ̄ / Achamōth seems to be a derivation from the biblical *Ḥokhmah*, whilst the phrase *'ēkh-mōth* translates to

[343] J.J. Buckley, *op. cit.*, pp.211-227.
[344] *Ibid.*
[345] Both these passages are excerpted from B. Layton, (ed.) and W.W. Isenberg, (trans.), 'The Gospel according to Philip' (1989), pp.142-215. The translations are my own.
[346] On the usage of ⲕⲉⲟⲩⲁ, see W.E. Crum, *Dictionary* (1939), p.92.

‘like death’ in biblical and mishnaic Hebrew and Aramaic[347]. It is therefore perhaps possible that whilst the two figures are intended to be seen as somewhat separate, the similarity of their names is in part dependant on this slightly rough pun.

In conclusion, we must of course admit that the separation between the two wisdoms in *Gos. Phil.* is nowhere near as definite as in Irenaeus. The particular reason for this we can hardly conjecture without knowing the source of the original passage included in the *Gos. Phil.* anthology: it may be that it represents an earlier conception of the ‘double-Sophia’ before the separation was as attenuated, or it may be that it represents a very similar conception to that found in Irenaeus, but that this was either muted before the passage’s inclusion in *Gos. Phil.*, or else it is merely that the surrounding context of the other *Gos. Phil.* passages cast it in a less divisive light. In any case, whilst we *cannot* say with any certainty that this passage derived from Ptolemy’s system, its presence in *Gos. Phil.* at least allows us to presume that the concepts of Achamōth and the ‘double-Sophia’ were current within certain ‘Valentinian’ circles, an observation that thus enables us to view Irenaeus’s account with a perhaps even greater degree of plausibility.

[347] B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.336.

Chapter 6
The 'Cathar' Connection: On the Possibility of the Transmission of 'Dualism'

As indicated in the previous chapter, it seems as though a logical method by which to proceed in our analysis is to assume in the first instance that all correspondences identified are essentially coincidental, dismissing this assumption *only* if we can identify a high level of exactness in our comparisons (such as would render pure coincidence relatively improbable) and/or establish a secure chain of transmission between two sources, a chain which renders the transmission of ideas not only possible but indeed probable. Now, as we have hitherto noted on several occasions, the potential correspondences between the 'Gnostics' and medieval Kabbalah are, on the whole, too inexact to intrinsically refute a coincidental hypothesis; we must therefore turn for the moment to an examination of the methods by which 'Gnostic' ideas could have been transmitted from the late Antique Middle East to the medieval Occident. In the penultimate chapter we shall examine the theory, most prominently expounded by Scholem, that the preservation of certain strains of 'mystical'-theosophical speculation in Jewish sources might account for the theosophy of the early Kabbalah, but I first wish to consider, in this chapter and the next, two other potential routes by which the second century 'Gnostics' might be linked to medieval Europe, namely the 'Cathars', and the 'Alchemic tradition'[348]. Of course, given the scope of this thesis it will be impossible to treat either of these subjects exhaustively, but I should like to offer a slightly more expansive analysis than that which is often allotted them regarding their potential role in the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation. Furthermore, it is my hope that by successfully applying our current methodological approach to lines of questioning related to, but not intrinsically contained within, our primary sphere of enquiry, we may thus establish the validity of this methodology as a tool for general utilisation, rather than as a method effective only in relation to one specific question.

In line with this endeavour, then, let us begin by building on our conclusions up to this point, in order to establish some further definition regarding our methodology for proceeding in the establishment of potential chains of transmission. In particular, I wish to stress the importance of distinguishing between those motifs and concepts which may be called specific, or preferably *exclusive* to our systems, and those which are so widespread and

[348] As will become clear in what follows, both these terms are open to debate regarding the appropriateness of their application. I shall, therefore, tend to refer to them only within inverted commas.

ubiquitous as to make pinpointing their point of origin practically impossible. We noted, for example, in the previous chapter that the existence of some type of motif of the primordial man in a variety of different cultures is a testimony to the ubiquity of the idea; it is, however, this very ubiquity which prevents us in many cases from definitively saying from whence each culture obtained the idea, whether from another of the cultures identified as possessing primordial man imagery or, as Lincoln argues, from an Indo-European *Urmyth*[349]. Such judgements can ultimately only be made where we are able to demonstrate very exact correspondences between two cultural expressions of the idea and/or a clear chain of transmission between those two cultures, whilst also being able to exclude the possibility of the influence of a third (or fourth, or fifth...) culture. To illustrate, we earlier argued that Scholem's application of the term 'Gnostic' to an example of the 'Thomas literature' was largely inaccurate since whilst the two might share certain similarities the latter, as Layton points out, does not presuppose any real sort of 'Gnostic' mythological system, but rather only "an uncomplicated Hellenistic myth of the divine origins of the self"[350]. If we now develop this argument, we can observe that a motif of some element of the heavenly realm (*sometimes* identified as the 'soul' or 'higher mind') exiled to the world and trapped within the body, to await its release, is not only classically Orphic but is also, as we have seen, common to certain 'Gnostic' and 'Thomasine' writings, Lurianic Kabbalah, certain strains of Hellenistic philosophy, and in some contexts arguably also to much 'general mysticism'[351]. Indeed, one may even wish to argue that such a concept is a logical philosophical outcome of any ethical system which separates the body from the soul/mind, a description that reasonably encompasses a great many systems of Antiquity[352]. As such, one can hardly attempt to prove a chain of transmission based on the recurrence of such a motif in two or more philosophic, theosophic, or 'mystical' systems (such as 'Gnostic' thought and the Kabbalah), as there are inevitably too many other sources from which the idea could plausibly have been derived.

To give another example of the application of this hypothesis, in chapter 4 we identified certain Coptic texts as being potentially related to the *Bahir* on the basis of their identical methods for calculating the number seventy-two in relation to a heavenly hierarchy[353]. As we saw, the specificity of these calculations, their relatively exact correspondence in the different

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[349] B. Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society* (1986), pp. 8-15, 35-40.
[350] B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.360.
[351] *Ibid.* C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.93-95; pp.33ff., 86ff. above. See also J.N. Bremmer, *Rise and Fall* (2002), pp.59-69; Y. Liebes, 'Kabbalistic Myth' (1993), pp.65-92.
[352] C.f. L. Nauta, 'Preexistence of the Soul' (1996), pp.93-135.
[353] See above, pp.68ff.

texts, and their seeming lack of attestation elsewhere render some level of filiation between the sources at least plausible. By contrast, we have frequently encountered usages of the number seven in our texts, but I have been reticent to infer too much from these instances of numeric symbolism; not only is the occurrence of seven a far less specific example than the particular calculation of seventy-two, but moreover it must be conceded that seven is perhaps *the* most ubiquitous number in numerological sources[354]. Indeed, given the number of cultures with which we are dealing for whom there were seven known planets, and who either practised, or were at least aware of the existence of a seven-day week, it would be strange to locate a theosophical text of this type which, if it made numerical references, did not include the number seven. Unfortunately then, however, the mere occurrence of this number in a source must therefore fail to indicate for us anything regarding the provenance of that source. Similarly, to give a ritual rather than theosophical example, we also observed in chapter 3 that the widespread practice of asceticism in the ancient world, especially in potentially 'mystic groups', thus renders it taxonomically useless as a tool for definition[355].

If we have seen then the difficulty in attempting to construct a secure chain of transmission on the basis of corresponding motifs, and the need to focus more on the specific rather than the ubiquitous in order to locate reliable evidence, it would now be wise to mention something of the problem which is introduced into our investigation by the phenomenon of Manichaeism. In attempting to trace a line from the 'Gnostics' to the medieval Occident, the particular dates and geographical spread of Manichaeism might perhaps make it an inevitable step in the chain. That the movement had some degree of filiation to certain 'Gnostics' seems almost undeniable; as an example, one might cite the usage of the figure of Seth in Manichaean literature, with the important observation that the specific roles played by Seth here are often remarkably close to those which he performs in the 'Sethian Gnostic' literature[356]. I would, however, hesitate to describe Manichaeism as 'Gnostic', insofar as I would hesitate to describe it as anything other than Manichaean; for this is the crux of the matter, the fact that perhaps above all else, Manichaeism was intensely syncretic. It is as well to remember that Mani placed himself as the latest in a line of redeemer-type figures, a line which included Seth, Noah, Enoch, Shem, Abraham, Buddha, Aurentes, Zoroaster, Jesus, and

[354] C.f. above, pp.73-78.
[355] See above, pp.43ff. Recall also that a pro-ascetic stance is almost the sole common factor between the majority of otherwise highly varied documents found at Nag Hammadi. C.f. S. Gero, 'Encratite Orthodoxy' (1986), pp.287-307.
[356] C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Seth in Manichaean Literature' (2004), pp. 268-282; Idem., 'Seth in Gnostic Literature' (2006), pp.52-83.

Paul[357]. The difficulty that this syncretism presents arises when one attempts to construct a chain back towards the 'Gnostics'. Should, for example, one attempt to trace the origins of 'Cathar dualism' (on which more will be said later), back towards the 'Gnostics', one will discover that in between the two potentially stands Mani. One is then left with the difficult question of whether this 'dualism' derives from certain 'Gnostics' via Manichaeism, or whether it instead descends from the 'dualist' religion(s) of Mani's native Persia[358]. As we shall see, it is surely imperative that any attempt to affiliate second century 'Gnostics' with the medieval Occident must either tangle with the syncretic *Religionsgeschichtliche* maze that is Manichaeism, or else locate a different chain of transmission that bypasses Mani entirely.

As a final methodological point in this chapter, let us also note the importance of a semantic distinction, related in part to the famous Messina definition, *viz.* the importance of distinguishing between 'Gnostic' as used to describe specific second century 'groups', and 'Gnostic' as used to describe a particular *typos* of religious or theosophical thought[359]. The Messina definition of course distinguished between the two through the use of the terms 'Gnosis' and 'Gnosticism', but as we noted in chapter 1, it seems preferable to disavow the latter term, as it implies a greater ideological unity than would generally appear to be case in reality. As also demonstrated above, neither am I convinced that a reliable definition of the 'Gnostic-type' exists, or can even be created, and it has seemed preferable to me to concentrate on smaller 'groups' such as the 'Sethians', thereby largely relegating the term 'Gnostic' to be little more than a shorthand indicator for the various different types of late Antique thought streams. In any case, however, the point which I wish to highlight here is that whilst it might, *potentially*, be possible to speak of some elements of, for example, the 'Cathars' as representing something of a 'Gnostic-type' (however so defined), it is important to remain cognizant of the fact that to do so does *not* necessarily imply filiation between these elements and second century 'Gnostics'. As we have seen, correspondences themselves are not in general sufficient to reasonably prove a genetic relationship.

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357 See, for example, K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* (1984), pp.326-342.

358 I should note that I posit this chain of transmission here purely as a hypothetical illustration. As will be outlined below (pp.124ff.), I am not myself convinced that the proper antecedents of the 'Cathars' can be traced any further back than the Paulicians, and possibly not even to the Bogomils.

359 C.f. R. McL. Wilson, 'The Messina Definition' (1994), pp.539-551, which provides an excellent analysis both of the definition, and of its reception and utilisation after 1966.

Bringing these observations forward, we turn then to the subject of the 'Cathars'. Now, it is at first interesting to note that, outside of certain strains of rather unscholarly fantastical speculations on secret histories, surprising little has been written concerning the 'Cathars' in relation to the emergence of Kabbalah, most specifically as regards the potential relationship of the latter to the 'Gnostics'[360]. In itself, this is perhaps not an unfair position since, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, one probably cannot make any reasonable argument for a filial relationship between the 'Cathars' and either the 'Gnostics' or the Kabbalah. It is, however, curious that whilst much scholarly ink has been spent on the questions of relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the 'Cathars', between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, and to a lesser extent, between the Kabbalah and the 'Cathars', the consideration of all three together is rather a rarity[361]. Indeed, one might logically think that the *relatively* close chronological and geographical proximity in which the Kabbalistic and 'Cathar' thought streams existed would have naturally incited some impassioned debate, given that both have been claimed by some scholars to descend from the 'Gnostics', but this does not appear to have been the case. In truth, I suspect that this state of affairs owes much to the fact that these are two somewhat separate questions, and perhaps deserve to be treated as such: a) did the 'Gnostics' influence the 'Cathars' and b) did the 'Cathars' influence the Kabbalah. That being said, however, given our prior observation that to establish filiation between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah we would require a secure chain of historical transmission, it thus behoves us to ask these questions somewhat in tandem, since were it possible to answer both in the positive, then we would surely have established an at least *potential* route by which 'Gnostic' influence could have been transmitted to medieval Kabbalah. To be sure, Scholem does devote a few pages in his *Origins* to these questions, but he generally views the utility of the 'Cathars' more as an illustration of the *zeitgeist* of the time, and chooses to leave unresolved the question of what historical relationship they might have held to those 'Gnostics' whom he sees as influencing the *Bahir*. Whilst he does briefly highlight what he views as a few *potential* similarities between the 'Cathars' and the Kabbalah, he is ultimately far more acutely aware of the importance of the greatly noticeable differences between the

[360] C.f. the outlines of certain currents in B. Hamilton, 'The legacy of Charles Schmidt' (1998), pp.191-214.
[361] E.g. the majority of sources listed in the bibliography, and cited throughout this thesis. In contrast, Scholem's brief discussion of the topic, cited in the following note, is about the most exhaustive *scholarly* analysis of the matter I have been able to locate. C.f. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, 'Manichaeism in Medieval Judaism' (1994), pp.535-538. Incidentally, although Moshe Idel discusses several strains of both 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah in his work, he makes only a couple of passing references to the 'Cathars', generally omitting them from the debate [*Kabbalah* (1988), pp.23, 251]. Indeed, as Scholem notes [*Origins* (1990), p.234], prior to his work the only real treatment of the relationship between the 'Cathars' and the Kabbalah was to be found in Moses Gaster's *The Origin of the Kabbalah* (1894).

two, and as such generally tends to dismiss the Cathars as little more than a tangential issue to the history of the Kabbalah[362]. Now, in light of the above observations, whilst I do not essentially disagree with Scholem's conclusions on this matter, I do find it necessary to provide a slightly more considered reasoning on the topic than has often been given.

Beginning then with the first of these questions, *viz.* the possibility of a relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the 'Cathars', as we indicated above, a secure methodological approach to link these two at any level beyond the coincidental requires us to investigate both the exactness of the similarities between them, as well as the potential means of historical transmission from the earlier to the later. If we consider first the correspondences between the two, we can reasonably assert that the most likely original reason for seeing this equation lies in the ascription of some form of 'dualism' to both[363]. A note of caution should be raised here since, as we observed in chapter 1, the very term 'dualism' is particularly ambiguous, and can potentially encompass a large number of highly diverse systems. Furthermore, let us also recall the *caveat* given above that any attempt to trace a 'dualist' system back to the 'Gnostics' is rendered particularly difficult by the syncretism of Mani's system, which likely drew from several 'dualist' sources, not just the 'Gnostics'. More shall be said on this later, but it is here interesting to observe that, as Roelof van den Broek highlights, the 'dualistic' views of the 'Cathars' (and indeed, as is central to van den Broek's argument in his article, the Bogomils) "at first sight reminded [their 'orthodox' opponents]... of the Manichaean doctrines that had been combated so vehemently by Saint Augustine"[364]. Unfortunately for these opponents, however, it quickly became apparent that these contemporary 'dualist' thought streams lacked the "fantastic and very complicated mythology" of Manichaeism, and thus, as van den Broek puts it, "soon they [i.e. the 'orthodox' opponents] discovered with embarrassment that Augustine's arguments did not work" against these 'dualists'[365].

[362] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.12-18, 197f., 234-238.
[363] Perhaps the classic enunciation of this thesis in the modern era is that given by Sir Steven Runciman in his 1947 work *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy*, the very title of which somewhat betrays his position on the subject of 'Gnostic'-'Cathar' relationship. As we shall see in this chapter, however, his conclusions hold little weight in current scholarly debate on the matter. In particular, it should be noted that the definition of 'Gnostic' from which he works is maddeningly imprecise; admittedly, he was working at a time when the Nag Hammadi documents had only just been discovered, and several decades before their general collection and publication, but even so it is worth highlighting the fact that he groups together (under the heading of 'The Gnostic Background' to the 'Cathars') such diverse figures and movements as Valentinus, Marcion, Manichaeism, Montanism, Paul of Samosata, and the Messalians!
[364] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.
[365] *Ibid.* It should be noted that van den Broek is perhaps rather optimistic about the accuracy of the heresiological evidence on this point; whilst I do not generally disagree with him that 'Cathar dualism' most likely prompted medieval churchmen towards the ascription of the label 'Manichaean', nor do I believe one

Furthermore, as Mark Gregory Pegg has highlighted in an important and insightful, if rather assertive article, claims regarding the historical lineage of the ‘Cathars’ all too often rely on a perceived similarity of broad ideas, devoid of any secure proof of connection[366]. As we have argued in our methodological observations, such a basis for arguing filiation is wholly unsatisfactory; as Charles Schmidt rightly observed over 150 years ago, those scholars who identify the ‘Cathars’ as descendants of Manichaeism often do no better than the medieval heresiologists in supplying precise argumentation in support of this historical relation[367].

Indeed, it could well be contended that when one examines ‘Cathar dualism’, such as it is, it may well be more logical to ask first whether such ‘dualism’ could have emerged quite organically in the medieval Occident of the time, as opposed to its necessarily being a genetic descendant of an earlier ‘heresy’. Now, van den Broek indicates that we may generally speak of two strains of ‘dualism’ in ‘Cathar’ thought, ‘absolute’ and ‘moderate’, evidence for which is fortunately extant in several texts. In particular, he highlights the expression of ‘absolute dualist’ views in two ‘Cathar’-authored texts, namely “the so-called *Anonymous Treatise*”, which is preserved in Durand of Huesca’s *Liber contra Manicheos* (the title of which bears out our earlier observation that ‘Cathar dualism’ naturally, if not necessarily accurately, reminded their contemporary opponents of Manichaeism), and the *Book of Two Principles*[368]. This latter, as van den Broek notes, also somewhat preserves the views of the ‘moderate dualists’ insofar as the author attempts to refute them in favour of an ‘absolute dualist’ position; otherwise, apart from the specific Inquisition records, we also find these views recorded in the *Summa de Catharis* of Rainerius Sacconi, a former ‘Cathar’ turned Inquisitor[369]. We cannot afford here to delve too deeply into a discussion of this thought, but what is particularly interesting to note is that both systems, ‘absolute’ and ‘moderate’, essentially express a concept scarcely unknown to the medieval Occident, that of a heavenly conflict, played out on earth, between God and Satan / the Devil / Lucifer (identified by different names in different texts, although of course all these names were current throughout much of western Christendom). In both systems, it is Satan who creates the material world;

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should underemphasise other potential explanations for the application of such language, especially since they are scarcely mutually exclusive. On the freedom with which such terms were often applied in the medieval era see, for example, R.I. Moore, ‘The war against heresy’ (2008), pp.189-210, esp. n.19; J.N. Bremmer, *op. cit.*, pp.68f. C.f. M.G. Pegg, ‘Cathars, Albigenses’ (2001), pp.181-195, regarding the related question of medieval heresiological method.

[366] M.G. Pegg, ‘Cathars, Albigenses’ (2001), pp.181-195.

[367] C. Schmidt, *Histoire et doctrine* (1849), Vol. 2, pp.252-254.

[368] R. van den Broek, ‘Medieval Gnostics?’ (1998), pp.87-108.

[369] *Ibid.*

the essential difference is primarily whether he and God are held to be two co-eternal opposing principles, good and evil, light and dark (the 'absolute' position), in which the good creates that which is spiritual (including the soul) whilst the bad creates the material, or whether Satan is seen as a creation of God who rebels against him and is cast down, and thus creates the material world (the 'moderate' position)[370]. From this brief *précis*, it should at first be obvious that complicating the question of historical filiation to the 'Gnostics' is the fact that the 'absolute' position seems to have its clearest analogue in the 'dualism' of Mani, whilst the 'moderate' system seems more akin to the 'Gnostic' systems featuring a Demiurge figure, which we have previously explored[371]. We shall return to reconsider this question shortly, but a more pertinent matter here is the observation that in any case these parallels can hardly be called so exact as to make historical descent highly probable. Indeed, let us note that arguably *any* theology which places God and Satan in conflict could to some extent be called 'dualist'; now, since the interest in Satan and his perceived influence in the world in the medieval Church need hardly be stressed, one is then led to wonder whether it is not more plausible that these systems could have emerged organically in their own time than that they are descended from 'Gnostic' thought[372]. Whilst the ascription of material creation to Satan is of course at odds with 'orthodox' Catholic theology, the general depiction of the Demiurge figure is otherwise scarcely far removed from a relatively common conception of the Devil as an adversarial figure; let us note especially the absence of particular 'Gnostic' designations for the Demiurge figure (e.g. Yaldabaoth), in place of which are used common designations for Satan. In particular, it is worth highlighting the use of the title 'Lucifer' (i.e. 'light-bearer'), a term that emerged from the quite 'orthodox' exegetical tendency to read Isaiah 14:12-20 as referring to Satan rebelling against God; the theology that this exegesis espouses is notably scarcely different from that of the 'moderate dualists'[373]. That this exegesis was widespread in medieval Christianity is perhaps well demonstrated by Frank Talmage in his

[370] S. Hamilton, 'Virgin Mary' (2005), pp.24-49. C.f. R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108. Of course, both expressions of the idea necessarily led their proponents to the docetic position that Christ could not really have assumed material flesh.

[371] On the 'moderate' position, c.f. above, pp.3ff. Regarding the 'absolute' position, c.f. K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* (1984), pp.326-342. C.f. also our observations above (pp.4f.) regarding Rudolph's posited distinction, following Hans Jonas, between 'Iranian' and 'Syrian-Egyptian' models of 'dualism'. One might then plausibly argue that the 'absolute' system fits more into the 'Iranian' model, whilst the 'moderate' position is closer to the 'Syrian-Egyptian' *typos*.

[372] C.f. G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491.

[373] Is. 14:12 "'How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn...'" (*RSV*). Note that older translations in fact generally render this verse using the title 'Lucifer'. It is also perhaps worth mentioning that the system and myth of the 'moderate dualists' is, apart from the ascription of a demiurgical role to Lucifer, otherwise reasonably close to Milton's account of Lucifer's fall in *Paradise Lost*. I am not yet aware, given the commonplace nature of the tradition of Lucifer's fall in 'orthodox' Catholicism, that any serious scholarship has felt it necessary to question the possibility of the 'Cathar' system as having influenced Milton.

presentation of a Jewish polemical treatise against both Catholics and certain 'dualists' (who were most likely 'Cathars'); in a refutation of the views of both parties concerning Lucifer, the author is able to make use of common stock arguments from Jewish polemic, largely based on a more accurate exegetical reading of the Isaiah passage (*viz.* that it refers to Babylon, and has nothing to do with a heavenly figure)[374]. We shall return both to Talmage's arguments and to the important source which he presents later, in the context of potential Jewish-'Cathar' interaction, but it is here worth citing a passage from the article, as it serves to demonstrate the surprising closeness of the Catholic conception to that of the 'dualists':

> "...[T]he Catholics found themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, they wished to preserve the Lucifer legend as it existed in their own tradition, and, on the other, to refute the heretics. This was accomplished principally by attempting to establish inconsistencies in the dualist position. The author of our treatise, in refuting the very concept of a fallen angel, was able to strike a blow at both groups. By dispensing with this notion which is tangential in Jewish tradition, he could go farther than the Catholic in his attack on the dualists. At the same time, he could show that the Catholic conception of the Devil, with whom the Jew was all too frequently associated, had no basis."[375]

Of course, these observations scarcely *prove* anything, but what I wish to suggest by them is that *if* we are unable to identify sufficiently exact parallels for 'Cathar dualism' in our older sources, then is it not perhaps more reasonable to locate the genesis of this thought within its contemporary context? As a further example of this methodology, I might also briefly mention an intriguing article by Sarah Hamilton in which she explores the conceptions of the Virgin Mary in 'Cathar' thought; what is of importance here is that although Hamilton does find some potential analogues to 'Cathar' ideas in older heresiological sources, she ultimately presents a rather convincing argument for the primary importance of contemporary factors in determining Mary's representation in 'Cathar' systems[376].

Now, we shall have occasion to return to the theme of these observations at several points in this chapter, but what I wish to concentrate on here is the *potential* occurrence of precisely that type of exact correspondence which we have argued is necessary to prevent one identifying parallels as largely coincidental, each organic to their own time. Specifically, I wish to examine van den Broek's hypothesis that certain elements from an extant 'moderate dualist' text known to have been used by certain 'Cathar' groups, the *Interrogatio Johannis*,

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[374] F. Talmage, 'Hebrew Polemical Treatise' (1967), pp.323-348.
[375] F. Talmage, *op. cit.*
[376] S. Hamilton, *op. cit.*

present such clear parallels to the Nag Hammadi evidence as to argue strongly for a case of filiation[377]. The locus of these potential correspondences at least makes sense: as we have noted, it is primarily the 'Gnostic' systems of Nag Hammadi that present perhaps the closest structural similarity to the 'moderate dualist' approach. Moreover, the establishment of a reasonably exact similarity between these sources would also permit us to sidestep the syncretic quagmire of Manichaeism: as per our methodology, although a secure chain of historical transmission is desirable in order to refute the coincidental hypothesis, where highly similar parallels are located, it is not wholly necessary.

Van den Broek's basic argument then is that the *Interrogatio Johannis* bears a number of correspondences to certain 'Gnostic' texts, in particular the *Apoc. John* (and the somewhat comparable passages in *Hyp. Arch.* and *Orig. W.*). The *Interrogatio* relates how Christ reveals to John the cosmogonic origin of the world, in the form of a somewhat mythic story, familiar from Christian tradition, in which Satan is cast down from heaven for rebelling against God; the Genesis account is then, however, re-interpreted to show Satan making man and woman out of clay and in *his* image, calling down angels to place into their bodies to give them life[378]. By means of the serpent, he then has sex with Eve, thus creating sexual desire, and the reproduction of human bodies as the descendants of the Devil. The point is of course obvious and in essence, as we have seen previously, quite ubiquitous: mankind is body and soul/spirit, the body is earthly and corrupt/evil, whilst the soul/spirit is of a heavenly origin. Beyond this broad theme, however, van den Broek proceeds to identify "several elements that are also known from the tradition of the *Apocryphon of John*... One is the idea that Satan had sexual intercourse with Eve; another is his boasting that he is the only God"[379]. In particular, van den Broek focuses the crux of his argument on the occurrence in the *Interrogatio* of Satan's false assertion "See you that I am god and there is no other god beside me", as the placement of these 'biblical' words into the mouth of the creative Demiurge (an act which thus renders them inaccurate) is also known from certain 'Gnostic', especially 'Sethian' texts: such a boast is to be found in *Apoc. John* II.11:20f., *Hyp. Arch.* II.86:30f., and *Orig. W.* II.103:12f.[380]. Let me stress here that despite appearances, this correspondence is

[377] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.
[378] An English translation of the *Interrogatio* is given in W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *Heresies* (1991), pp.458-465.
[379] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.
[380] The translated quotation from the *Interrogatio* is taken from W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, p.461. As van den Broek notes ['Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.105f., n.20], the Latin text survives in two variant

not an example of a clear *textual* equation: apart from anything else, it is as well to remember that we are dealing with the comparison of a Latin text (the *Interrogatio*) and Coptic translations of Greek originals (the 'Gnostic' texts), both of which are citing a 'biblical' passage that was originally Hebrew. I use the term 'biblical' here in inverted commas because whilst the sentiment of the passage is clearly biblical, having originally referred to the one true God, and hence creating an irony when it is instead ascribed to a Demiurge, the specific source of the line is not wholly clear. Walter Wakefield and Austin Evans adduce comparisons for the line as it stands in the *Interrogatio* from Deuteronomy 4:35, Judith 9:14, and Mark 12:32, whilst Gilles Quispel lays great stress on the parallel with the monotheistic statement of Isaiah 45:5[381]. Van den Broek, however, seems to me to unnecessarily complicate matters by arguing instead on the basis of the Demiurge's boast in *Apoc. John* II.13:8f. that "...'I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me.'..."[382]. Although he is probably quite correct to hypothesise that this line is the combination of Exodus 20:5 and Isaiah 45:5, I find myself perplexed by his assertion that the monotheistic boasts in *Hyp. Arch.* II.86:30f., and *Orig. W.* II.103:12f. form a clear "structural parallel" with *Apoc. John* II.13:8f., such as that "makes it clear that the first part of the exclamation [in *Hyp. Arch.*, and *Orig. W.*] derives from Exod. 20:5", except that "the word 'jealous' has been omitted"[383]. In his argument, van den Broek seems to wholly ignore the earlier version of this statement in *Apoc. John* II.11:20f., whilst it also seems to me that given the fact that the usage of the term 'jealous' in this context is clearly the minority usage, it is surely more logical to speak of its singular *inclusion* in *Apoc. John* II.13:8f. rather than, as van den Broek, to speak of its *omission* in *Hyp. Arch.*, *Orig. W.*, and the *Interrogatio*.

Now, it may be useful at this stage to highlight certain of the textual examples which we have hitherto adduced, and thus they are outlined in a table on the following page. Since, as I have noted, we are dealing with primarily conceptual, as opposed to textual comparisons, it should suffice to provide these lines solely in reasonably accurate English translations. From an examination of the table, several conclusions should appear if not obvious, than at least relatively plausible. Firstly that, *pace* van den Broek, since the more common statement of

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forms, the relevant readings from which are "Videte quia ego sum Deus et non est alius deus preter me" and "Videte quia ego sum deus vester et non <est> preter me alius deus".

[381] W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, pp.461, 775, n.41 (note that the Judith reference is erroneously given there as 9:*19*); G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491.

[382] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108. The *Apoc. John* translation is by Frederik Wisse, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.104-123.

[383] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.

monotheism does not refer to jealousy, it seems reasonable to presume that the form found in *Apoc. John* II.11:20f., *Hyp. Arch.* II.86:30f., and *Orig. W.* II.103:12f. is more likely to be the original form, with *Apoc. John* II.13:8f. being a variation upon it achieved by the addition of Exodus 20:5. That this variation is then employed in the following verses to make an ironic comment (*viz.* that if the Demiurge *was* the only God, he would have no one to be jealous of) would seem to bear this observation out; a more common form of the monotheistic boast is thus seen to be re-employed in *Apoc. John* for rhetorical purposes[384].

Exod. 20:5	"...I the Lord your God am a jealous God..."[385]
Deut. 4:35	"To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him."
Is. 45:5	"I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God..."
Apoc. John II.11:20f.	"'I am God and there is no other God beside me'..."[386]
Apoc. John II.13:8f.	"...'I am a jealous God and there is no other God beside me.'..."
Hyp. Arch. II.86:30f.,	"...'It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me]'..."[387]
Orig. W. II.103:12f.	"'It is I who am God, and there is no other one that exists apart from me.'..."[388]
Interrogatio	"...'See you that I am god and there is no other god beside me.'..."[389]
Interrogatio (variant reading)	"...'See you that I am your god, and beside me there is no other god.'..."

As for the source of this boast, I am inclined to agree with Quispel in seeing Isaiah 45:5 as the most likely origin, since this verse in fact seems to offer an almost exact parallel (insofar as the linguistic differences allow) to the form most commonly used in our 'Gnostic' texts[390]. Indeed, the only real difference seems to be the initial identification of the speaker as "the Lord" rather than "God"; it is worth recalling, however, that what is here rendered as 'the

384 C.f. *Apoc. John* II.13:1-13.
385 The biblical translations are all taken from the *RSV*.
386 This and the following line from *Apoc. John* are translated by F. Wisse, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.104-123.
387 Trans. B. Layton, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.161-169. Note that there is a lacuna in the text here, so this reconstruction is based on the text in *Orig. W.* II.103:12f., which is the most reasonable parallel since *Orig. W.* and *Hyp. Arch.* share a number of other similarities (see pp.18f., 70-74, above, and also the discussion in this chapter regarding Eve).
388 Trans. H.-G. Bethge, B. Layton, and Societas Coptica Hierosolymitana, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.170-189.
389 Trans. W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, p.461.
390 G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491.

Lord' (and as ὁ κύριος in the Septuagint) would originally have been the personal name of the Tetragrammaton. Proper consideration shall be given in chapter 8 to the question of Jewish antecedents to 'Gnostic' thought, but I might raise here the hypothesis (and indeed, it can only ever be a hypothesis) that although the original author(s) who placed this monotheistic boast in the mouth of the Demiurge most likely wrote in Greek, if they were drawing on a Judaic background, they would probably have known that the biblical ὁ κύριος served in fact to represent a personal name. Since the Demiurge is already identified in the texts by another name, it might therefore have made sense to excise this term from the biblical line cited, in favour of a repetition of the θεός used later in the verse. This is, of course, merely speculation, but it perhaps serves to indicate the possibility of the 'Gnostic' boast being a mildly adapted biblical line, as opposed to a combination of verses.

The particular importance of this discussion for our investigation of the 'Cathars' can be seen when one examines the above table, and notes the potential difficulty of identifying the statement of the *Interrogatio* with anything other than the 'Gnostic' texts: in none of the biblical texts do we find a closer parallel than these for Satan's statement. Admittedly, as Bernard Hamilton has demonstrated, we have no actual surviving text of the Old Testament used by the 'Cathars' (those of them who were willing to accept it), but through analysis of 'Cathar' New Testament texts, we are aware that they seem to have had a preference for variant readings not contained in the Vulgate[391]. More importantly, the Bogomils (from whom, as van den Broek notes, the *Interrogatio* originated), apparently accepted certain parts of the Old Testament (including Isaiah), although again we lack the actual texts in question[392]. One might, however, therefore wonder whether it is possible that the author(s) of the *Interrogatio* were working from a variant text of Isaiah which substituted (either by accident or conscious design) the term *deus* in place of *Dominus* in 45:5 or whether, alternatively, it was the author(s) themselves who made that change. The combination of this altered reading with the Christian tradition of the fall of Lucifer could then potentially give rise in the *Interrogatio* to something that looked rather like the 'Gnostic' sources.

Now, I suppose that the above scenario is potentially possible, but in the absence of almost all the relevant sources, and without any attestation (of which I am aware) in the medieval literature for such an alteration of Isaiah 45:5, it seems that for once the proposal of filiation

[391] B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60.
[392] *Ibid.*; R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.

to the ‘Gnostic’ sources may actually be the more plausible alternative! Moreover, we can perhaps further refine this argument through a consideration of the sexual conquest of Eve in the *Interrogatio*. We must of course first highlight that this motif is scarcely unique; van den Broek generally passes over the potential comparison, only briefly noting it, whilst Quispel specifically dismisses it, stating that since the idea “that Eve had sexual intercourse with the Serpent... is a Jewish legend also found elsewhere”, it is thus essentially a “common feature... [which] does not prove that the latter writing was a source of the former”[393]. I would generally concur with Quispel on this point, and indeed would add that the motif of the rape or sexual seduction (often accomplished by deception or through some supernatural power) of a woman by a heavenly power is a common element in much mythology and folktale[394]. That being said, however, it is at least interesting to observe that both *Apoc. John* and the *Interrogatio* depict an evil heavenly power seducing Eve in the form of a serpent, for the purposes of implanting sexual desire in humanity, and thus engendering the process of human reproduction[395]. By contrast, however, both *Hyp. Arch.* and *Orig. W.* present a rather different motif: in these accounts, the serpent is in fact distinct from the evil heavenly powers and plays a positive role as an instructor[396]. Furthermore, whilst a comparison of the sources shows that in *Apoc. John* and the *Interrogatio* the implication of the sexual act is lighter, and more ambiguous, in some senses described more as a seduction (albeit one by deception and the inspiring of lust), the motif in *Hyp. Arch.* and *Orig. W.* is more strongly portrayed (with the use of relevant adjectives) as a rather foul rape[397]. On the basis, then, of this dissimilarity, we can probably reasonably exclude *Hyp. Arch.* and *Orig. W.* as potential sources for the *Interrogatio*: this leaves us then with a perhaps rather more secure level of correspondence between the latter source and *Apoc. John*.

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[393] R. van den Broek, ‘Medieval Gnostics?’ (1998), pp.87-108; G. Quispel, ‘Cathars and Gnosis’ (1994), pp.487-491.

[394] C.f. E. Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, (2005), pp.189-211. Note that this section is primarily a discussion of the school of syntagmatic structuralism, the conclusions of which I do not necessarily agree with, often because they can be overly reductionist. Nonetheless, the inclusion of this motif amongst these syntagmatic archetypes serves as a useful illustration of its relative ubiquity.

[395] C.f. the *Interrogatio* and *Apoc. John* II.22:10-24:31. See also the brief reference in *Gos. Phil.* 61:5-12.

[396] *Hyp. Arch.* II.89:31-90:12, *Orig. W.* II.118:24-120:10.

[397] In *Apoc. John*, the sole reference to the incident itself is in II.24:15-17, which simply notes ⲁϥ-ϫⲁϩⲙ-ⲉⲥ (‘he [i.e. the chief archon] defiled her [i.e. Eve]’). C.f. W.E. Crum, *Dictionary* (1939), pp.797f. Although I myself would translate the text here as ‘defiled’, as does Layton [*Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.47], c.f. Wisse’s translation [in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.104-123], which renders the term as ‘seduced’. Regarding the *Interrogatio*, see W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, pp.460f., 774, n.30, which highlights that a marginal gloss in the text even goes so far as to claim that “the serpent who deceived Eve had the form of an attractive youth”. C.f. *Hyp. Arch.* II.89:17-30, *Orig. W.* II.116:8-117:14.

To be sure, I do not wish to overly stress the similarity between the accounts of these two texts. In particular, it is worth highlighting that in the *Apoc. John* the creation is portrayed as an act of the Demiurge which the higher divinity somewhat thwarts by tricking the Demiurge into inadvertently transferring his stolen power to man, thus diminishing himself and enabling the man to live[398]. By contrast, Satan as he is depicted in the *Interrogatio* seems to remain fully empowered and in control: far from diminishing himself in order to empower man, he is presented as being able to call down other angels from the heavens and imprison them inside the clay bodies he has made, so that the life of mankind is at their expense, not his. Similarly, whilst in the *Apoc. John* the body of man is created by the powers in an attempt to emulate the vision of the primordial man which they glimpsed, it is explicitly said here that Satan intentionally made mankind in *his own* image: "[a]nd he pondered on making man to serve him; he took clay of the earth and made man like unto himself"[399]. There are of course many other differences between the two texts, each perhaps somewhat reflecting the *zeitgeist* of their different social, geographical, religious, and temporal contexts. What is important to emphasise, however, is that I certainly do not wish to postulate that the *Apoc. John* was the *only* source for the *Interrogatio,* merely that it might plausibly have been *a* source. Indeed, given our earlier analysis, I should not wish to dismiss the possibility that the *Interrogatio* in part emerged organically in its time, drawing on an already well established tradition regarding Lucifer. One does not, however, have to contend that the *Apoc. John* influenced the Lucifer myth presented in the *Interrogatio*; conversely, it might in fact be that the level of similarity between this text and the separately existing myth was what led to the adoption of the *Apoc. John* as a potentially amenable source.

To summarise the above discussion then, we have seen that in certain instances the *Apocryphon of John* offers conceptual parallels to the *Interrogatio Johannis*, specifically in regards to the monotheistic boast and the seduction of Eve. Now, to be sure, we have also noted both the relative ubiquity and widespread nature of these motifs, as well as the fact that the correspondences are not exact; we could also say the same regarding the comparisons between the 'Gnostic' Demiurge and the Lucifer of the 'Cathars'. What is interesting, however, is that we have observed *several* correspondences between the elements of *two specific texts*, as opposed to parallels spread between various different systems and sources. Indeed, I would argue that there is a weakness in the arguments of both van den Broek and

[398] *Apoc. John* II.19:15-20:9.
[399] *Apoc. John* II.14:13-15:13. C.f. W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, p.460.

Quispel on this point, insofar as they concentrate primarily on one element, the monotheistic boast, a textual motif that appears in several 'Gnostic' sources[400]. As I have hopefully demonstrated above, the number of unresolved questions regarding this motif perhaps leaves it somewhat unconvincing as a proof of filiation. If, however, we take it in conjunction with the seduction of Eve (which is in itself a widespread concept), then we become able to narrow the field to a question of filiation between two particular sources, thus strengthening the argument for both. Similarly, let us add another motif, that of the means of presentation (a revelation cosmogony, given to John by Christ) in both *Apoc. John* and the *Interrogatio*: in itself, this parallel proves little, since the same scene is, after all, also found in the book of Revelation; when taken in conjunction, however, it seems slightly more secure[401]. Ultimately then, what I wish to argue is that whilst no *one* of the correspondences which we have here highlighted seems either unique or exact enough to disprove our *a priori* assumption of coincidence, the recurrence of these correspondences together in the same two texts might at least give us pause to consider filiation as a possibility; it will be recalled that we have already made a similar observation as regards *Orig. W.* and the *Bahir*[402]. That being said, however, given the arguments *against* filiation which we have also raised, we probably cannot be so secure as to dispense with the necessity of needing to locate a historical chain of transmission: i.e., if we are considering the possibility of the *Apoc. John* having been a source for the *Interrogatio*, then in the absence of highly *exact* correspondences, it behoves us to try and identify a potential historical chain between the two, and it is thus to that undertaking that we shall now turn.

Now, it must be admitted that perhaps the first step in such a chain, the question of the descent of the 'Cathars' from the Bogomils and/or the Paulicians, is unfortunately far too large and complex a topic to extensively treat here, especially given its somewhat tangential nature to our thesis[403]. It is, however, worth noting that this debate highlights methodological

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400 R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108; G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491.
401 C.f. G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491.
402 See above, pp.78f.
403 On the divided state of scholarly opinion regarding this matter compare, for example, M.G. Pegg, 'Cathars, Albigenses' (2001), pp.181-195 (which generally refutes the idea of the 'Cathars' descending from either group), B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60 (which argues for a Bogomil origin and a later Paulician influence), R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108 (which suggests a certain level of interaction between the Bogomils and the 'Cathars', but tends towards the thesis that each group evolved largely independently from the Paulicians), and G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491 (which seems to suggest that the Paulicians were perhaps remnants of earlier 'Gnostic' groups, and that their ideas were passed on to the 'Cathars', and through them *to* the Bogomils).

points comparable to those upon which we are concentrating, *viz.* that claims of genetic descent from these groups to the 'Cathars' are more often founded upon perceived similarities between these thought streams than upon any demonstrable textual evidence of relation. Indeed, as Pegg argues, in light of a general lack of reliable evidence for the origin of the western 'Cathars' amongst these eastern 'dualist' groups, the argument for this relation often tends to rest "quite weakly, on the historian simply perceiving a similarity between one set of ideas and another"[404]. A classic example of this is the thesis, highlighted by van den Broek that, since the 'Cathars', as we have seen, seem to have been divided between 'absolute dualist' and 'moderate dualist' positions, this probably reflects a similar division in Bogomil thought, which in turn owes much to the influence of the 'absolute dualist' Paulicians upon an already existent Bogomil group[405]. Of course, I raise this argument here merely as an illustrative example, since we have already observed that this is only one of a number of proposed demonstrations of this potential chain of influence; the reason for this multitude of theories of course becomes quite clear when we observe, with van den Broek, that there can be little or no real "certainty on this point, for the simple reason that there are no sources available"[406]. Let us recall our earlier observation (see above, pp.114f.) that heresiological claims that the 'Cathars' were direct descendants of earlier 'heresies' no doubt owe at least something to heresiological method, and are thus in and of themselves insufficient evidence for the existence of genetic antecedents for these 'heretics'. Further, as van den Broek notes, there does not seem to exist any reliable "independent evidence from the Bogomils or the Cathars themselves that could prove that their doctrines derive from those of [earlier 'heretical' groups]"[407]. Perhaps one of the most explicit assertions of such a descent which we possess is to be found in the Appendix to the Letters of St. Bernard, which contains the report of Eberwin of Steinfeld, who conducted the trial of two 'Cathars', one of whom was supposedly a 'Cathar bishop', in Cologne in 1143-44. Eberwin records that these men claimed that "hanc haeresim usque ad haec tempora occultatam fuisse a temporibus

[404] M.G. Pegg, 'Cathars, Albigenses' (2001), pp.181-195. In particular, Pegg lambasts [n.20] certain scholars whom he sees as having allowed their notions of a relation between these groups, based on perceived abstract similarities, to colour their reading of the actual evidence. He cites instances where a scribal variation for *bons omes* (a name *possibly* used to refer to the 'Cathars') has been read as meaning *Bonosii* (i.e. 'Bosnians'), as well as a misreading of an Inquisition slur against a 'Cathar' text, so that the original claim concerning the text's origin (*et hoc in vulgari*) is read as *et hoc in Bulgaria*, and thus appears to evince the presence of an eastern influence on the text.
[405] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.
[406] *Ibid.*
[407] *Ibid.*

martyrum, et permansisse in Graecia et quibusdam aliis terris"[408]. Even assuming that Eberwin faithfully recorded the evidence he heard (on which point recall our comments above, on a certain medieval ecclesiastical tendency to see 'heresy' as particularly prevalent, and invariably stemming from earlier 'heresies'), I am still loath to take this statement as wholly reliable. We have already noted our general lack of other sources to substantiate such a claim, and moreover, as we shall have cause to see in the next chapter, the claim to a particular antiquity and/or foreign origin for one's beliefs is a very common rhetorical trope for arguing for the validity of those beliefs[409].

In fact, this Rhineland trial seems to me of more import insofar as it serves, as Bernard Hamilton argues, as something of a *terminus a quo* for the establishment of the 'Cathars' in western Europe[410]. This is interesting precisely because, in spite of the reservations made above, it is probably impossible to deny that there was some level of interaction between the Bogomils in the east and the 'Cathars' in the west. Indeed, van den Broek highlights certain pieces of textual evidence which survive, and can thus be shown to have been in use amongst both groups (in particular the *Interrogatio Johannis* and the ritual text of the sacrament of the *consolamentum*), as well as attested instances of interactions, visits, and discussions between the eastern and western groups[411]. What is notable, however, is that these relatively reliable examples of interaction seem to occur, as far as we can demonstrate, a significant time *after* the *terminus a quo* of 1143. The *Interrogatio*, for example, is concluded with a notation recording that the text was "brought from Bulgaria by Nazarius [a 'Cathar' bishop]", an event which van den Broek dates to c.1190; similarly, whilst van den Broek rightly highlights the importance of the arrival in the west of the Bogomil bishop of Constantinople, Nicetas, and his convening of a meeting of 'Cathar' bishops in Saint-Félix, one should note that this occurred in 1179, over thirty years after the trial in Cologne which arguably marked the definite appearance of the 'Cathars' in the west[412]. Of course, it should be logically obvious that we cannot expect to find examples of the 'Cathars' interacting with other groups until a period *after* the 'Cathars' came into being, but the essential point to stress here is that we do not generally seem to have reliable evidence for a sustained Bogomil influence in the west prior to the emergence of the 'Cathars'. As Bernard Hamilton notes, although there may

[408] C.f. the record of this trial in B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60.
[409] See below, pp.151f.
[410] B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60.
[411] R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.
[412] Trans. W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, p.465; R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108.

possibly have been Bogomil missions to the west, which might potentially have been "responsible for some of the outbreaks of heresy reported in western Europe in the first half of the eleventh century", the missions quite clearly "failed to take root", as suggested by our general lack of evidence for western 'dualists' prior to 1143[413]. Viewed from this angle, therefore, one might plausibly argue that neither the Paulicians nor the Bogomils can be properly called the genetic antecedents of the 'Cathars', since we have no real evidence of the stable incursion of these eastern movements into the west until *after* the emergence of the 'Cathars'. As such, whilst the proven later interactions between the Bogomils and the 'Cathars' certainly seem to show the earlier group influencing the latter, this cannot be claimed as evidence that the 'Cathars' descended from the Bogomils. Rather, it appears more as though what we are seeing here is a sharing of ideas between two 'dualist' groups with sympathetic theologies, but who nonetheless originated individually; to say that the Bogomils were chronologically prior to the 'Cathars', whom they were later to heavily influence, is scarcely the same thing as claiming that the 'Cathars' originated from the Bogomils[414].

In any case, however, such a chain of descent would only be of real use to us here were it possible to substantively trace it back to our second century 'Gnostics'. Already we have had reason to doubt the possibility of tracing the 'Cathars' back to any earlier group, but even *were* it possible to reliably link them to the Paulicians (the oldest of our potential immediate antecedents), to do so would at best take us no further than fifth century Armenia and the Balkans, a far cry (both geographically and chronologically) from our second century 'Gnostic' groups. Indeed, in attempting to trace from the 'Gnostics' to the 'Cathars', it is arguably this lacuna which has provided the biggest stumbling block for scholars. Probably the most extensive attempt to fill this gap is that of Steven Runciman, and later Quispel, who focus primarily on references within the evidence of one Moses of Chorene to a sect of 'Borborites' being present in Armenia in the fifth century[415]. Both Runciman and Quispel argue that these 'Borborites' are to be understood as descendants of the same group of libertine 'Gnostics' to whom Epiphanius applies this name in *Panarion* 26. I find myself,

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413 B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60.
414 C.f. also B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60, where he notes that from c.1180 onwards (i.e. after the council of Saint-Félix) rather than a wide-ranging connection between the two 'movements', the more common pattern was for individual and somewhat distinct 'Cathar groups' to converse with similarly differentiated Bogomil 'groups'. This again suggests less a descent of one 'movement' from another, but rather a complementary level of interaction between different already existent 'dualist' churches which subsequently discovered their sympathy of ideas with each other.
415 S. Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee* (1982), pp.26-31; G. Quispel, 'Cathars and Gnosis' (1994), pp.487-491.

however, unconvinced by this argument, not least because the very name ‘Borborites’ (i.e. ‘filthy/muddy people’, derived from βόρβορος, ‘mud’) seems more likely to be a polemical slur rather than a name that serves a useful purpose in taxonomic definition, and probably not a name which the group would apply to themselves (as Epiphanius essentially admits in 26.3.6). Both Runciman and Quispel conjecture that the term may have been intended as a parody of the group name ‘Barbērites’, in reference to the group’s adherence to the ‘Gnostic’ figure Barbēlō; Epiphanius notes in 26.10.10 that ‘Barbēlō’ is also variantly spelled as Barbērō, and also records in 26.3.7 that one of the names applied to the group was ‘Barbēlites’[416]. Whilst at face value this may seem a plausible hypothesis, we should first recall the concerns raised in chapter 2 (see above, pp.21f., 25f.) regarding the accuracy and reliability of Epiphanius’s evidence in *Panarion* 26, such that we might well doubt whether this ‘group’ of ‘Gnostics’ truly existed as an actual sect. It is worth noting that those ‘Gnostics’ described as “Barbeliotes” in our earliest evidence, that of Irenaeus (*Haer.* I.29) do not generally resemble those depicted by Epiphanius; in particular, the lurid descriptions of their abhorrent practices, which are the cornerstone of Epiphanius’s condemnation of the sect (and the rationale behind their labelling as ‘Borborites’), are wholly absent from Irenaeus’s account. If we also recall our earlier observation (see above, pp.20ff.) that these ‘group’ names are not original to Irenaeus, but are in fact later additions, then we must surely be given to wonder whether such a definite ‘group’ really existed, and was able to endure into fifth century Armenia[417]. Now, even were we to assume that Epiphanius was correct in his reporting of this sect, it should be recalled that not only does he locate them in Egypt, but he also lists a number of other names by which they were variously called, such as Coddians, Stratiōtics, and Zacchaeuses (26.3.6-7). It therefore seems to me curious, to say the least, to suppose that this group migrated from Egypt to Armenia, and in so doing shed every tag attached to it except the one tag which they would probably be least likely to ever use themselves. It does not seem unreasonable to me to expect that were these Armenian ‘Borborites’ the same as those of Epiphanius, that somewhere in the evidence one of the other group names attached to them might also have been preserved. That this is not the case thus

[416] S. Runciman, *op. cit.*, pp.29f.; G. Quispel, ‘Cathars and Gnosis’ (1994), pp.487-491. C.f. B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), p.200.

[417] In support of this point, note also that the heading for *Haer.* I.29 refers to the “Barbeliotes or Borborians”, despite the fact that the text itself makes no reference to this latter name, nor gives any particular rationale for it. It thus seems most likely that this addition was made primarily on the basis of Epiphanius’s later description. C.f. Theodoret, *Haer. fab.* 1.13, “Περὶ Βαρβηλιωτῶν, ἤγουν Βορβοριανῶν. Ἐκ τῶν Βαλεντίνου σπερμάτων τὸ τῶν Βαρβη λιωτῶν, ἤγουν Βορβοριανῶν, ἢ Νaασινῶν, ἢ Στρατιωτικῶν, ἢ Φημιονιτῶν καλουμένων, ἐβλάστησε μύσος...”

suggests to me that it is perhaps more likely that the usage of the term 'Borborites' in the Armenian evidence is merely intended as a slur on the group in question, and does not necessarily imply any relation to the earlier 'Gnostic' group (if in fact such a 'group' ever even existed). Indeed, Runciman admits that "[i]t has been suggested that these [Armenian] Borborites were the Messalians under a more abusive name. 'Borborites' means 'muddy ones' and may have been used as a general term of disapprobation for any nasty-mannered heretic". As we have seen, both he and Quispel reject this thesis on the grounds of Epiphanius's account but, given the reservations raised above, I would contend that on the basis of the available evidence it is this latter explanation for the Armenian usage of 'Borborites' that is more logical. As a final point against the thesis of Runciman and Quispel, it should also be noted that there is nothing in the evidence which clearly identifies the theology of the Armenian 'Borborites' with that of the earlier 'Gnostics'; indeed if, as these scholars argue, these 'Borborites' are supposed to have been the antecedents of the Paulicians and/or the Bogomils, then it becomes even less likely that they were related to the 'Borborites' of the *Panarion*. As we have already mentioned, the Paulicians are generally held to have been primarily 'absolute dualists', whilst the Bogomils included both 'absolute' and 'moderate' groups; as such, one would expect their 'Borborite' ancestors to have been largely 'absolute dualists', thematically closer to the 'Iranian dualist' model and the Manichaean system[418]. Yet those 'Borborites' described by Epiphanius are quite clearly closer to the 'Syrian-Egyptian dualist' model; furthermore, it is notable that those hideous and perverted practices which Epiphanius ascribes to his 'Borborites', and which he presents as vital elements of their religion (see especially 26.3.3-5.8; 8.2f.), are generally not recorded in the evidence for either the Armenian 'Borborites' or their supposed heirs. Given that the majority of this evidence is directed against these groups, we can reasonably assume that were such practices common amongst them, they would be clearly recorded and utilised in polemic: that such references are absent must therefore suggest that these groups did not engage in such acts. Now, of course, we have previously disputed much of what Epiphanius says in *Panarion* 26, especially in regard to these licentious practices (which run counter to the heavily ascetic strain which we find in most other 'Gnostic' evidence), but I would suggest that for the thesis of Runciman and Quispel this observation creates something of a Catch-22 paradox. Either the evidence of Epiphanius is accurate, in which case one must explain why the Armenian 'Borborites' bear so little resemblance to the 'Borborites' of the

[418] C.f. p.124, n.403 above.

Panarion, or else Epiphanius's evidence is incorrect or misleading, in which case it lacks utility for constructing a reliable argument whereby the fifth century Armenian 'Borborites' are seen to be descended from second century Middle Eastern 'Gnostics'. The most logical, and I dare say responsible, conclusion therefore seems to be that, on the basis of the evidence available, the Armenian 'Borborites' cannot be reliably linked to earlier 'Gnostics'.

A brief word also needs to be said here about the *Interrogatio Johannis* which, as we observed above, possibly seems to bear some textual relation to the *Apoc. John*. We have already highlighted that a notation on the *Interrogatio* (which was "probably made by an inquisitor or a scribe of an inquisitorial court") claims that the text was brought to the west from Bulgaria by a 'Cathar' bishop; as such, *if* this claim is correct (which is of course by no means certain), it might indicate that a copy of *Apoc. John* was present in the Balkans[419]. The bearing of this observation upon our argument here is, however, minimal: we have already argued that the existence of a 'Gnostic' text in the second century does not necessarily imply the existence of a contemporary solid 'Gnostic' community, and therefore much less does it imply such a community centuries later in a different geographical area. We also noted above that it is quite possible that the theology behind the *Interrogatio* arose organically, and subsequently subsumed elements of the *Apoc. John* into the *Interrogatio* on the basis of a largely coincidental level of sympathy between the two paradigms[420]. Again, therefore, we do not seem able to reliably construct a substantive argument for the continued existence of 'Gnostic groups' into the fifth century (and later) Balkans; as concluded above, perhaps the most we can propose is the potential existence of a copy of the *Apoc. John* within the area where the *Interrogatio* was composed. To say more than that concerning social constructions would likely be too far beyond the available evidence.

If we have, therefore, hopefully refuted the argument that the 'Cathars' likely descended (via the Paulicians and/or the Bogomils) from the remnants of a 'Gnostic group' which survived in the Balkans, we are perhaps left with one other option to fill the lacuna between the second century 'Gnostics' and the Paulicians, namely the possibility of descent through the Manichaeans. Unfortunately, however, it seems to me that this thesis is from the beginning unsupportable, not least because, as we have already highlighted, the sheer syncretism of the Manichaean system would render any attempt to trace a 'dualist' system back through it to

[419] See above, p.126; W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *op. cit.*, p.776, n.79.
[420] See above, p.123.

the second century ‘Gnostics’ logically impossible[421]. Similarly, proceeding in the other direction, we have already noted that whilst ‘dualists’ such as the Paulicians, Bogomils, and ‘Cathars’ might to some extent bear a very vague surface similarity to the ‘Iranian dualist’ *typos* which might be reflected in Manichaeism, the level of similarity is scarcely exact enough to warrant any suspicion of filiation[422]. Indeed, as we observed, the ascription of the label ‘Manichaean’ to the ‘Cathars’ by their ecclesiastical contemporaries was likely more an application of heresiological method and polemic than an accurate reflection of ‘Cathar’ thought; as we saw, it was quickly realised by these ecclesiastical opponents that old arguments designed to refute the Manichaeans were not particularly effective in combating the ‘Cathars’[423]. As Quispel rightly highlights, there is “nothing similar in Bogomil or Cathar lore” to the “picturesque and complicated interplay” of the Manichaean cosmological system; furthermore, the evidence seems to suggest that by the fifth century the Manichaeans “had been completely wiped out in the Roman Empire, Eastern and Western”[424]. As such therefore, the balance of the extant evidence would seem to suggest that the lacuna between the second century ‘Gnostics’ and the Paulicians remains steadfast, and cannot it seems be reliably filled in such a way as to create a secure chain of transmission, whether by the Manichaeans, a ‘Borborite group’, or the hypothesised presence of a copy of *Apoc. John*. When we add to these observations our earlier findings regarding the high levels of doubt regarding the extent (if at all) to which the ‘Cathars’ descended from the Paulicians and/or the Bogomils, then the argument for a reliable chain of filiation between the ‘Gnostics’ and the ‘Cathars’ surely appears somewhat untenable.

Now, if such a hypothesis of filiation seems difficult to maintain, might it perhaps be possible to maintain a contrary position, namely that the rise of ‘Cathar dualism’ in the medieval Occident can be primarily explained organically, as a result of contemporary changes in the socio-religious climate? R.I. Moore in particular has argued that the rise of heresy, both genuine and perceived, and the reaction to it by ecclesiastical authorities in the Middle Ages, may well owe much to a growing culture of dissatisfaction and dissent, formed out of a reaction by the laity against the changes imposed by the Gregorian reforms[425]. Similarly, Bernard Hamilton has hypothesised that the decline of the ‘Cathars’ was largely due to the

[421] See above, pp.111f.
[422] C.f. M.G. Pegg, ‘Cathars, Albigenses’ (2001), pp.181-195.
[423] R.I. Moore, ‘The war against heresy’ (2008), pp.189-210; R. van den Broek, ‘Medieval Gnostics?’ (1998), pp.87-108. C.f. pp.114f., above.
[424] G. Quispel, ‘Cathars and Gnosis’ (1994), pp.487-491.
[425] R.I. Moore, *op. cit.*

rise of the Mendicant orders, who, in contrast to many other ecclesiastical authorities, undertook a more pastoral mission, thereby effectively addressing the same social concerns which drove people towards the 'Cathars'; since the Mendicants "not only had the approval of the papacy", but also provided "sheer numbers of additional clergy... to carry out the work of pastoral ministry in Languedoc and Lombardy", Hamilton argues that they were able to more completely address the pastoral concerns of these areas, thereby constituting "a severe challenge" to those 'Cathar' movements which had hitherto acted as the primary outlet for a dissatisfied laity[426]. To be sure, since similar social arguments have also been raised for the development of early Christianity, both 'orthodox' and 'heretical', we might then argue that we are on even surer ground here, given our higher levels of extant source material concerning issues of social dissent in medieval Europe[427]. I would stress, however, that in my opinion such an argument as this can only ever be speculative; in particular, let us recall our earlier discussion of the influence of the 1492 Expulsion on the development of Lurianic Kabbalah, and the *caveat* of Moshe Idel against interposing psychology into historical examinations[428]. It is as well to recall that religious or theosophical texts do not generally, almost by definition of their genre, refer to historical circumstances as the motivation for their doctrine, since to do so would dilute the divine origin which such texts adduce for their theology. Furthermore, as we have already noted, much of our evidence for the 'Cathars' derives from the reports of their Inquisitors, who would scarcely have been likely to ever suggest that the rise of heresy was in some way the direct result of ecclesiastical policy. As such, whilst I do not necessarily deny the proposition that 'Cathar heresy' could have arisen organically within its own environment, I am not myself convinced by attempts to explicitly link its emergence to social causes; whilst we may postulate a particular historical situation as having some bearing on the emergence of a specific thought stream, and as potentially explaining at least one reason why it may have found such a level of acceptance as it did, the intrinsically hypothetical nature of such a postulation must unfortunately render it little more than indicative[429].

This then perhaps demonstrates the opposite side of the methodology that we have previously outlined, *viz.* that whilst probably the most logical approach is to assume a contemporary

[426] B. Hamilton, 'The legacy of Charles Schmidt' (1998), pp.191-214.
[427] C.f. R.I. Moore, *op. cit.* On social arguments for early Christianity see, for example, H.A. Green, 'Socio-Economic Background' (1986), pp.100-113 and J.N. Bremmer, *op. cit.*, pp.56-70.
[428] C.f. above, p.90, n.285; M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.264-267.
[429] C.f. also the critiques of such methodologies in M.G. Pegg, 'Cathars, Albigenses' (2001), pp.181-195 and P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.

origin for a particular motif in the absence of a credible line of historical transmission, this assumption must always remain based upon an admittedly tenuous *argumentum ex silentio*. To say that a motif most likely developed organically, whether or not one attempts to link that development to social circumstances, does not automatically deny the possibility of the transmission of historical antecedents. One must simply recognise that where sources for such transmission are lacking, the most secure approach is to rely primarily on those sources which *are* extant, i.e. those which witness to the existence of a particular motif within the relevant sphere of inquiry. Thus, whilst a lack of sources for historical transmission should force us to acknowledge organic generation as the only explanation for which we possess some degree of proof, this lack does not itself disprove the possibility of transmission.

An interesting coalescence of arguments for both transmission and organic generation is raised, however, by Sarah Hamilton, who advances a rather captivating theory, that the 'Cathars' might plausibly have adopted earlier 'heretical' ideas and arguments which were preserved in the heresiological comments of the *Glossa ordinaria*, "the standard reference work for thirteenth-century biblical exegesis"[430]. Hamilton convincingly demonstrates that not only would educated 'Cathar' leaders have most likely known the *Glossa*, as did their 'orthodox' opponents, but that it is also possible that certain of the 'heretical' views which the 'Cathars' are recorded as having held in treatises composed against them (most prominently the early thirteenth century *Disputation of a catholic against the heretics*) can in some cases be reasonably equated with 'heretical' views drawn from the *Glossa*. It is of course also possible, as Hamilton admits, that the Catholic authors of such treatises might themselves have merely ascribed to the 'heretical' characters in their works the views of other 'heretics' from Antiquity. She argues, however, that not only are the 'heretical' arguments in these works often borne out as being genuine 'Cathar' beliefs in the records of the Inquisition trials, but in addition the 'heretical' characters in these treatises also express beliefs not found in the *Glossa* (especially in regard to the figure of Mary), thus suggesting that the authors may actually be presenting (and refuting) actual 'Cathar' arguments[431]. Of course, this hypothesis can scarcely serve to explain the source of *all* 'Cathar' theology, and certainly Hamilton does not make this claim; as already noted, she does not find evidence in the

[430] S. Hamilton, *op. cit.*
[431] *Ibid.* Such a conclusion would of course be logical, since if the authors were writing for the purposes of refuting the contemporary 'Cathar menace', then they would presumably be interested solely in refuting those arguments which the 'Cathars' were *actually* espousing. One might, however, be wary of ever applying too great an expectation of logic to religious polemics (c.f. our earlier comments regarding the reliability of Epiphanius, pp.21f., 25f., 127-130, above).

Glossa for 'Cathar' views on the body of Mary, instead locating the antecedents of those arguments elsewhere, such as in the *Interrogatio*. Further, the thirteenth century setting of this discussion does somewhat dilute its utility for identifying the origin point of the 'Cathars', perhaps somewhere c.1143 or earlier[432]. The particular details of this argument need not concern us here, but what is important for our thesis is that it highlights the possibility of 'heretical' groups organically developing within their society, and adopting older 'heretical' ideas which we know to have been transmitted from Antiquity, ironically in works dedicated to refuting them. We therefore see a possible schema by which a medieval 'heretical' group could have arisen without receipt of any prior 'heretical' tradition, yet could express ideas comparably similar (to a lesser or greater extent) to those earlier 'heresies' by dint of their adaptation of the records of those 'heresies' preserved in heresiological works. Now, of course, since we in general lack evidence of either specific citations for or direct quotations of such heresiological works from the 'Cathars', this suggestion remains largely hypothetical. Moreover, whilst it might be more easily explicable to state how and why a particular group would adopt a theology or theosophy that they had received in and of itself through a chain of transmission, it is perhaps more difficult to explain why a particular group emerging from a specific religious background would consciously choose to adhere to particularly those ideas recorded as being condemned by that religion. The most obvious answer might perhaps be as a form of protest against the current state of the religion, but I should not here wish to delve too deeply into this possibility. As we considered above, it may well be unwise to attempt to transpose specific psychological motivations into particular historical circumstances, as the outcomes of such endeavours can by definition only ever be speculative. That being said, in the final chapter we shall return to certain more abstract questions regarding the role of psychology and theosophy, but for the moment I am content to leave this question open.

A final point of uncertainty which we might raise in regard to the question of the origins and antecedents of the 'Cathars' is the rather vexatious issue of whether one can properly speak of the 'Cathars' as a single unified movement or group, an issue which has been much debated in modern scholarship (hence why I have chosen to refer to the term 'Cathar' in

[432] It is still somewhat open to debate as to whether certain 'heretics' identified in the west in the early twelfth century were 'Cathars' or 'dualists' or not, but there is a reasonable level of agreement on setting the trial at Cologne as the *terminus a quo* for the definitive appearance of the 'Cathar heresy'. C.f. B. Hamilton, 'The legacy of Charles Schmidt' (1998), pp.191-214.

inverted commas)[433]. We have already noted the existence of a division between 'absolute' and 'moderate' forms of 'dualism' amongst both the 'Cathars' and the Bogomils, and indeed, as Bernard Hamilton highlights, the lack of conceptual unity within each of these 'movements' can be clearly demonstrated by the fact that after the council of Saint-Félix, it was generally the case that "different Cathar churches in the West preserved links with different Bogomil churches in the East"[434]. It should further be stressed that, as Jan Bremmer has rightly demonstrated, the very term 'Cathar' is likely an external imposition onto these medieval 'heretics', since none of the available sources seem to suggest that they themselves ever actually utilised the term as a self-designation; we recall that we have previously made similar observations regarding the application of a number of 'Gnostic' titles[435]. Bremmer instead highlights the heresiological occurrences of the term since late Antiquity (when it was originally a self-designation of the Novatianists), and suggests that, in line with medieval heresiological method, the name of an earlier 'heresy' was simply re-applied to a current 'heresy'; given that we have already identified the use of such a method regarding the application of the term 'Manichaean' in this period, Bremmer's thesis thus seems at least plausible[436]. Pegg in fact goes further, and applies a certain amount of hyper-critical scholarship to this issue, pointing to the varied and not necessarily consistent use of a number of different terms such as 'Cathars', 'Albigenses', and '*bons omes*' to refer to the 'heresy'[437]. In particular, he notes a general geographical dispersion of the use of these terms in the Inquisition records; for example, he finds the use of '*bons omes*' (or some variation thereon) to be the standard in the Inquisition reports from the Toulousain, the Lauragais, and the *pays de* Foix, but notes the absence of the noun 'Cathar' in these records. Pegg thus suggests that there primarily only ever existed a number of individual 'heretical' groups, each operating in their own geographical area, neither group being necessarily related or in especial contact with any other[438]. Indeed, we might add to this argument the observation of Sarah Hamilton that the *Interrogatio* was not necessarily in use amongst all 'Cathar' groups, only circulating

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433 Arguably, the same level of debate could be applied to the potential divisions amongst the 'Bogomils', but since this discussion would be largely tangential to our focus here I have chosen, for the sake of simplicity, to avoid encasing the term 'Bogomils' in inverted commas (though I have avoided use of the term 'Bogomilism'). The reader should, however, be aware that the entire situation of medieval 'dualist heresies' is likely somewhat less homogenous than sometimes supposed. C.f. M.G. Pegg, 'Cathars, Albigenses' (2001), pp.181-195.

434 B. Hamilton, 'Wisdom from the East' (1994), pp.38-60.

435 J.N. Bremmer, *op. cit.*, pp.67-69, 163, n.92. In particular, Bremmer cites the lack of source evidence supporting the use of 'Cathar' as a self-designation in order to refute the hypothesis that the 'Cathars' derived their name from καθαρός ('clean' or 'pure').

436 *Ibid.*, p.68.

437 M.G. Pegg, 'Cathars, Albigenses' (2001), pp.181-195.

438 *Ibid.*

in certain geographical areas (primarily parts of Northern Italy and Southern France), and then only being accepted by certain of the 'heretics'[439]. Building on our earlier discussions of heresiological method and ecclesiastical method in the medieval Occident, we might perhaps suggest that a predisposition of the ecclesiastical authorities led them to perceive a real and present threat from an organised and unified widespread 'heretical church', even when the reality was no more than a number of local movements, perhaps (so Moore) stirred away from the established church more by local and pastoral concerns than by any great 'heretical' tide[440]. Pegg, however, would go further and argues, on the basis of a lack of consistency and agreement amongst Inquisition documents concerning the identification of these 'heretics' and their doctrines, that the Inquisition at the time (which, he notes, was in any case not yet the centrally organised and controlled institution which it would become) did not in fact view these varied 'heretics' as part of a widespread 'group'; the 'Cathar heresy', Pegg maintains, is thus largely to be seen as an invention of modern scholarship[441]. The full extent of this debate regarding the existence and identification of the 'Cathars' as such is unfortunately rather too complex to delve into any more deeply here, but it is at least important to be aware of the debate on this matter. Just as we have previously identified the necessity of speaking with precision about *which* specific 'group' of 'Gnostics' we might wish to claim as an antecedent, so too perhaps should we be careful to speak about *which* specific 'Cathar group' we claim as a descendant.

Having hopefully now examined some of the important methodological considerations which should guide our consideration of the possibility of 'Cathar'-'Gnostic' filiation, I wish now to address one final point, in direct relation to our thesis regarding potential transmission from the 'Gnostics' to the Kabbalah. Although we have hopefully by now demonstrated the relative unreliability of attempts to claim a second century 'Gnostic' ancestry for the 'Cathars', it remains to be considered whether, *were* one to consider such an ancestry plausible, it would be reasonable to claim that the Kabbalah could potentially have thus

439 S. Hamilton, *op. cit.* C.f. R. van den Broek, 'Medieval Gnostics?' (1998), pp.87-108. Given what we have seen of the theology of the *Interrogatio*, we should not be surprised that it circulated, according to van den Broek, in those areas most associated with the 'moderate dualist Cathars'.

440 R.I. Moore, *op. cit.* As we have previously noted, however, the more social-psychological aspects of such a theory are perhaps too hypothetical to be wholly reliable. Such questions will be addressed more fully, however, in our final chapter.

441 M.G. Pegg, 'Cathars, Albigenses' (2001), pp.181-195. It should, of course, be noted that Pegg's contention is quite heavily disputed. See, for example, Bernard Hamilton's review (listed in the bibliography) of Pegg's *The Corruption of Angels.*

received ‘Gnostic’ ideas via the ‘Cathars’, by dint of both thought streams existing in similar geographical and chronological spheres.

Now it should of course first be stated that we possess little real evidence for the possibility of relatively cordial relations between ‘Cathars’ and Jews in the relevant period, and indeed one must suspect that such interaction would in fact be rather unlikely. To be sure, Scholem highlights certain pieces of Catholic polemic against the ‘Cathar’ groups (in particular the *Adversus Albigenses* of Lucas of Tuy) which accused the ‘heretics’ of consorting with Jews but, as Scholem notes, it is hard to discern how much truth is reflected in what is essentially a piece of stock medieval polemic[442]. More importantly for us, it is as well to recall that, as we have repeatedly highlighted, the Kabbalah, especially in its earlier stages, generally remained wholly within normative Judaism, and in fact to an outsider (such as a Catholic or a ‘Cathar’), a Kabbalist would probably have been indistinguishable from an ordinary rabbinic Jew. Let us of course note here that such a contemporaneous line of transmission could potentially run either way; it might thus be possible to suggest that ‘Gnostic’ ideas were transmitted in some (non-‘Cathar’ related) way to the Kabbalists, and from there *to* the ‘Cathars’. Admittedly, our analysis of ‘Cathar’ theology up to this point has done little to strongly recommend ‘Gnostic’ influence (especially such an influence refracted through medieval Judaism), but *if* ‘Gnostic’ ideas could be shown to have been transmitted to the Kabbalists in some other way, then one *might* argue that those ideas were then transmitted to the ‘Cathars’[443]. In the following chapters, we shall of course be exploring other potential chains of transmission, but let us note here that if the chain of ‘Gnostic’ influence *were* to be found to flow from the Kabbalah to the ‘Cathars’, then this chain essentially steps outside the bounds of our thesis. Since we are primarily focused on the possible ‘Gnostic’ origins of the Kabbalah, it thus becomes rather tangential to consider the potential further post-Kabbalistic transmission of any such ideas. Thus, our analysis here must necessarily focus on the possibility of whether there could have been any transmission of ideas from the ‘Cathars’, either directly to the Kabbalists, or at least into normative Judaism and subsequently into the Kabbalah.

Such a line of transmission seems, however, to be rather implausible. In the first place, as we have noted, the Kabbalah largely remained inside normative Judaism and, whilst not without its critics, never excited the same level of impassioned dispute regarding its propriety within

[442] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.16.
[443] C.f. *Ibid.*, pp.234-237.

Judaism, such as occurred in the Maimonidean controversy[444]. Indeed, as we have seen, it seems as though in general Kabbalists were far more concerned to present themselves as standing wholly in line with an internally Jewish received tradition (the very word *kabbalah*, קבלה, does, after all, denote reception), an image likely intensified by such actions as the presentation of the *Zohar* as being the second century work of the revered Simeon bar Yoḥai[445]. In this context, therefore, it seems difficult to postulate why either Kabbalists or normative Jews would prominently adopt the ideas promulgated by a fundamentally Christian 'heresy'. Certainly, as Talmage notes, given the public nature of the conflict between the ecclesiastical authorities and the 'Cathars' or 'dualist heretics', it is highly likely that members of Jewish communities in the relevant geographic areas would have been aware of the arguments and theologies of both sides, yet there remains no evidence that they would have adopted those ideas[446]. Indeed, one might logically argue that if, up to that point, Jews had retained their religion against those of the ecclesiastical authorities, despite the persecution that such action could entail, why then might they choose to adopt ideas at once both arguably foreign and also clearly encumbered with yet more ecclesiastical ire? The 'dualist' cast of much 'Cathar' theology which, as we have seen, included a denigration of the Old Testament (and by definition a concomitant supersessionism) arguably far in advance of even that of the medieval Catholic Church, would have been highly unlikely to win favour amongst Jewish communities[447]. Although Scholem rightly notes that the "metaphysical anti-Semitism [of the 'Cathars'] did not necessarily prevent them from engaging, on occasion, in an exchange of ideas with Jews, who were, like themselves, adversaries of Catholicism", this is a long way from suggesting that Jews were ever likely to adopt 'Cathar' ideas themselves, or indeed cooperate with the 'Cathars' in any major way[448]. In fact, as Talmage argues, the Catholic Church's preoccupation with its internal struggles with the 'Cathars' left it with "only limited means... for dealing with the Jews, who consequently had greater liberty to speak freely"[449]. Rather than joining with the 'Cathars' to combat a common enemy, therefore, as Talmage points out it seems more likely that Jewish communities took advantage of the relative lull in persecution to more forcibly construct their position against both sides. As a specific example, Talmage in his article reproduces a rare surviving Jewish

444 C.f. M. Idel, 'Particularism and Universalism' (1992), pp.324-344.
445 The word *kabbalah* is derived from the root קבל, meaning 'to receive'. C.f. B. Davidson, *Lexicon* (1850), p.652. On the attribution of the *Zohar* see, for example, G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.158ff.
446 F. Talmage, *op. cit.*
447 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.236f.
448 *Ibid.*, p.16.
449 F. Talmage, *op. cit.*

polemical tract from the time, the so-called *Disputation of Rabbi David Kimhi*, in which the author makes use of both Catholic and 'Cathar' arguments, and plays them off against each other in order to defend the position of Judaism[450]. Thus, as Talmage rightly concludes, whilst the existence of such a treatise certainly seems to prove that Jewish communities did have a detailed acquaintance with 'Cathar' ideas, far from adopting them, they were more likely to utilise them to point out the potential weaknesses in the Catholic arguments (and indeed *vice versa*)[451]. In this context then, it is also interesting to observe, as Scholem does, that despite their geographical spread throughout Catholic France and Italy, the 'Cathars' "did not obtain a firm foothold in the major Jewish centres such as Narbonne and Montpellier"[452]. As such, whilst it is certainly a point of interest that both the 'Cathars' and the Kabbalah arose in a similar geographical and chronological sphere, and perhaps both espoused a stream of ideas with potentially some *prima facie* resemblances to 'Gnostic' mythologies, we should probably, in view of the context in which these 'groups' existed, be cautious about supposing any shared adoption or transmission of ideas between them. It may, as Scholem proposes, be better to "speak of a common mood" permeating the area at that time, which may have encouraged the rise of such types of speculation, a point to which we shall return in the final chapter[453].

Conclusion

We have in this chapter hopefully managed to further refine our methodology, previously developed and applied solely in the context of the question of filiation between the second century 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, and have successfully applied it to the related but distinct question of filiation between these 'Gnostics' and the 'Cathars'. Whilst, as we noted, the absence of source evidence does not necessarily disprove the possibility of a chain of transmission between particular thought streams, unless there are to be found reliable and

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450 It is unlikely that David Kimhi (*RaDaḲ*) is actually the author of this treatise, and the critical version makes no mention of his name in the text. Talmage is no doubt correct in surmising that the attribution stems from the heavy use of remarks from Kimhi's commentary to Psalms in the first section.

451 F. Talmage, *op. cit.*

452 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.17.

453 *Ibid.*, p.238. C.f. also the methodological *caveats* raised by P.S. Alexander in 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18. To be sure, Shulamith Shahar ['Le catharisme et le début de la cabale' (1974), pp. 1185-1210] does claim to find instances of correspondence suggestive of a close relationship between the 'Cathars' and certain streams of the Kabbalah (including the *Bahir*). Her arguments, however, do not seem overly convincing to me, not least because her method seems to generally override many of the concerns which we have hitherto raised regarding the necessity of parallels being properly adduced *in detail* within their respective contexts. Moreover, as Moshe Idel [*Ecstatic Kabbalah* (1988), pp.33-44] rightly highlights, her article seems almost to segue from speaking of 'analogous' conceptions to a conclusion of direct influence, without providing sufficient methodological justification for this development.

highly exact conceptual parallels between those thought streams, the logical conclusion must be one of coincidental independent development. In this line, we also stressed the importance of distinguishing within such parallels between those motifs which are particularly specific or unique to the relevant systems, and those which are so ubiquitous as to not be indicative of any one chain of transmission. Through careful application of this methodology we were thus able to discern that whilst the possibility of a link between certain of the 'Gnostics' and certain of the 'Cathars' could be postulated on the basis of the combined similarities between the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Interrogatio Johannis*, overall the similarities were not themselves enough to not require proof of a chain of transmission. Given the relative difficulty of reliably proving such a link, we were thus forced to suspect the organic development of the 'Cathar' theology within its own context, and whilst we did not exclude the possibility of the adoption of 'Gnostic' ideas at a later stage, we could not reasonably determine that such ideas were to be seen behind the genesis of the 'Cathars'. In so doing, we also strove to refute the possibility that 'Gnostic' ideas may have been transmitted to the Kabbalah via the 'Cathars', a notion which we have, if not wholly disproved, at least cast substantive reasonable doubt on, both on the basis of our rejection of 'Gnostic' filiation to the 'Cathars', and of the implausibility of either Kabbalistic or non-Kabbalistic Judaism having adopted 'Cathar' theology. It therefore now remains to direct our methodological approach towards other potential chains of transmission between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, and to examine the viability of these approaches; it is thus to this endeavour that we shall now turn.

Chapter 7
Material Transformation: The Role of the 'Alchemic Tradition'

In consideration of another potential chain of transmission, it seems to me to be worth here briefly considering the role of the so-called 'alchemic tradition', in relation both to the second century 'Gnostics' and the later Kabbalah. The reason for so doing stems from the attested existence of texts relating to, and self-proclaimed practitioners of, 'alchemy' throughout the many centuries which lie between these two thought streams. Moreover, the argument might be made, and indeed it often has been, that a level of interaction can be shown between the 'alchemic tradition' and both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah; on a *prima facie* level, therefore, it seems necessary to examine the plausibility of the hypothesis that 'Gnostic' ideas might have been transmitted to the Kabbalah via a route of 'alchemical' learning. I should, however, state at the outset that I find myself unconvinced by such an argument, for a number of reasons. Now, unfortunately, the individual elements of such a debate are to a greater or lesser extent too tangential to our main thesis to warrant overmuch attention here (in particular, the deep question of the relationship between 'Gnostic' writings and the 'Hermetic' writings is likely worthy of several theses in and of itself), but I do find it necessary here to highlight three main objections to this posited chain of transmission, such as should allow us to reasonably exclude the 'alchemic' evidence from our examination of potential filiation between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah. I intend to treat these objections in a somewhat chronological order, and thus they may be outlined as so: that 1) it is open to debate as to whether any real proof of influence can be shown, in either direction, between the relevant 'Gnostic' texts and the roughly contemporary 'alchemic' evidence, 2) that it seems unlikely that there ever existed what might be called a stable 'alchemic tradition', which would allow for the faithful preservation and transmission of doctrines and ideas across the centuries (hence why I choose to refer to all references to 'alchemic' thought within inverted commas), and 3) that such interaction and influence as there was between the Kabbalah and 'alchemy' was not only primarily to be found from the mid-fifteenth century onwards (i.e. long after the origin of the Kabbalah), but also nearly always took the form of 'alchemic' adoptions of Kabbalistic ideas, rather than *vice versa*.

Taking then the first of these points, the relationship between the 'Gnostics' and 'alchemy', it seems likely that a key starting point regarding the argument for this hypothesis would be the presence in the Nag Hammadi texts of several 'Hermetic' writings, including the previously unknown *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI.6)[454]. Since, as Edwin Yamauchi has highlighted, the 'Hermetic' texts were, prior to the Nag Hammadi discovery, "among the first sources to be mined for possible evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism", the subsequent discovery that several 'Hermetic' texts were preserved at Nag Hammadi naturally fuelled speculation regarding the relationship between the 'Gnostics' and this branch of primarily Graeco-Egyptian wisdom[455]. The particular complexities of this debate are probably, given the numerous objections regarding a theory of transmission which we are raising in this chapter, somewhat tangential to our thesis, but it is at least worth noting, as van den Broek has argued, that although on certain points many of the 'Hermetic' texts might seem to agree with parts of the 'Gnostic' evidence, ultimately "these similarities cannot conceal the great differences that separate [these two thought streams]"[456]. As he demonstrates, although there exists in both a "basic idea" of the "fundamental identity between the soul and the divine", wherein the "final goal is the return of the soul to its origin, its reunion with God", this essential conception is expressed rather differently in each thought stream. In particular, we have already highlighted the extent to which many 'Gnostics' might be distinguished from more 'philosophical' approaches, by virtue of their not viewing the development of higher knowledge as an intellectual accomplishment achievable solely by human efforts, but rather understanding such γνῶσις as a divine gift, the very reception of which is to some extent in itself salvific[457]. By contrast, as van den Broek states, although the 'Hermetic' texts, like the 'Gnostic' ones, frequently refer to the actions of a "mystagogue who reveals the divine mysteries", the intellectual aspect is not as downplayed as in many 'Gnostic' texts; the knowledge that is imparted is seen not as itself salvific, but rather as a "systematic instruction in 'the way of Hermes'" which, if properly practised by the adherent, can lead to a 'mystical' ascent and thus salvation[458]. Moreover, as he stresses, it should be recalled that despite variances between the different texts which comprise the so-called 'Hermetic' writings, generally speaking 'Hermetic' thought does not see the created world as intrinsically evil or tragic; as we have noted, despite a similar level of variance between the texts, 'Gnostic'

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[454] B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.
[455] E.M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (1973), pp.69-72. The earliest critical attempt to link the 'Hermetic' writings with early 'Gnostics' is probably Richard Reitzenstein's *Poimandres: Studien zur Griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (1904).
[456] R. van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism' (1998), pp.1-20.
[457] *Ibid.* See above, pp.8f. C.f. also G. Filoramo, *op. cit.*, pp.38-46.
[458] R. van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism' (1998), pp.1-20. It is also worth highlighting that, as might be expected, in the 'Hermetic' texts it is Hermes who plays the role of revealer, which as we have seen is not generally the case in the 'Gnostic' texts, where either Christ or Seth (not necessarily seen as different figures) most commonly occupy this role. C.f. above, pp.19f.

thought generally tends towards the opposite, more negative valuation of creation. Let us also now recall our prior observations regarding the unreliability of any argument for influence which is built upon relatively ubiquitous motifs; as we saw in chapter 3, the motif of ascent to the divine origin of the soul can arguably be seen as a basic element of any 'mystic' approach, and is thus of doubtful utility for any attempt to prove influence between two thought streams. If this aspect of similarity is removed, then we perhaps see the levels of difference between the 'Gnostic' and 'Hermetic' writings rather more clearly; indeed, as van den Broek concludes, the two ultimately "had more that separated them than they had in common". He proposes that such similarities as they share are likely due to the fact that they both originated and developed in the same geographical and chronological spheres, and within "the same spiritual climate"; ultimately, however, they were "separated by a deep cleft" in regard to the fundamental elements of their thought, such as "the nature of God, the cosmos, and man"[459]. Finally, it should of course be stressed that, as we have previously highlighted, the reasons behind the storage of all these texts at Nag Hammadi are scarcely clear, and thus we cannot really claim that the collection represents a 'Gnostic library'; as such, it is perfectly possible that those responsible for storing the texts placed together a number of writings, regardless of whether they saw them as having any actual relation to the 'Gnostics' or not[460].

Now again, as we have noted, the deeper details of this debate need not chiefly concern us here; it is sufficient that we have highlighted some elements of doubt regarding the possibility of shared influence between the 'Gnostic' and 'Hermetic' thought streams. What is more important for us to highlight is rather the 'alchemic' role in such a debate; our focus is, after all, on the potential descent from the 'Gnostics' to Kabbalah, and it is primarily an 'alchemic' rather than a wider 'Hermetic' thought stream which is later attested in relation to Kabbalah. In this context, it should thus be noted that quite apart from our brief critiques regarding the relationship between the 'Hermetic' texts and the 'Gnostics', it is of arguably greater interest that those 'Hermetic' texts preserved at Nag Hammadi contain nothing within them which would explicitly identify them as 'alchemic' texts. As we have already stated, these texts primarily focus on more 'philosophical' or 'mystical' considerations, and in fact lack any of the clearly 'alchemic' motifs of Hellenistic 'alchemic' writers such as Pseudo-Democritus or

[459] R. van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism' (1998), pp.1-20. C.f. G. Filoramo, *op. cit.*, pp.7-9; P. Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy* (1995), pp.66-68.
[460] See above, pp.2-5. Note, for example, that NHC VI (which contains all the 'Hermetic' writings from Nag Hammadi) also contains a 'version' of Plato's *Republic*.

Zosimos of Panopolis[461]. Nowhere present in the Nag Hammadi 'Hermetic' texts are such 'alchemic' elements as speculations on the nature and correspondences of metals and minerals (especially, of course, gold), nor indeed any references, however spiritualised, to processes for the manipulation or alteration of such elemental forces[462]. Indeed, one is led to wonder what exactly there is in these 'Hermetic' texts to link them to the 'alchemic tradition'.

The answer is, of course, quite obvious, as the connection is the common ascription of the texts to Thrice-Great Hermes (Hermes Trismegistus, also generally equated with the Egyptian deity Thoth)[463]. As van den Broek rightly notes, one could arguably apply the label 'Hermetic' to every surviving text ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus; the problem, however, arises in that his authorship is claimed for a large variety of different texts from different time periods, including 'philosophical', 'magical', astrological, and of course 'alchemical' writings. As one might expect, such texts hardly present a single unified view and moreover, given the wide range (both thematic and chronological) covered by these writings, they end up sharing "so much in common with others that do not bear his [Hermes Trismegistus's] name that the term Hermetic becomes almost meaningless"[464]. Now, van den Broek chiefly applies the term in reference to the 'philosophic' writings attributed to Hermes (which includes those from Nag Hammadi) and which, as we have already noted, give no real indication of being related to any 'alchemic' writing. Nonetheless, the frequent attribution of 'alchemic' writings to Hermes (including perhaps most prominently the Tabula Smaragdina, or Emerald Tablet, which was often cited in medieval 'alchemy') arguably led to a situation where the name Hermes Trismegistus became all but synonymous with 'alchemy', and the distinctions between the various types of texts ascribed to him was generally diluted, if not lost[465]. As a particular example, we might mention the later translation and adoption of the *Corpus Hermeticum* which, as van den Broek notes, is primarily part of the 'philosophical Hermetica', having relatively little to do with 'magical', 'theurgical', or 'alchemical' precepts; nonetheless, this collection of texts played a key role in the 'magical' and

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461 See, for example, R. Patai, *Jewish Alchemists* (1994), pp.50-56. C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.
462 R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.50-56; J. Read, 'Alchemy and Alchemists' (1933), pp.251-278.
463 E.M. Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, p.69.
464 R. van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism' (1998), pp.1-20.
465 J. Read, *op. cit.* C.f. the definition given by the OED: "**hermetic** (adj.)... (also **Hermetic**) of or denoting an ancient occult tradition encompassing alchemy, astrology, and theosophy". See also Peter Kingsley, *op. cit.*, pp.332-334, on the potential contemporary overlap in Antiquity between 'Pythagoreanism' and 'Hermetism'.

'alchemical' movements of the European Renaissance, being translated by Marsilio Ficino and adopted primarily on the basis of its attribution to the figure of Hermes Trismegistus[466].

The importance of the above discussion then is to stress that those 'Hermetic' texts found at Nag Hammadi are to be regarded as quite distinct from those 'alchemic' texts bearing the name of Hermes Trismegistus. Moreover since, as we have demonstrated, these 'Hermetic' Nag Hammadi texts are in many fundamental instances rather different from much 'Gnostic' thought, whilst their similarities are in general too ubiquitous to prove anything regarding transmission, they are thus of little utility for attempting to filiate the 'Gnostics' with the later Kabbalah. As such, therefore, we have yet to identify any truly solid potential link between the 'Gnostics' and 'alchemy', something which is surely essential if we are to propose a chain of transmission via the 'alchemic tradition'. Perhaps unfortunately, however, I find it unlikely that any such link can be reliably identified: in the first instance, it is worth noting that those markers of 'alchemic' writing which we identified above are generally lacking from any of the extant 'Gnostic' texts, whilst certain scholarly attempts to link 'Gnostic' writings to 'alchemic' evidence seem to me to be ultimately unconvincing. Quispel's argument that the Tabula Smaragdina incorporates textual elements drawn directly from *Gos. Thom.* seems highly unsatisfactory, not least because Quispel adduces corroborating evidence from 'Valentinian' texts (*Gos. Phil.* and *Gos. Tru.*), despite their clear differentiation from *Gos. Thom.* as regards most other aspects of thought[467]. Furthermore, the primary basis for Quispel's argument rests on vague correspondences and potential similarities between a number of texts (including those from Nag Hammadi, the works of Zosimos, and variant readings of the canonical gospels) regarding the theory of the sympathy of all, especially in regards to sympathy between what is 'above' and what is 'below'[468]. We have, however, already mentioned in chapter 5 the observations of Jonathan Z. Smith regarding the presence of an above / below corresponding duality in a number of religious systems, and indeed I find Quispel's evidence to more likely point to the ubiquity of such an idea, rather than the

[466] R. van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism' (1998), pp.1-20; K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1978), pp.266-268.
[467] G. Quispel, 'Gnosis and Alchemy' (2000), pp. pp.303-333. Recall our earlier observations that *Gos. Thom.* is arguably not even to be considered 'Gnostic' (see above, pp.5, n.17).
[468] In particular, I cannot see the validity in Quispel's assertion that the idea of the sympathy of the all is essentially identical with the motif found in *some* 'Gnostic' texts of the 'redeemed redeemer'. If anything, the sympathy of the all is more obviously identifiable with the most extreme forms of pantheism, which are not generally found in the 'Valentinian' sources (see above, pp.66-68).

necessary interconnectedness of all the relevant texts[469]. Indeed, it is worth recalling that the animistic theory of the universe, wherein each element is an interconnected part of the whole, was generally the primary natural theory (and the essential basis for the propagation of much 'magical' practice) well into the early seventeenth century, before the development of more scientific mechanistic theories; in this context then, the ubiquity of the theory of the sympathy of the all should scarcely be surprising[470]. Similarly unconvincing is the hypothesis of Régine Charron that one of the older extant 'alchemic' texts, the so-called *Dialogue of the philosophers and Cleopatra,* echoes in its descriptions of 'alchemic' practices both 'Valentinian' and 'Sethian' rituals, especially those which express concepts of either 'sacred marriage' or union and/or descent and ascent through baptism[471]. In particular, Charron compares sections of the *Dialogue* with the 'Pronoia Hymn' of *Apoc. John* (II.30:11-31:31), and stresses both a thematic and terminological similarity between the two as regards motifs of light and dark and descent and ascent. To be sure, whilst the usage of similar themes is interesting, it must be admitted that there is no particularly exact textual correspondence between the two sources, such as would reliably suggest interaction. Moreover, as we noted in chapter 3, motifs such as descent in order to permit ascent were ubiquitous in 'mystery' or 'mystical' thought of the ancient world, and thus cannot really prove any relationship between these sources[472]. We might also add that since, as we have argued, the actual existence of any 'Gnostic' rituals is purely hypothetical, inferred only from vague references in theosophical texts, we should, therefore, perhaps be cautious about wishing to equate such supposed rituals with the described metallurgical practices of 'alchemic' texts[473].

If, so far, we have found reason to be cautious regarding the potential for interaction between 'Gnostic' and 'alchemic' thought, then it is now worth turning to the perhaps more fruitful evidence contained in the work of Zosimos which, although undoubtedly highly syncretic,

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469 J. Z. Smith, 'Here, There' (2004), pp.323-339. C.f. M.J. Edwards, 'Vessel of Zosimus' (1992), pp.55–64, esp. pp.60-64. See above, pp.87f.
470 C.f. K. Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp.264-268.
471 R. Charron, 'Graeco-Egyptian Alchemical Literature' (2005), pp.438-456.
472 See above, pp.40ff. In addition, Charron's argument that 'Gnostic' and Graeco-Egyptian texts are evidently to be linked due to their having emerged from the same intellectual background and culture in roughly the same chronological and geographical areas seems to me to be flawed. As we have already noted, the very fact of two 'movements' emerging in the same sphere should lead one to expect similarities between them anyway, regardless of whether they originated independently or in relation to each other.
473 See above, pp.24ff.

arguably shows notable affinities in parts with certain 'Gnostic' (primarily 'Sethian') ideas[474]. Of course, the late date of Zosimos (circa late third to early fourth century) removes the possibility that he might have influenced the 'Gnostic' texts, but it does suggest that, as a syncretic 'alchemist' living in Hellenistic Egypt, he may well have adopted ideas from the 'Gnostics' into his work[475]. Particularly interesting is his treatise *On the Letter Omega*, which for one expresses broadly similar conceptions of the primordial man to those which we have previously observed in our 'Gnostic' evidence, although in light of our earlier comments regarding the ubiquity of motif, I am reticent to ascribe to much weight to this observation by itself[476]. As we argued in the previous chapter, however, the coalescence of several shared motifs within a single source could be taken as substantiating the claim for transmission, even if each individual instance of correspondence cannot, for reasons of ubiquity, substantiate such a claim on its own, and it is precisely this coalescence of several motifs which we find in Zosimos. Alongside the imagery of the primal man, *Omega* (sections 13-15) also speaks of a false and jealous power, comparable to the 'Gnostic' Demiurge, who is named as the ἀντίμιμος δαίμων, clearly reflecting the usage of the term **ⲙ-ⲡⲁⲛⲧⲓⲙⲓⲙⲟⲛ ⲙ̄-ⲡ̄ⲛ̄ⲁ̄** in our 'Sethian' evidence[477]. Perhaps of even greater importance is the fact that Zosimos cites one Nikotheos (sections 1 and 10) as the source for much of this theosophy; when this fact is taken in conjunction with our observations regarding the correspondence between Zosimos and our 'Gnostic' evidence, it thus seems highly plausible, as Howard Jackson has convincingly argued, that the Nikotheos mentioned here is to be regarded as the same Nikotheos who is attested in other evidence relating to the 'Gnostics'[478]. As Jackson notes, Nikotheos is named by Porphyry (*Vita Plotini* 16) as a revealer figure whose revelations were utilised by the 'Gnostics' whom Plotinus is said to have encountered, and he is also depicted as a revealer in chapter 7 of the 'Untitled Treatise' of the Bruce Codex, as is the figure of Marsanes. Moreover, it is notable that the revelations of Nikotheos are referred to by Porphyry alongside those attributed to Allogenes and Zostrianos, names already familiar to us

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474 On Zosimos's syncretism see, for example, R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.51-55. Zosimos frequently combines elements from Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew traditions, and in fact engages in a certain amount of comparative mythology in *On the Letter Omega* (sections 8-13). C.f. also his work *The True Book of Sophé the Egyptian and of the Divine Lord of the Hebrews [and] of the Powers of Sabaoth* which, even in its very title, witnesses to his syncretic combinations.

475 C.f. R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.51f; M.J. Edwards, 'Vessel of Zosimus' (1992), pp.55–64; P. Kingsley, *op. cit.*, pp.60-62.

476 *Omega*, sections 9-13. All references to *Omega* in this thesis are given according to the version edited by Howard Jackson (1978). C.f. above, pp.98ff.

477 E.g. *Apoc. John* II.29:21-30:11. C.f. H.M. Jackson, *Omega* (1978), pp.35, 53, nn.67f.; G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.142f.

478 H.M. Jackson, 'Nikotheos' (1990), pp. 250-277. C.f. M.J. Edwards, 'Neglected Texts' (1990), pp.26-50, esp. pp.44-49; G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), p.139.

from the ‘Sethian’ corpus; the same can also be said of Marsanes and indeed, as we have mentioned previously, the ‘Untitled Treatise’ of the Bruce Codex might also be potentially included amongst the ‘Sethian’ writings on the basis of its possible dependence on the ‘Sethian’ writing which bears the name *Marsanes*[479]. Moreover, Zosimos’s descriptions of Nikotheos in *Omega* as ὁ κεκρυμμένος (§1) and ὁ ἀνεύρετος (§10) seem to suggest, as Jackson has persuasively hypothesised, that Zosimos knew of Nikotheos as a revealer whose revelation is in effect a self-revelation, i.e. that the seer is himself an incarnation of the divine power which he reveals, descended from outside the world, and thus subsequently returning to the divine sphere, with the result that the seer can no longer be found on earth[480]. That such a depiction is common amongst the revealer figures of the ‘Sethian’ texts (including Seth himself, the earthly counterpart of the heavenly man), perhaps, therefore, further strengthens the argument that Nikotheos (or rather a writing attributed to this figure) is to be included amongst the ‘Sethian’ corpus, and is thus the most likely source for Zosimos’s knowledge of ‘Sethian’ thought, as Zosimos himself claims[481].

Now, as should be evident even from this relatively cursory examination of Zosimos’s writing, it seems quite plausible that Zosimos did make use of some ‘Gnostic’ ideas, although in light of his highly syncretic approach, we might well wish to refrain from asserting that such ideas were determinative for his ‘alchemic’ writings[482]. Indeed, it certainly seems arguable that, following our stated methodology, Zosimos could be reliably linked with the ‘Sethian Gnostic’ evidence: the correspondences which we have highlighted appear, as we have seen, to be relatively exact, whilst the chronological and geographical locale of Zosimos clearly suggests the possibility of such ideas having been transmitted to him. To be sure then, the question of Zosimos and the ‘Gnostics’ is clearly one of great interest, and certainly

[479] See above, pp.18f. C.f. H.M. Jackson, ‘Nikotheos’ (1990), pp. 250-277. Also worth noting is the naming of one Zoroaster as a source of revelations in the *Vita Plotini* passage which refers to Nikotheos. Although we possess no extant writing of this name, it seems likely that such a text did exist and served as a source for *Apoc. John* (as it is explicitly referenced in the latter text, II.19:6-10). It is of course scarcely an automatic conclusion that the sources extant from Nag Hammadi which bear these names are necessarily identical to those referred to by Porphyry, but given their potentially common origin, and general agreement with certain of the views which *Enneads* II.9 ascribes to these ‘Gnostics’, such a conclusion certainly does not seem implausible. See further M.J. Edwards, ‘Neglected Texts’ (1990), pp.26-50.
[480] H.M. Jackson, ‘Nikotheos’ (1990), pp. 250-277. C.f. R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres* (1904) p.268.
[481] B.A. Pearson, ‘Seth in Gnostic Literature’ (2006), pp.52-83. C.f., for example, *Zostrianos* 129:16-130:14, *Apoc. Adam* 69:19-24, and *Melchizedek* 27:7-10. For our purposes here, it is not really necessary to debate whether there actually existed a historical person called Nikotheos, and whether he was the author of a revelation bearing his name. On this matter, however, see further H.M. Jackson, ‘Nikotheos’ (1990), pp. 250-277, esp. pp.265ff.
[482] C.f. also M.J. Edwards, ‘Vessel of Zosimus’ (1992), pp.55–64, esp. pp.57f., regarding Zosimos’s use of the *Poimandres*.

requires further consideration; unfortunately, however, we cannot I feel afford to offer such analysis within the confines of this thesis, as it is arguably too tangential to our primary focus, *viz.* the genetic relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah. Although a transmission of ideas from the 'Sethian Gnostics' to Zosimos seems possible, or even probable, such a conclusion can be relevant to our examination *only* if it can be further shown that such ideas were subsequently transmitted, in a relatively unaltered form, to the origin point of the Kabbalah in the medieval Occident; as I shall endeavour to demonstrate in what follows, not only can I find no stable proof to substantiate such a chain of transmission but, moreover, it in fact seems quite unlikely that any ideas contained within the 'alchemic tradition' could have been preserved and transmitted to the Kabbalah in such a way as to exercise a determinative influence on the origin of the latter[483]. As such, therefore, we must now regrettably set aside further debate on the subject of 'Gnostic'-'alchemic' influence in late Antiquity as to some extent *nihil ad rem*, since our primary aim must be to examine here whether, even *were* one to take such a contention as proven, it might then be possible to demonstrate that the 'Gnostic' elements of such earlier thought could have been transmitted to the Kabbalah via the 'alchemic tradition'.

Now, we have already mentioned, as an example, the preservation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and its translation and utilisation by 'alchemists' during the Renaissance but, as we also highlighted, this fact seems to owe less to the particular content of this corpus and its real relationship to more explicitly 'alchemic' texts, and more to the simple fact of a shared attribution to Hermes Trismegistus. This observation then, unfortunately, perhaps highlights a major difficulty of this theory of transmission, and the specific reason why I have chosen to encase the terms related to 'alchemy', and in particular the phrase 'alchemic tradition' within inverted commas. That is to say that I find it hard to identify what one might call a stable 'alchemic tradition', one capable of preserving and faithfully transmitting a complex set of theosophic doctrines and motifs such as we find amongst our 'Gnostic' texts. To elucidate, when one examines the history of 'alchemy', what emerges is less any sort of organised religion, sect, movement, or school, but rather a long line of individual 'alchemists', each developing and propounding their own particular, and often novel theories, rather than

[483] The following discussion will concentrate more widely on the possibilities of stable 'alchemic' transmission, but it is worth noting here that, apart from the brief citation given by George Synkellos (see below, pp.157f.), I am not generally aware of any major attestation of the use of Zosimos's work until the *Theatrum chemicum* of the seventeenth century. I do not doubt that his writings were preserved and used during this intervening period, but merely wish to highlight that they do not generally seem to be cited in any extant evidence, particularly such evidence as would be relevant to the origins of the Kabbalah. C.f. R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.141-143, 371f.

working within the bounds of an inherited tradition[484]. It is worth recalling that the title 'alchemist' has been applied to (and indeed often willingly claimed by) such diverse figures as the syncretic, and quite probably Judaic-influenced Zosimos, the monk Roger Bacon, the French adept Nicholas Flamel (and his wife), the early 'flight pioneer' John Damian, and the father of modern physics Isaac Newton (who, as is well known, actually produced a greater volume of work on 'alchemy' than he did on mathematics and physics). To be sure, many of these figures, and more besides, likely read such earlier works as they encountered, but more often than not their 'alchemic' reputations rested more on their individual developments, inventions, or creations, rather than their adherence to, and preservation of, older ideas. As a paradigmatic example, it is as well to remember that in 1525 the great 'alchemist' Paracelsus publicly burnt "the works of Galen and Avicenna before the burghers and physicians of Basel", in a powerful demonstration of the freedom of both medicine and 'alchemy' from the constraints of any 'orthodox' received tradition[485]. Indeed, one could probably with some justification say that the 'tradition' of 'alchemy' was more one of innovation than of preservation. In surveying the available 'alchemic' evidence, few real constants emerge beyond the central objective of producing gold, and some speculations on the methods necessary for achieving this, and in fact even these basic principles are subject to high levels of alteration and development amongst individual 'alchemists'. For example, although many (though scarcely all) 'alchemic' texts agree on the need for specific apparatus in order to achieve one's desired end, the design of these pieces of equipment can vary greatly, a testimony to the innovation of individual 'alchemists' rather than their adherence to received learning[486]. Similarly, although 'gold' remains a core concern of the 'alchemic' endeavour, it is notable, as Keith Thomas highlights, that beginning with Paracelsus in the sixteenth century, 'alchemists' begin to drift away from the focus on producing gold in and of itself, and become more concerned with the "quest for a better pharmacopoeia". Rather than maintaining the older, primarily metallurgical conception of gold, 'alchemists' rather begin to conceive of it as something which "in its liquid form (*aurum potabile*) would be a remedy for all diseases and [would] help to produce the elixir of long life", as well as also enabling the "creation of *homunculi*" and bestowing "the power to see at a distance"[487]. Furthermore, we can also observe a growing division (if such a term can be used, since it implies that there

[484] C.f. J. Read, *op. cit.*
[485] J. Read, *op. cit.*
[486] For illustrative examples of these varied apparatus see, for example, R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.62f., 424-429 and É.G. de Givry, *Sorcery, Magic and Alchemy* (1991), pp.369-372.
[487] K. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p.271.

was once unity) amongst 'alchemists' in Europe between the late sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, a distinction between those who came to view 'alchemy' as more of a 'spiritual' practice, requiring little if indeed any chemical experimentation, and their opposites (derisively labelled 'Puffers') who pursued a more evidential, 'scientific' path, and were arguably the forerunners of modern chemists; certainly, it is thus hard to claim that this latter group owed any great loyalty to earlier 'received' traditions[488]. Finally, we might also highlight the obvious logical argument that the preservation and continued adherence to an earlier doctrine or idea necessarily rests on one's conviction that it is correct and true. Since, to the best of my knowledge, no doctrine was ever transmitted that allowed the recipient to successfully manufacture gold, in whatever form (I obviously here remain sceptical regarding the grandiose claims concerning Flamel), there cannot therefore have been any real impulse for an 'alchemist' to hold fast to whatsoever older learning they received; one might take it as a starting point, but evidently the production of gold would require further research and development. In light of these observations, I thus remain unconvinced that any 'Gnostic' influence could have been transmitted through the 'alchemic' tradition in a form which retained enough of its original shape to enable us to identify it; more likely, *if* any such influence had ever been originally transmitted, it would most probably have been jettisoned or utterly modified as soon as it ceased to be of practical use in the 'alchemic' endeavour.

To be sure, it is true that *some* 'alchemists' explicitly claimed to be faithfully following the teachings of older (and interestingly, often 'Jewish') 'alchemic' sources, yet this too serves as a useful illustration of the lack of unity amongst 'alchemists' insofar as whilst some might, as we have seen, explicitly disavow older teachings, others might deliberately seek to claim them, the better to validate their own work. As examples, we might again cite Zosimos, who extensively 'quoted' in his writings from the works of one 'Maria the Jewess', and Nicholas Flamel who, according to his *Book of Hieroglyphic Figures*, learnt the 'alchemic' secrets from a manuscript attributed to one 'Abraham the Jew'[489]. These two examples are probably the most prominent 'alchemic' claims regarding the derivation of an individual's 'alchemy' from the faithful reproduction of older learning, but unfortunately, however, it seems to me to be impossible to accurately assess whether these claims convey any accurate information, or whether they are chiefly hyperbole. We have, of course, already mentioned the tendency

[488] C.f. É.G. de Givry, *op. cit.*, pp.374-384.
[489] *Ibid.*, p.352; R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.60-91, 218-233. Incidentally Flamel, by his own admission, supposedly possessed this text, but was unable to interpret and understand it until he decided to consult with contemporary Jewish alchemists (an idea which it apparently took him 21 years to conceive).

with many ideas of this type for one to claim an antique and/or alien provenance for one's learning, as a means to validate and esteem it by attributing to it both age and mystique[490]. By means of an analogically comparable example, we might perhaps note Justin Martyr's concern in the *First Apology* to stress the age and eastern origin of the Old Testament prophetic scriptures, in part to impress upon his audience their clear validity[491]. Similarly, in a later time period, we might also mention the high levels of both esteem and condemnation which, from the medieval era onwards, were given respectively by 'magicians' and the ecclesiastical authorities to a number of 'magical' texts which circulated under the name of Solomon (perhaps most prominently the *Clavicule de Salomon*), despite the abundant and rather obvious evidence within them to place their authorship several millennia after the biblical King; nonetheless, it was this attribution of age and foreign origin to the work which greatly contributed to its reputation[492]. In this context then, it is also perhaps interesting to note the contention of John Read that "the long age of alchemy virtually ended" with Robert Boyle's 1661 publication of *The Sceptical Chymist*[493]. Read attributes this change not only to Boyle's scientific method and refutation of the standard conceptions of 'the elements', but also to the growing trend, of which Boyle's work was a prominent example, to publish in the vernacular, which thus had the effect of encouraging a wider reception of the modern theories, and firmly associating them with the current geographical and chronological era; as Read puts it, arguably by the time of Boyle, "[a]lchemical mysticism and obscurantism were gradually fading away"[494]. Now, in the case of Zosimos and Flamel, whilst it is possible that both these 'alchemists' are faithfully reproducing received material, that such material is not to be found attested outside of their own works makes such claims hard to verify. I cannot, as such, disagree with Raphael Patai regarding his rather optimistic judgements on the substance of these sources as supposedly 'reproduced' by the later 'alchemists', but nor can I wholly agree with him as regards the supposition that these sources genuinely existed, and were faithfully reproduced by Zosimos and Flamel respectively[495]. Such a contention is certainly

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[490] See above, pp.125f. Of course, it can scarcely be overlooked that such claims are hardly lacking in many 'movements' today; if anything such appeals are even more prevalent.
[491] *First Apology* 31-36, 44-46, 54, 59-60. C.f. A.J. Guerra, 'Marcus Aurelius and Justin Martyr' (1992), pp.171-187.
[492] É.G. de Givry, *op. cit.*, pp.95-105. Although such traditions linking Solomon and demons are themselves particularly old (c.f. below, p.163), as de Givry notes [p.95], the attribution and reputation of the various versions of the *Clavicule* which existed were not generally affected by the fact that "the names of Porphyry and Paracelsus were sometimes cited in it, nor that it invoked the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost".
[493] J. Read, *op. cit.*
[494] *Ibid.*
[495] R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.60-91, 218-233. Whilst Patai certainly does not necessarily claim that the 'sources' in question were actually written by 'Jewish alchemists' named Maria and Abraham respectively, he does not seem

not wholly implausible but, given the absence of proof for the independent existence of these sources outside of their 'quotations', I should thus generally prefer to reserve judgement on their provenance.

Now, it is in this context then that we turn to the question of the Kabbalah, and its potential relationship with 'alchemy'. In an important late monograph entitled *Alchemy and Kabbalah*, Scholem revisited his earlier remarks on the potential nature of the relationship between these two 'movements', and sought to accurately assess whether, and to what extent, they could be said to have interacted; his conclusions are highly interesting, insofar as he aptly demonstrates that Kabbalah and the 'alchemic tradition' in the main did not, and indeed *could not*, genuinely interact and share influence [496]. His conclusion is, admittedly, in the first instance a general one, and he then proceeds to highlight a small number of exceptions, perhaps most frequently found in the *Zohar*, which demonstrate the adoption or utilisation of typically 'alchemic' language or motifs to express Kabbalistic theosophy; the number of these instances is, however, startlingly small in comparison to the whole of Kabbalistic literature and, as Scholem argues, these instances seem to be precisely those exceptions that prove the rule[497]. In general though, as Scholem persuasively shows, *genuine* Jewish Kabbalah had at best little to do with 'alchemic' ideas, and at worst was fundamentally unsuited for them; as a starting point, he highlights the fact that in Kabbalistic symbolism, in almost all cases "gold is not at all a symbol of the highest status"[498]. In contrast to the obviously incomparably high valuation of gold (in whatever form) in 'alchemy', Scholem notes that within the Kabbalah, and more importantly already within the earliest Kabbalistic source, the *Bahir*, "silver is the symbol of the right side, male donation, grace, and love (white, milk); in contrast, gold, the symbol of the left side, represents the female and strict Judgement (red, blood, wine)"[499]. In the *Bahir* then, the text which we have taken as the

to doubt that both Zosimos and Flamel had in front of them actual sources attributed to these figures. As noted, I remain more sceptical. C.f. G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), pp.19f. As an analogical example, one might perhaps also compare the debate regarding the composition of the *Zohar*. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.156-204.

[496] Scholem originally published this work, as *Alchemie und Kabbala*, in 1977, refining and developing the arguments of his 1925 article 'Alchemie und Kabbala. Ein Kapitel aus der Geschichte der Mystik'.

[497] G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), *passim*. Indeed, the majority of Scholem's book is dedicated to the documentation and exposition of these exceptions; that the book still only runs to a little over 100 pages should thus indicate something regarding just how rare these instances of 'alchemy' within the genuine Kabbalah are.

[498] G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), p.21-23.

[499] G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), p.22. Admittedly, Scholem does highlight [pp.24f.] *one* section of the *Bahir*, §36, which presents gold (זהב) as a primary, masculine symbol, but it should be noted that a) this is, as Scholem points out, a singular exception to the more common symbolism of the *Bahir*, and one which was not carried forward into the later Kabbalah, and b) that, *pace* Scholem, this attribution of the masculine principal to gold is

originating point for the Kabbalah, there seems not to appear any evidence of 'alchemy'; furthermore, as Scholem stresses, those instances elsewhere in which we do find evidence of interaction between Kabbalah and 'alchemy' are not only rare, but are also more importantly relatively late[500]. We have of course previously argued that if we are to accurately speak of 'Gnostic' influence on the Kabbalah, then we must identify such influence in the *Bahir*; that we find no real evidence of interaction between 'alchemic' sources and the *Bahir* must surely, therefore, indicate the unlikelihood of such sources interacting with this writing, and thus further render implausible the hypothesis that 'Gnostic' ideas might have been transmitted to the Kabbalah's point of origin via the 'alchemic' tradition[501].

Although, to be sure, there are numerous well attested sources for the existence of 'alchemy' amongst Jews (many of which are well documented in Patai's book *The Jewish Alchemists*), what is important to stress is that this fact is a long way from the contention that any of these 'alchemists' were also Kabbalists or, more importantly, that any of their ideas influenced the origination of the Kabbalah[502]. It is especially interesting to note that, as Patai records, the primary geographical locus for Jewish 'alchemic' writers lay in the Arabic countries shifting, according to the evidence, to northern central and eastern Europe, Italy, and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century; the noticeable point to highlight from this observation is that, as we have seen, the Kabbalah originated in wholly different geographical areas to those most prominently associated with Jewish 'alchemy', thus again suggesting that 'alchemy' was scarcely an operative influence upon its generation[503]. Indeed, it is worth emphasising that the greatest observable levels of interaction between the Kabbalah and 'alchemy' occur at a substantially later time, from the Renaissance onwards, and in fact flow almost exclusively in the opposite direction; i.e. far from the 'alchemic tradition' influencing Kabbalah, it is more the case that 'alchemists', particularly non-Jewish ones, engaged in a selective and often hermeneutically unsound adoption of certain elements of an already well established Kabbalistic tradition, often utilised in the form in which it had been recast and translated by

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not here necessarily 'alchemic': the section is primarily a discourse on the symbolism implied by the letters of זהב, and seems to me more likely primarily influenced by Jewish exegetical traditions rather than by any 'alchemic tradition', especially one supposedly containing 'Gnostic' traces.

500 G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), pp.18-24, although c.f. R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.152f. See also *Ibid.*, pp.340-364 on the 'alchemic' elements of Ḥayim Vital's writings. Whilst certainly interesting, as we argued above (pp.88ff.), the later work of Vital cannot prove for us anything regarding the antecedents of the Kabbalah.

501 C.f. above, p.62.

502 C.f. G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), pp.15, 19f; M. Idel, 'Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations' (1992), pp.107-169.

503 R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.395-398

so-called ‘Christian Kabbalists’ such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola[504]. In particular, as Patai highlights, the methods of *gematria* calculations, extensively used in both normative and Kabbalistic Jewish exegesis, were in this way made available to ‘Christian alchemists’, who rapidly adopted them for the purposes of ‘alchemic’ theory. Thus, as he states, "‘kabbalistic alchemy’ developed... not, as one would have imagined, among Jewish alchemists, but among their Christian colleagues"[505].

It would, of course, be too tangential to dwell overmuch on this issue, but it is at least worth restating the point that this relationship between Kabbalah and ‘alchemy’ really only begins to emerge from about the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, and primarily amongst evidently syncretic circles, few members of whom "would have read or been able to read *authentic* kabbalist texts"[506]. It can then of course be seen that, the late date of these interactions aside, we are in any case already far from the genuine Kabbalah which is our primary focus. Incidentally, we might also seek to link this adoption of the Kabbalah into non-Jewish ‘alchemic’ circles with the interesting fact, which we earlier observed, of the relatively common attribution to ‘Jewish authors’ of supposed received ‘alchemic’ texts; we might then wonder whether there existed in non-Jewish circles, possibly from as early as Zosimos, a particular conception that Jews were to be regarded as possessing a great knowledge of ‘alchemy’[507]? Whilst I suppose that such a conception is quite plausible, it must however also be remembered that, as we have seen, we are often dealing with quite heavily syncretic ‘alchemists’, who likely borrowed from a wide variety of sources, often in a somewhat haphazard fashion; recall in particular our earlier observations regarding the appropriation for ‘alchemic’ purposes of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by the same circles who also adopted the Kabbalah to this use, regardless of the fact that the former held no specific ‘alchemic’ information. Perhaps the most obvious conclusion, therefore, is to view the usage of the Kabbalah by these ‘alchemists’ as simply another element of our earlier arguments

[504] G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), pp.85-98; M. Idel, ‘Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations’ (1992), pp.107-169.
[505] R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.154-160.
[506] *Ibid.*; A. Faivre, ‘Renaissance Hermeticism’ (1998), pp.109-123; G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), p.23. Emphasis added.
[507] C.f. R. Patai, *op. cit.*, pp.155-158. Whilst I am not aware of any sources which explicitly state so, I am tempted to consider whether it is plausible that later European ideas regarding Jewish knowledge of ‘alchemy’ might not bear some relation to certain of the less tasteful medieval slanders regarding the ‘secret wealth’ of Jews? For our purposes, however, it is as well to remember that any ‘Jewish’ reputation for ‘alchemy’ would naturally only exist outside of Jewish circles, and would thus be more likely to encourage non-Jewish ‘alchemists’ to appropriate the Kabbalah (as indeed happened), rather than encouraging Kabbalists to adopt ‘alchemic’ ideas.

regarding the 'mysticism and obscurantism' of 'alchemy', and the tendency to validate one's ideas by claiming for them an antique and/or alien provenance[508]. Indeed, given the somewhat wide-ranging syncretism and questionable faithfulness to the original import of their received sources which we have observed amongst those groups responsible for much 'Kabbalistic alchemy', one might perhaps suggest that they represent less a viable stream of evidence regarding interaction between Kabbalah and 'alchemy', and more a comparable analogy to the modern-era systems of Aleister Crowley, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, *et al.*[509].

In summary then, let us first return to an earlier point, *viz.* the question of interaction and transmission between the 'Gnostic' texts and the early 'alchemic tradition'. Although, as we have noted, there are certain reasons for retaining a level of caution and doubt regarding the possibility of *genuine* interaction between the two, we must again emphasise that this observation can scarcely be an end to the matter, especially in relation to the writings of Zosimos. In particular, the historical and ideological work which Richard Reitzenstein and Carl Jung have done to intertwine these two thought streams, along with the other roughly contemporary 'Hermetic' writings, is not so easily dismissed[510]. Unfortunately however, as we have already stressed, we cannot really afford to delve much further into the essence of this debate here, as the matter is really somewhat too tangential to our thesis, which is after all focused on the question of interaction between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah. As such then, whilst I wish to retain a certain appropriate scepticism regarding the potential relationship between the 'Gnostic', the 'alchemic', and the 'Hermetic' thought streams of the first centuries C.E., for our purposes here it is simply necessary to recall that even were one to conclusively prove that these 'traditions' were at that stage interrelated, such an analysis could only be relevant to our argument here if it could further be shown that there existed a stable chain of transmission which could accurately convey these earlier ideas towards the origin point of the medieval Kabbalah. As we have seen, however, such a chain does not seem to be evident: not only was the 'alchemic tradition', insofar as it actually existed, unlikely to have been unable to accurately preserve and transmit any 'Gnostic' ideas,

[508] C.f. above, pp. 125f., 151-153; J. Read, *op. cit.*
[509] G. Scholem, *Alchemy* (2008), pp.12f. C.f. A. Faivre, *op. cit.*
[510] C.f. R. Reitzenstein, *op. cit.*, esp. pp.219-228, 266-291; C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1968), esp. pp.3-37, 288-316. In a somewhat parallel line of enquiry, Yehuda Liebes ['Kabbalistic Myth' (1993), pp.65-92] locates echoes of Orphic conceptions in the text of the *Zohar*, but rightly concludes that the ubiquity of such motifs renders unsure any attempt to draw a line of historical relation between the sources.

furthermore, far from influencing and informing the Kabbalah, the chain of transmission instead flowed almost entirely in the opposite direction, so that the 'alchemic tradition' was in fact primarily a recipient of Kabbalistic thought, rather than its originator. Moreover, we also observed that in any case the major interactions between these two 'movements' occurred at least two centuries *after* the composition of the *Bahir*, thus further damaging the thesis of 'alchemy' as a means to transmit 'Gnostic' ideas to the Kabbalah.

If, therefore, in light of the preceding analysis, we can generally reject the 'alchemic tradition' as a means by which 'Gnostic' ideas could plausibly have been transmitted to the Kabbalah, we must therefore endeavour to examine the potential existence of yet another alternative chain of transmission. In this context then, I wish to return briefly, as a final point in this chapter, to Zosimos, not as an example of the 'alchemic tradition', *per se*, but rather as an indicator of the possibility that the origin of both the Kabbalah *and* the second century 'Gnostics' might be traced to primarily intra-Judaic 'theosophical mystical' speculation.

As part of a record of *1 Enoch* and the account(s) regarding the fall of the Watchers, the Byzantine chronicler George Synkellos briefly cites a passage from Zosimos's book of *Imouth* (now no longer extant), which demonstrates that Zosimos was also aware of this legend (although in his typical style Zosimos also mentions Hermes as a source for his knowledge of the story)[511]. In light of the preceding discussion, we can probably afford to set aside the questions surrounding potential 'Hermetic' and 'alchemic' uses of this legend (at least insofar as these uses relate to the 'Gnostic' evidence), and instead focus on the fact that Zosimos's knowledge of the story of the Watchers likely suggests its continuing currency in the Hellenistic Egypt of his time[512]. To be sure, as Pearson has demonstrated, the figure of Enoch, and the literature associated with him, enjoyed a high amount of esteem amongst certain religious sections of late Antique Egyptian Christian society, a situation which persisted up until the ninth or tenth century C.E.[513]. This observation then becomes highly relevant to our inquiry when we consider the contention that although, as Jackson has rightly noted, we cannot on the basis of this fragment reliably conclude from whence Zosimos

[511] George Synkellos, *Chronography* 14 (Adler and Tuffin) / 23.21-24.13 (Dindorf). C.f. W. Adler and P. Tuffin, *George Synkellos* (2002), pp.18f. This excerpt is also extant (albeit in a variant form) in a Syriac manuscript, published in M.P.E. Berthelot and R. Duval, *Histoire des sciences* (1893), Vol.2, p.238.
[512] C.f. W. Scott, *Hermetica* (1936), Vol.4, pp.149f.; G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.140f.
[513] B.A. Pearson, 'Enoch in Egypt' (2004), pp.132-152. In fact, there even exist fragments from an 'Apocryphon of Enoch', preserved, and even potentially composed in Sahidic Coptic. See Idem., 'Coptic Enoch Apocryphon' (2004), pp.153-197.

derived his knowledge of the Watchers' legend (whether from the Enochian literature, *Jubilees*, or another, possibly 'Hermetic' source which had already adopted the legend), the same cannot be said when we consider the 'Gnostic', and especially 'Sethian' evidence[514]. Indeed, several scholars have come to the conclusion that certain of the 'Gnostic' texts (perhaps most obviously *Apoc. John*) clearly draw on earlier Judaic traditions, such as the Enoch literature, which were current in the milieu in which the texts originated[515]. Were such an argument found to be secure, then it might potentially suggest an alternative theory of transmission, such as we previously mentioned, *viz.* that rather than attempting to draw a genetic link *between* the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, we might instead locate a surer footing were we to consider the possibility that both of these in fact derived from a common, 'Judaic-speculative' ancestor, which would thus account for the possibility of correspondences between the two. Therefore, it is to a consideration of this hypothesis that I propose to turn in the next chapter.

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514 H.M. Jackson, *Omega* (1978), pp.10f. C.f. G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.137-143.

515 See, for example, B.A. Pearson, '*1 Enoch*' (1995), pp.355-367; Idem., 'Jewish Apocalypticism to Gnosis' (2002), pp.146-163; G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.18-34. C.f. also Benno Przybylski's demonstration ['Calendrical Data in Gnostic Literature' (1980), pp.56-70] of the potential relationships between the calendrical ideologies of certain 'Gnostic' texts and the prominent calendrical polemics of earlier Judaic texts such as *Jubilees*, *1 Enoch*, and the Qumran scrolls. In fact, Pearson ['*1 Enoch*' (1995), pp.355-367, esp. pp.360f.] is confident that comparison between *1 Enoch* and *Apoc. John* can reliably demonstrate not only that the latter text used *1 Enoch* as a source, but further that it was a *Greek* version of this writing which was utilised. C.f. below, pp.159-162.

Chapter 8
Ancestors, Descendants, and Extended Relations: ‘Gnostics’, the Kabbalah, and Merkabah-Hekhaloth Traditions

In the preceding chapter, we noted that certain strains of Judaic speculative thought, especially related to the myth of the fallen angels or ‘watchers’, are likely observable within the extant ‘Gnostic’ evidence; in particular, as we saw, Birger Pearson has persuasively demonstrated the high probability of *1 Enoch* having a direct influence on the composition of the *Apocryphon of John*[516]. Of especial interest is that section of *Apoc. John* which relates the account of the copulation of the angels with human women, and their subsequent introduction to humanity of the metallurgical arts, an account which bears clear conceptual parallels with the Enochian traditions:

Apoc. John NHC II.29:17-30:2[517]	*1 Enoch* 7:1-8:3[518]
“He [i.e. the chief archon] sent his angels to the daughters of men, that they might take some of them for themselves and raise offspring for their enjoyment. And at first they did not succeed. When they had no success, they gathered together again and they made a plan together. They created a counterfeit spirit, who resembles the Spirit who descended, so as to pollute the souls through it. And the angels changed themselves in their likeness into the likeness of their (the daughters of men) mates, filling them with the spirit of darkness, which they had mixed for them, and with evil[519]. They brought gold and silver and a gift and copper and iron and metal and all kinds of things[520].	“These and all the others with them[521] took for themselves wives from among them such as they chose. And they began to go in to them, and to defile themselves through them, and to teach them sorcery and charms, and to reveal to them the cutting of roots and plants. And they conceived from them and bore to them great giants[522]... [8:1] Asael taught men to make swords of iron and weapons and shields and every instrument of war. He showed them metals of the earth and how they should work gold to fashion it suitably, and concerning silver, to fashion it for bracelets and ornaments for women. And he showed them concerning antimony and eye paint and all manner of precious

[516] B.A. Pearson, ‘*1 Enoch*’ (1995), pp.355-367.
[517] Trans. F. Wisse, in J.M Robinson et al., *Nag Hammadi Library* (1990), pp.104-123.
[518] Trans. G.W.E. Nickelsburg and J.C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch* (2004), pp.24f. Note that there are various textual difficulties with the reconstruction of these passages, although the above version is probably the most reasonably certain expression possible. C.f. G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1* (2001), pp.182-190.
[519] It is perhaps interesting to note that we have here the motif not of the rape *per se* of human women by the heavenly beings, but rather their seduction (albeit by deception), which perhaps accords with the *1 Enoch* motif, which suggests a certain willingness on the part of the women (c.f. also the account in the *Testament of Reuben* 5:1-6). In this context, let us recall our discussion in chapter 6 (see above, p.122, esp. n.397) regarding the depiction of intercourse between Eve and the chief archon in *Apoc. John* II.24:15-17, in contrast to the rather more unpleasant imagery of *Hyp. Arch.* II.89:17-30 and *Orig. W.* II.116:8-117:14. The comparison between *Apoc. John* and *1 Enoch* might, therefore, potentially be a useful guide for the problematic translation of ⲁϥ-ϫⲁϩⲙ-ⲉⲥ in the ‘Gnostic’ passage.
[520] Pearson suggests [‘*1 Enoch*’ (1995), pp.355-367, esp. p.363] that this line seems to serve no particular purpose in the narrative of *Apoc. John*, and thus its inclusion further testifies to the usage of *1 Enoch* as a

And they steered the people who had followed them into great troubles, by leading them astray with many deceptions..."	stones and dyes. And the sons of men made them for themselves and for their daughters, and they transgressed and led the holy ones astray[523]. And there was much godlessness on the earth, and they made their ways desolate."

Now, although clearly certain aspects of the overall import of these texts are in contrast to each other (most especially the way in which the *Apoc. John*'s presentation of the myth is tied to its 'dualistic' view, demiurgical figure and extensive heavenly hierarchy), that particular motifs are evident in both these passages seems to me to strongly suggest a possibility of influence between the two[524]. That being said, however, I should perhaps wish to reserve judgment as to whether it was the text of *1 Enoch* which was used as an immediate source; although Pearson makes a convincing argument for the direct usage of *1 Enoch* in the form which is still extant (i.e. that which espouses a 'negative' view of the heavenly instruction, c.f. n.523 below), given the wide spread of this myth of the Watchers, which is attested in several different sources throughout the centuries surrounding the turn of the millennium, I should wish to be wary about claiming any *one* source as the basis for the occurrence of this motif in the *Apoc. John*[525]. Indeed, Guy Stroumsa's seminal work *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* has clearly shown the influence of the Watchers' tradition on a variety of 'Gnostic' sources, and it is the influence of this tradition rather than

source. Although I do not necessarily disagree with him regarding the influence of *1 Enoch* here, I am tempted to wonder whether the author(s) of *Apoc. John* intended for the 'deceptions' of the following line to be seen as including the knowledge of these arts, seen as having been introduced in order to divert humanity from its proper aims. In this context, we might then recall the strong ascetic stance of much 'Gnostic' literature.

521 Referring to "the watchers, the sons of heaven" named in the preceding passage (6:1-7), reflecting the origin of this myth in Gen. 6:1-4.

522 The text at this point relates the conception and birth of the 'Nephilim', again developing the account of Gen. 6:1-4. Given the occurrence of this motif in Genesis, it seems highly unlikely that the author(s) of *Apoc. John* would not have known of it; it thus seems most plausible to suppose that the 'Nephilim' are deliberately omitted here, as they would have been considered irrelevant and/or unhelpful in regard to the text's claim (NHC II.24:15-31) that the production of ⲉⲗⲱⲉⲓⲙ and ⲓⲁⲩⲉ was the result of intercourse between the chief archon and Eve. C.f. B.A. Pearson, '*1 Enoch*' (1995), pp.355-367.

523 This line, which is attested only in some versions of the text (c.f. G.W.E. Nickelsburg and J.C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch* (2004), p.25), possibly reflects an older version of the myth, in which the heavenly revelation of various arts is in fact a positive mission, and comes prior to the 'fall'; i.e. that these teachings were a divine sanction, but that the divine emissaries responsible for imparting them were then, as a result of their mission corrupted, and fell into sin (so to speak). By the time of *1 Enoch*, however, this older 'positive' version of the myth has evidently been developed into, and thus supplanted by, the 'negative' version, which is the version transmitted to the *Apoc. John*. C.f. G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.19-27; B.A. Pearson, '*1 Enoch*' (1995), pp.355-367. It is *perhaps* possible, as Nickelsburg has considered ['Apocalyptic and Myth' (1977), pp.383-405], that the Promethean myth may have had some influence on the development of this 'negative' version of the motif.

524 C.f. B.A. Pearson, '*1 Enoch*' (1995), pp.355-367.

525 *Ibid.* C.f. G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.17-70.

the specific equation between two particular sources which seems to me to be the most pertinent observation for our argument here. Whatever the case regarding precisely *which* source was used by the *Apoc. John*, what thus seems to me more essential for our thesis is the observation that what we see here is a clear example of the influence of a Judaic stream of mythological speculation on a 'Gnostic' source[526].

Of course, by this stage the location of such an influence should not really surprise us: it is self-evident that much of our 'Gnostic' evidence shows a clear familiarity with Genesis and, as we saw in chapter 6 in our analysis of the words of the Demiurge in the 'Sethian' accounts (see above, pp.118ff.), a certain familiarity with other sections of the Old Testament can also be suspected amongst certain of our 'Gnostic' authors[527]. To be sure, I should not wish to necessarily conclude from such an observation that our 'Gnostic' evidence must have originated from within Judaism (although, as we shall see, such a hypothesis is perhaps not implausible); as the early Christian evidence makes plain, by the second century it was perfectly possible for one to be acquainted with Old Testament and related traditions without actually being Jewish. What our observations do, however, suggest is that the authors of the 'Gnostic' texts with which we are dealing were at least *aware* of both canonical and extra-canonical Judaic traditions, to an extent that they could utilise and adapt them to their own theosophic mythological systems[528]. Indeed, as Pearson has repeatedly demonstrated throughout his work, a number of 'Gnostic' texts make use of exegetical devices and traditions that go beyond solely what is recorded in the Old Testament, and thus witness to a knowledge of exegesis, thought, and textual discussion within second century Jewish haggadic tradition. As we should expect given the particular force of 'Gnostic' speculation,

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526 The chronological priority of the *Book of Watchers* (chapters 1-36 of *1 Enoch*), which was probably composed in third century B.C.E. Palestine [c.f. G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), p.19] obviously demonstrates that the direction of influence must run from this tradition *to* the 'Gnostics', as opposed to *vice versa*.

527 C.f. E.M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (1973), pp.143-162. As will become apparent in this chapter, in general our clearest points of comparison between many Judaic traditions and the 'Gnostic' evidence will be found primarily in the 'Sethian' evidence, rather than that of the 'Valentinians'. This is not to deny the likelihood of such influence upon 'Valentinian' thought, but rather reflects that a) a far lesser amount of 'mythology' is preserved for 'Valentinian' systems than for 'Sethian' ones (c.f. pp.102ff, above), leaving us with fewer sources for a reliable comparison with Judaic speculation, and that b) the greater use of more 'philosophical' (as opposed to mythical-theosophical) methodologies in the extant 'Valentinian' literature obscures our evidence somewhat, given that the relevant Judaic traditions are primarily mythical-theosophical [c.f. G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), p.169-171]. It thus, however, becomes rather interesting that many of the comparisons which Scholem makes between the Kabbalah and the 'Gnostics' are in fact focused on primarily 'Valentinian' sources (see above, pp.66ff., 83ff.). In this context though, c.f. *Val. Exp.* 38:34-37.

528 Obviously, the usage of the terms 'canonical' and 'extra-canonical' is somewhat anachronistic in this time period (as indeed are the terms 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament'). These terms are simply used here to identify for the modern reader the particular groups of texts under discussion.

these traditions are hardly preserved exactly as they were within a purely 'Jewish' context, but rather they are reworked, inverted, transformed, or in some cases even developed, in order to express the central concepts of the 'Gnostic' paradigm(s)[529]. Nonetheless, by comparison with the preservation of such exegetical motifs in 'Jewish' sources, we are enabled to see the utilisation of these traditions by the 'Gnostics' for their theosophical purposes. We cannot really afford here to offer a detailed examination of each of these instances, but it may serve a useful illustrative purpose to outline a few of these occurrences in tabular format, which we have done on the following page.

It is of course noticeable, as Pearson has highlighted, that in many of these cases the haggadic tradition in question is only actually recorded in writing in an orthodox Jewish form at a date later than its recording in a 'Gnostic' form[530]. One might, therefore, be tempted to argue that the 'Gnostic' form of the tradition was prior, and that it was subsequently 'sanitised' (so to speak) and made to play a more acceptable role within the sphere of rabbinic Judaism. Such a schema of procession seems to me highly unlikely, presupposing as it does that the rabbinic authors would be interested in adopting exegetical motifs from texts and/or thought streams which were already by the end of the Tannaitic period more Christian than Jewish, and whose mythology was, to say the least, disrespectful to the God of Judaism and of the Old Testament[531]. Pearson must surely, therefore, be correct in saying that "much of the Jewish traditional material so radically reworked by the Gnostic writers must have circulated orally", and was adapted and utilised by the 'Gnostics' long before it was recorded by rabbinic writers[532]. That the 'Gnostics' utilised already existing Jewish traditions to express their thought streams (much as, for example, we have already seen them doing with the Genesis creation accounts or the Watchers' tradition) is surely a far more plausible hypothesis than that later rabbinic Jewish writers felt compelled to adopt these ideas which were by both

[529] C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Sources' (1984), pp.443-481.
[530] *Ibid.*
[531] Both the existence of Christian motifs in 'Gnostic' sources (which may have originally lacked them, on which more shall be said presently, see below, pp.164ff.) and the evidence of Irenaeus (including the fact that he evidently saw the 'Gnostics' as enough of a threat to the 'orthodox' Church to warrant the composition of a refutation) must cause us to suspect that by the latter half of the second century the 'Gnostic' thought streams were predominantly Christianised. C.f. also R. Gershenzon and E. Slomovic, 'Rabbi Jose ben Halafta and the Matrona' (1985), pp.1-41; this article discusses a record of a late second century debate between Rabbi Jose and a Matrona (who is obviously not Jewish, but may well be a 'Gnostic' Christian), suggesting that a) by this period Christianised 'Gnostic' thought was predominant over any Judaic form and that b) a rabbinic Jew was evidently not interested in adopting 'Gnostic' ideas (as the preservation of this debate potentially also attests to).
[532] B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Sources' (1984), pp.443-481. C.f. Idem., 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions' (2006), pp.39-51; G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), p.129.

Tabular Outline of the Usage of Jewish or Judaic Exegetical Motifs in 'Gnostic' Sources[533]

Motif	'Gnostic' Source(s)	Judaic Source(s)	'Gnostic' Usage
The serpent in the garden as 'the devil'.[534]	*Hyp. Arch.* 89:31-91:4; *Orig. W.* 118:24-120:12; *Test. Tru.* 45:23-49:10.	Wis. 2:24; *2 Enoch* 31; *3 Apoc. Baruch* 4.8; *Targum Ps-J.*, Gen. 3:6.	Since the Old Testament God is viewed as in fact an adversarial Demiurge, the serpent is therefore the 'Gnostic' instructor who aids in liberating man from him[535].
'Samael' (ⲥⲁⲙⲁⲏⲗ), who in Jewish tradition is an 'accusing angel' or 'angel of death'.	*Apoc. John* II.11:15-18; *Hyp. Arch.* 86:27-87:4; *Orig. W.* 103:15-18; *Tri. Prot.* 39:23-27.	*Exod. Rab.* 18.5; *Deut. Rab.* 11.10; *b.Abodah Zarah* 20b. See also the *Testament of Abraham* (chapters 16f. in the M.R. James edition).	Whereas the more common Jewish etymology for this name involves (Aramaic) סם / סמא + אל (i.e. 'poison god'), the 'Gnostic' usage generally uses סמא + אל (i.e. 'blind god'), although this probably still goes back to an older Judaic tradition. In any case, Samael is identified here with the God of the Old Testament[536].
The use of demons in the construction of the temple.	*Test. Tru.* 70:6-24.	*b.Git.* 68ab, *Exod. Rab.* 52.4; *Num. Rab.* 11.3; *Pesiq. Rab.* 6.7, etc. C.f. also the extra-biblical text the *Testament of Solomon*.	Solomon's use of demons is portrayed as evidence of his improper character.[537]
The work of angels in the creation of man.	*Apoc. John* II.15:1-13; *Hyp. Arch.* 87:23-88:1; *Orig. W.* 112:30-113:5.	*Targum Ps-J.*, Gen. 1:26; *Gen. Rab.* 8.3. C.f. also Philo, *De fuga et inventione* 68-70 and *De opificio mundi* 72-75.	Man's body is created by the Demiurge and his archons (i.e. not the true God).[538]

[533] As previously mentioned, we cannot of course afford here to list every occurrence of Judaic motifs in 'Gnostic' literature, only a few illustrative examples. In particular, beyond the above cited motifs we might also note the interesting identification in *Test. Tru.* 46:20-27 of the tree in Paradise as a fig tree (an identification common in the Talmud) [C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions' (2006), pp.39-51], as well as the usage in much 'Gnostic' evidence of the figure of 'Norea' (or variants) [c.f. Idem., 'Norea in Gnostic Literature' (2006), pp.84-94]. C.f. also Idem., 'Gnostic Self-Definition' (2006), pp.124-135.

[534] C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions' (2006), pp.39-51. To be sure, the motif of the serpent as 'the devil' was also known in early Christian thought (c.f. Rev. 12.9), but Pearson makes a convincing argument [see esp. pp.43-46] that the serpent's particular 'Gnostic' role as 'instructor', especially in relation to the role of Eve, evinces a knowledge of a particularly Jewish stream of interpretation, derived from an Aramaic wordplay constructed around the terms חיויא ('serpent'), חוה ('Eve', obviously etymologically related to Heb. חיה / Aram. חיא, 'live'), and the verb חוא ('to show' or 'to tell', i.e. 'instruct'). C.f. *Targum Onqelos*, Gen. 3:1 and *Gen. Rab.* 20.11, 22.2.

[535] Of course, as we saw in chapter 6 (c.f. above, p.122), the serpent is not always viewed positively in 'Gnostic' sources, for example *Apoc. John* II.22:3-21; instead, in 23:26-35, the instructor appears as an eagle (c.f. also *Gos. Phil.* 61:5-12). It should, however, be stressed that where the serpent appears in this negative light, it still reflects the motif of the serpent as 'devil', insofar as he is then identified with the evil Demiurge figure; what is different is not the underlying Jewish tradition, but rather the use to which the particular 'Gnostic' text puts it.

[536] B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Haggadic Traditions' (2006), pp.39-51, esp. pp.47-50. As Pearson also highlights [pp.48f., esp. nn.45, 49], another 'Gnostic' title for the Demiurge, 'Saklas' (ⲥⲁⲕⲗⲁⲥ) from the Aramaic סכלא ('fool') *may* be linked to 'Samael' in relation to the Demiurge's lack of omniscience, related to exegetical traditions regarding Gen. 3:9. Similarly, the 'Gnostic' name of Yaldabaoth (with variant spellings in the Coptic) has been linked to a number of possible Aramaic etymologies. C.f. A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.126f; G. Scholem, 'Jaldabaoth Reconsidered' (1974), pp.405-421.

[537] C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Gnostic Interpretation' (1980), pp.311-319.

[538] C.f. Idem., 'Biblical Exegesis' (2006), pp.29-38.

Jewish and 'orthodox' Christian standards heretical, and strip them of their 'heretical' elements in order to record them. As we shall see, the logic of this argument can also be usefully applied to later questions regarding the Kabbalah.

Now, as we previously noted in chapter 2 (see above, pp.19ff.), a number of scholars have hypothesised that the addition of 'Christianising' elements to certain 'Gnostic' texts was a later development, and that the texts in their original form were not necessarily Christian. Hans-Martin Schenke feels that *Apoc. John*, *Hyp. Arch.*, and *Melchizedek* all bear evidence of a secondary Christianisation appended to earlier sources, whilst Alastair Logan persuasively argued for a redactional process responsible for the current form of *Apoc. John*, in which perhaps the most explicitly 'Christian' elements (such as the addition of the frame story of the dialogue between John and the risen saviour and the equation of Autogenes with Christ) are later additions, influenced by 'Valentinianism' and the Fourth Gospel[539]. To be sure, Logan still finds the original form of the myth to bear clear 'Christian' characteristics, and I would not disagree with him on that point *per se*, insofar as he well demonstrates the likelihood of an early form of the myth originating in a somewhat Christian milieu. I would contend, however, that as we shall see it seems likely that at least a part of the 'Gnostic' impulse originated in a Jewish, or at least Judaic-influenced context; of course, the two opinions are scarcely contradictory, since the preceding description also applies to the emergence of Christianity.

Let us develop this point a little further; as Pearson has argued, the presence at Nag Hammadi of texts such as the *Apocalypse of Adam*, which shows 'Gnostic' traits but not Christian ones suggests "the development of non-Christian forms of Gnosticism", in particular those which exist in a Judaic paradigm[540]. As we have already to some extent noted, and will have occasion to do so again, the likelihood of a movement *from* 'Gnostic' theosophy *towards* Judaism surely seems unlikely, and especially in the case of *Apoc. Adam*, its parallels to the genre of 'Jewish' apocalyptic literature lead one to suspect that it can only have grown out of a 'Jewish-Gnostic' setting, as opposed to a 'pagan-Gnostic' or 'Christian-Gnostic' one. When we add to this observation the hypothesis, which I shall argue later in this chapter, that the 'dualistic Gnostic' impulse more likely arose from *within* Judaism, rather than emerged elsewhere and subsequently absorbed Judaic elements, then it seems logical to postulate that

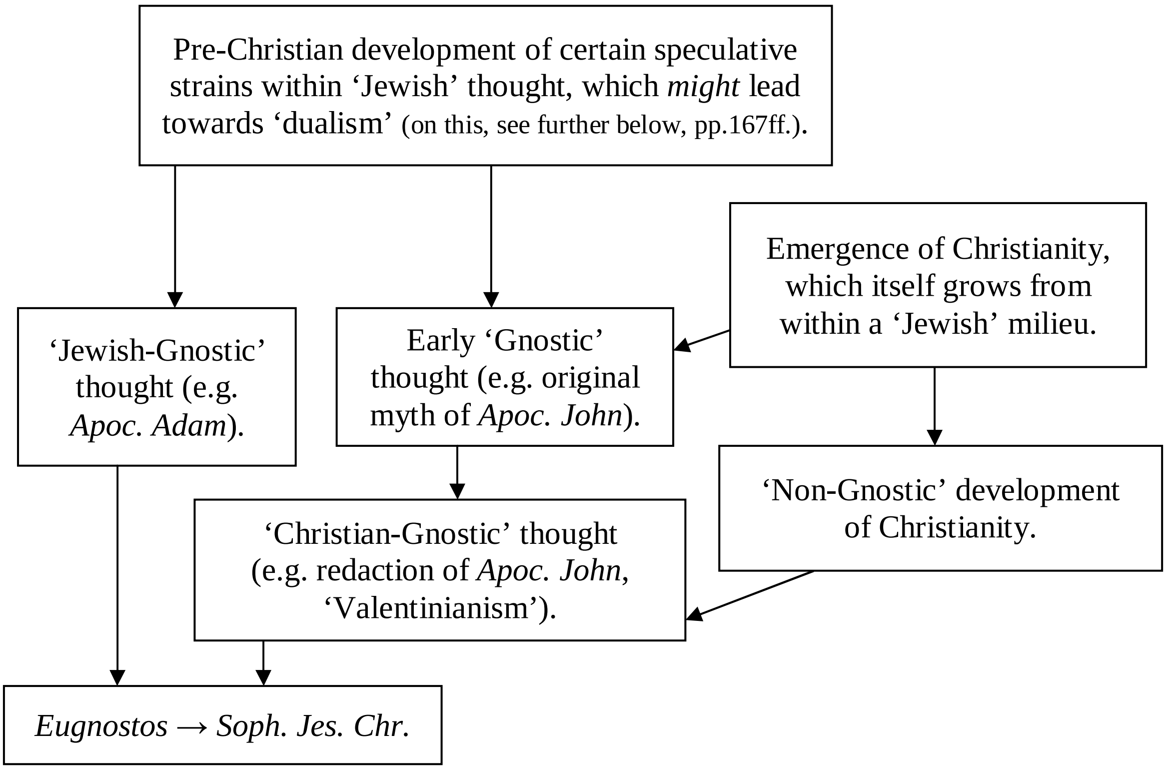
[539] H.-M. Schenke, 'Gnostic Sethianism' (1981), pp.588-616; A.H.B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth* (1996), pp.35-56.
[540] B.A. Pearson, '"Jewish Gnostic" Literature' (1986), pp.15-35.

the ultimate origin of the ‘Gnostic’ thought streams was within a ‘Jewish’ milieu; some of these thought streams may have remained primarily ‘Jewish’ (such as the author(s) of *Apoc. Adam*, and perhaps eventually the Mandeans), whilst others likely combined with the similarly emergent Christianity, perhaps at a very early stage, and thus developed in a ‘Christian-Gnostic’ direction[541]. By this hypothesis then, we might suppose that although the original ‘dualistic’ impulse behind the myth of *Apoc. John* was essentially of ‘Jewish’ origin, informed in part by exegetical work on Genesis, it may quickly have combined with Christian trends (even within the first century), leading to the development of a more complex ‘Gnostic’ myth, which would subsequently be developed even further, accruing additional Christian elements[542]. Of course, given the state of our evidence, such a hypothesis remains primarily speculative, but it does seem like a logical progression.

We might then test the plausibility of this hypothesis in relation to a geographical locale for which we possess a relatively reasonable amount of source evidence with which to work, namely Alexandria. Now, if we begin with Pearson’s supportive reassessment of Moritz Friedländer’s thesis that certain of those whom Philo attacks in his works (most especially in *De migratione Abrahami* 86-93) are to be understood as ‘Gnostics’, or perhaps one *might* say ‘proto-Gnostics’ amongst the Alexandrian Jewry, who are speculating on the Torah in an allegorical and antinomian way of which Philo disapproves; it would perhaps be rather a digression here to delve into the minutiae of Friedländer’s argument, but let us take Pearson’s conclusion which agrees with Friedländer in that it sees the ‘Gnostics’ as a “pre-Christian phenomenon that developed on Jewish soil” [543]. Pearson rightly notes that Friedländer was incorrect in trying to identify those described by Philo with specific ‘Gnostic’ groups depicted in the Patristic heresiological evidence but the base contention, that the origins of the ‘Gnostics’ can be traced to ‘Jewish’ speculation seems relatively sound. We shall return to defend this point presently but if, for the moment, we accept it, then we can begin to construct a rather persuasive chain. That Alexandria was a prominent Jewish centre is of course well known, as is the fact that it also became a prominent Christian centre; after all, it need hardly be re-stated that a major locus for most early Christian (or perhaps better ‘Jesus-movement’) missions was to the prominent Jewish communities. Moreover, as Colin Roberts

541 B.A. Pearson, ‘“Jewish Gnostic” Literature’ (1986), pp.15-35.
542 As this discussion should indicate, I am again not persuaded by Pétrement’s arguments [*Separate God* (1990), pp.211-213, 387-419] for the Christian origin of the ‘Gnostics’, and the subsequent divesting of Christian elements from some ‘Gnostic’ texts.
543 B.A. Pearson, ‘Friedländer Revisited’ (2006), pp.10-28.

has convincingly shown through the use of extant manuscript and papyrus evidence, the strong Jewish presence in Alexandria evidently left a mark on the Christianity there, and the two were evidently intertwined, existing in the same area, and probably both maintaining well established links with their co-religionists in Jerusalem; it is also well to remember, as Pearson has noted, that “the earliest documentable church [in Alexandria], that of Saint Theonas… lay in the northwestern part of the city… [which was] one of the ‘Jewish’ quarters in the first century”[544]. Alexandria was indeed also a major centre, and *perhaps* the place of origin, of ‘Gnostic’ thought; of course, we do not aim to necessarily argue for the origin of ‘Gnostic’ thought in Alexandria (it is simply the place where we have the best available evidence to work with), but simply to consider whether, given the evidence which we have adduced, is it then wholly implausible to propose a chain of development which would run thus, whether in Alexandria or elsewhere?



[544] C.H. Roberts, Manuscript, Society and Belief (1979), pp.1-7, 55-58. It may also be worth noting, as Roberts does [pp.56f.] that although the use of *nomina sacra* in Egyptian Christian writing (including our Nag Hammadi texts) is not itself a Jewish trait, it is most likely “influenced by the Jewish reverence for the name of God”. Moreover, the preservation of manuscripts in jars at Nag Hammadi seems rather similar to a *Genizah* (c.f. also the preservation of the Qumran scrolls), and perhaps suggests that this practice might have been transmitted into Egyptian Christianity. Indeed, it might potentially be the case that the Nag Hammadi codices represent a collection of texts which were rejected for their theology, but which could not be destroyed because they contained the name of God, or other sacred terms. If this were the case then we might suspect, as Roberts does [pp.6f.], that the “institution of a morgue for sacred but unwanted manuscripts was taken over from Judaism by the early Church”. B.A. Pearson, ‘Earliest Christianity’ (1986), pp.132-159.

To be sure, this is a somewhat simplified structure of potential 'Gnostic' origins, but in light of the preceding discussion it at least seems a plausible schema; in particular, the composition and later redaction of *Eugnostos* (both likely in Alexandria, perhaps between the very late first and early second centuries) testifies to the Christianisation of earlier 'Jewish-Gnostic' thought[545]. It should be stressed, however, that as we have previously remarked in the first box, the 'development of certain speculative strains within 'Jewish' thought, which might lead towards 'dualism'' need not necessarily imply an *intra*-Jewish development, nor that those 'Gnostics' who themselves adopted this thought existed within Judaism; it is quite possible that prior to the adoption of such speculation for 'Gnostic' use, it had already progressed beyond the acceptable bounds of Judaism, and even were this not the case, there is perhaps little enough reason why non-Jews who nonetheless held an interest in contemporary currents of Judaic speculation (especially likely if they were also associated with emergent Christianity) might not make use of it. Nor, however, need such speculation have necessarily been heretical, although it may have sometimes developed in that direction; I think especially here of the early second century Elisha ben Abuya, the notorious Aḥer, whose apostasy from the correct prescriptions of Judaism was likely due, as Stroumsa has convincingly argued, to his having permitted his speculative thought regarding the question *unde malum* to develop in the direction of a 'Gnostic dualism'[546]. Such speculation could also remain, however, somewhat within acceptable bounds: we have already noted the Enochian and Watchers' traditions, and their adaptation by certain 'Gnostics', and we shall shortly have cause to consider the related role of Merkabah speculation (see below, pp.171ff.). We might also note, as Pearson has, the growth of apocalyptic (which arguably influences the 'Gnostic Apocalypses', especially texts like *Apoc. Adam*), as well as the 'dualistic' speculation of Qumran[547]. Of course, it should be stressed that the Qumran 'dualism' is arguably closer to an 'ethical dualism' than any demiurgic system, but the important point to emphasise here is that all these thought streams testify to the prevalence of speculative contemplations and motifs in the various strata of Judaism and Judaic thought at the time, thus suggesting the existence of a *zeitgeist* rich with the possibilities for 'Gnostic' development[548].

545 C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Current Issues' (2004), pp.11-81.
546 G.G. Stroumsa, 'Aḥer' (1981), pp.808-818.
547 B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Apocalypticism to Gnosis' (2002), pp.146-163; Idem., 'Jewish Sources' (1984), pp.443-481. C.f. G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.18-34; B. Przybylski, *op. cit.*, pp.56-70.
548 C.f. above, p.5, n.16.

That being said, however, it is as well to remember that it is all too often overly easy for scholars viewing the situation from the future to overstate the case, and assume a wider spread of ideas than may actually have existed. We have previously observed the difficulties inherent in reliably extrapolating a 'Gnostic' movement of any significant size from extant theosophical texts, and we might well apply a similar *caveat* here[549]. It is worth noting that all our extant 'Judaic speculative' texts can *strictly* prove is their own existence, and the fact that someone thought them worth preserving (which, as we have noted in regard to Nag Hammadi, need not necessarily imply that this person agreed in any way with the text)[550]. To be sure, that this evidence exists might well give us reasonable cause to suspect the existence of a *zeitgeist* of speculative thought within 'Jewish' communities of the centuries surrounding the turn of the millennium, but we should, however, remain aware that we cannot truly *prove* the existence of that spirit, nor can we accurately estimate the extent of its influence. Nonetheless, as we have seen a background of Judaic speculation does, on the basis of the evidence, seem like perhaps the most plausible explanation for the development of the 'Gnostic' impulse; we shall shortly return to consider this theory further, but it is probably first worth noting that this hypothesis has emerged, especially post-Nag Hammadi, as the predominant scholarly position[551]. We have already noted that a large number of scholars (e.g. Schenke, Pearson, Stroumsa, Scholem, Idel) locate *some* sort of 'Jewish' or Judaic speculation behind the 'Gnostic' evidence; to be sure, alternative theories have been proposed, perhaps most prominently Adolf von Harnack's view of the 'Gnostics' as representing the "acute… hellenising of Christianity", the arguments of Simone Pétrement for a predominantly Christian origin, and more recently the defence by Tuomas Rasimus, against Schenke, of the thesis that the 'Gnostics' emerged against the backdrop of Christian-Platonic readings of Genesis[552]. As we shall see, however, I continue to remain convinced of the high plausibility of a Judaic speculative background for the origins of the extant 'Gnostic' evidence.

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[549] See above, pp.24ff. C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.

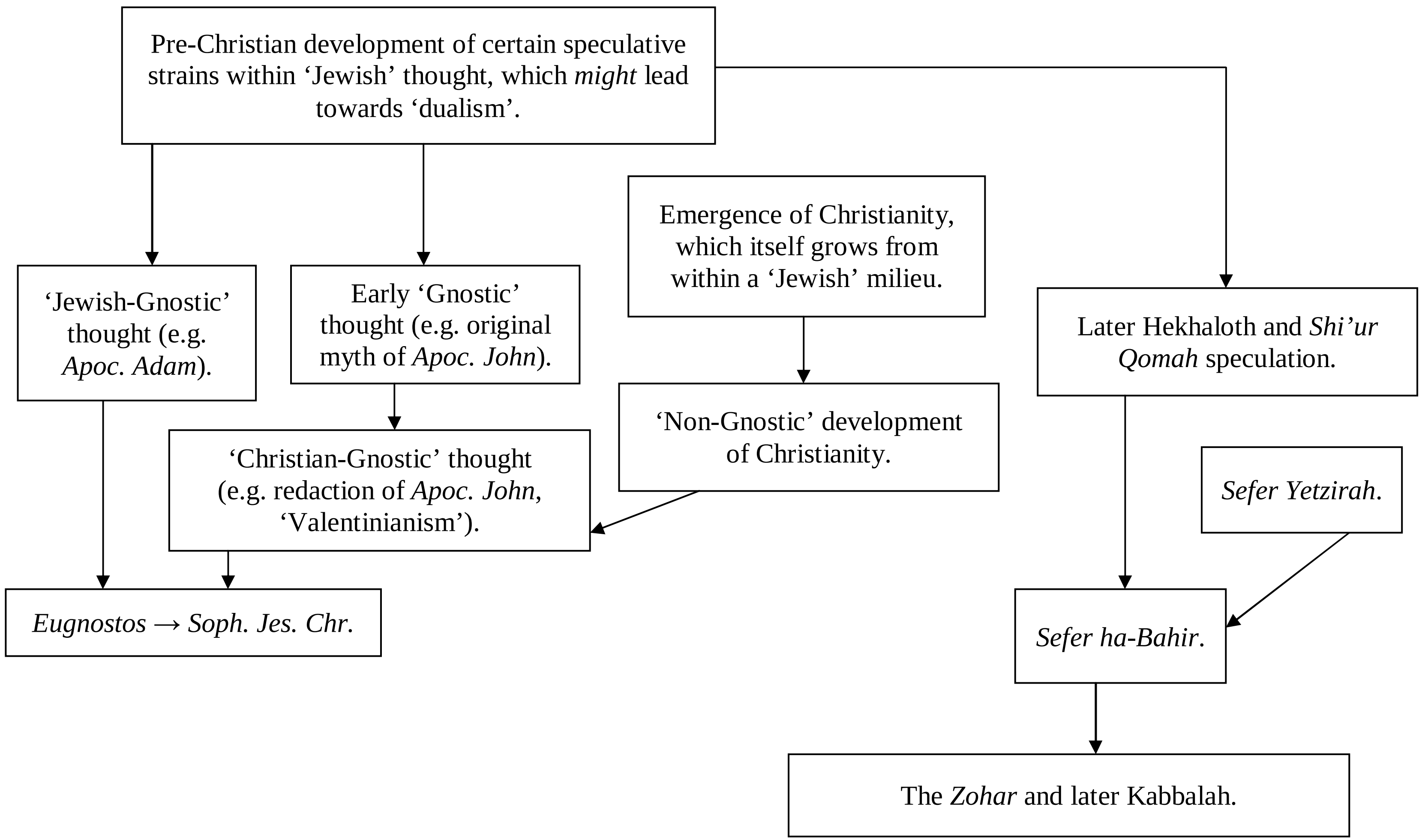
[550] Admittedly, the Qumran evidence does perhaps serve as somewhat of an exception in this situation: the strong community dialectic evident in several of the Qumran texts (most obviously the 'Community Rule', 1QS) rather indicates the existence of an active group, a conclusion also borne out by the adjacent archaeological evidence at the Dead Sea site. It should, however, be noted that the isolationist and exclusionary tenor of the texts, combined with the physical geographical separation of their location, must lead one to doubt the extent to which this community participated in the wider cultural matrices. C.f. G. Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls* (2004), pp.26-90.

[551] C.f. E.M. Yamauchi, *op. cit.*, pp.143-162.

[552] A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (1958), esp. p.226; S. Pétrement, *A Separate God* [*le Dieu séparé*!] (1990); T. Rasimus *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking* (2009).

Now, the particular relevance of these observations to our thesis is that they raise the possibility of explaining any potential similarities between 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic thought *not* by the direct descent of the latter from the former, but rather by the hypothesis that *at least a part of the ultimate origins of both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah lies in this turn of the millennium Judaic speculative tradition*[553]. An obvious advantage of this hypothesis over the theory of the descent of Kabbalah from the 'Gnostics' is that it satisfactorily explains *why* a medieval Jewish tradition might adopt such ideas. We have frequently stressed that for the most part Kabbalah (a term which, after all, signifies received tradition) remained *within* the normative Judaism of its day, and strove to express itself as being in continuity with the religious heritage of Jewish thought. As we noted in chapter 6, in relation to the 'Cathars' and Kabbalah, despite the obvious *caveats* regarding the interposition of psychology into history, nonetheless a theory which suggests that a religious movement adopted ideas essentially alien to its heritage must necessarily explain the reasoning for such an action; that the Kabbalah was explicitly not a 'protest movement' as such therefore raises doubt as to what reason there could be for it to adopt 'Gnostic' ideas[554]. This difficulty is, however, greatly mitigated if one contends, as we shall, that the Kabbalah was potentially drawing not on 'Gnostic' speculation, but rather on an older, essentially *intra-Jewish* stream of traditions, such as the speculation of the Merkabah, the Hekhaloth literature, and the *Shi'ur Qomah*. The fact that several centuries earlier the 'Gnostics' might also have drawn from the earliest forms of these speculations can thus then be construed, in the context of the origins of the Kabbalah, as essentially a largely irrelevant sideline; the 'Gnostic' evidence might therefore potentially tell us something of the contents of these speculative traditions, but this is perhaps the whole extent of the 'Gnostic' relation to the medieval Kabbalah. It is thus to an examination of the plausibility and likelihood of this hypothesis that I wish to devote our attention in the remainder of this chapter, but let us here briefly restate it, in diagrammatic form. If we accept this argument, whereby one might say by analogy that the Kabbalah *was* related to the 'Gnostics', albeit as distant cousins rather than as direct progeny, then we might perhaps combine our prior conclusions regarding the development of the Kabbalah with our earlier diagram, which could potentially then be redrawn in this way:

[553] As we shall see (below, pp.178ff.), it was in fact this position which Scholem eventually came to in his later work *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965).
[554] C.f. above, p.134.



It should of course be stressed that this diagram is intended *only* to demonstrate direction of progression: the position of the boxes is merely a practical arrangement, and should not be taken to indicate any chronological location. I do not, for example, wish to suggest that the composition of the *Sefer Yetzirah* was contemporary with the redaction of *Apoc. John*.

We shall expound presently on the particular implications of this diagrammatic hypothesis, but let us here note that it arguably presents a convincing explanation to the curious fact, which we observed in chapter 4, of the relatively high level of correspondence between the *Bahir* and the 'Gnostic' text *On the Origin of the World*[555]. When we also recall that the relevant *Orig. W.* passages quite clearly evince indebtedness to Ezekiel 1, then we may well be given to consider the viability of the suggestion that a version of *Orig. W.*, or a related source, might have survived into the medieval Occident, and from there influenced the composition and redaction of the *Bahir*. Given our preceding discussions in this chapter, is not a far more plausible theory that, in line with the above diagram, there existed a speculative tradition concerned with the reading of Ezekiel 1 (i.e. Merkabah speculation) and that it was this which informed the text of *Orig. W.* (and its parallels in *Hyp. Arch.*), and was subsequently transmitted in some form to the *Bahir*[556]? The striking similarities between the two texts then are explained not by any intrinsic connection of the two, and the frankly puzzling idea of the *Bahir* adopting and altering this alien writing, in order to bring it more within the limits of normative medieval Judaism, but rather by the fact that both draw upon the same stream of tradition based upon a relatively acceptable 'Jewish' interpretation of Ezekiel 1[557].

Now, it must of course be stressed that the particular form, content, or even existence of such a vein of turn of the millennium 'Judaic speculation' is scarcely definite, and is generally not preserved in any of the extant contemporary evidence. As can be seen in P.S. Alexander's insightful work, the existence of such a speculative trend contemporaneous with, or indeed slightly earlier than, our 'Gnostics' must generally be inferred from the extant evidence of earlier 'Jewish' apocalyptic texts and the later Hekhaloth literature[558]. As Alexander rightly notes, the Merkabah (insofar as it is understood from the Hekhaloth literature) "can be seen as an inner-Jewish development of pre-70 apocalyptic", developing ideas already present in the earlier texts, albeit with a change in emphasis, so that in contrast to apocalyptic, the Merkabah is, as Alexander puts it, "more concerned with the world above than the world to come, with ouranology than eschatology", a shift in focus which is already apparent in late

555 See above, pp.78f.
556 C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Sources' (1984), pp.443-481, esp. pp.464-467. See also the extensive treatment of this 'Gnostic' text by Francis Fallon in his work *The Enthronement of Sabaoth* (1978).
557 C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.
558 *Ibid.* On the dating of the Hekhaloth literature see below, p.174. C.f. also G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.40-79.

apocalyptic texts like the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Ascension of Isaiah*[559]. To be sure, the specific contents of Merkabah speculation in the time period with which we are concerned must largely be read out of elements of the later Hekhaloth texts (on which more shall be said presently), but in light of our previous comments regarding the reflection in rabbinic writings of earlier oral traditions, I see little reason to dispute the contention of Scholem and others that the Hekhaloth literature at least in parts reflects, preserves, and in some cases develops an earlier strain of 'mystic' speculation built around Ezekiel 1 and the vision of the Merkabah, which is referred to (even if the specific details are generally not) in the Talmudic literature[560]. Indeed, the existence of such speculation is well shown by the notable prohibitions made in the literature against the engagement of the wider religious community with these ideas: *m.Meg.* 4:10 states that Ezekiel 1 may not be used as a *haftarah* (i.e. a text for synagogue reading), and *b.Shabb.* 80b tells of one who planned to publicly speak on the Merkabah, only to be stung by a wasp and die[561]. Indeed, it seems that several of the rabbis were greatly concerned that one who studied the Merkabah without proper preparation (i.e. a rigorous rabbinical religious and halakhic training) would be apt to misunderstand it with dangerous consequences, and thus sought to prevent any without such a background engaging with it[562]. Most intriguingly for our purposes though is the suggestion that perhaps the most prevalent danger associated with the improper contemplation of the Merkabah was the possibility of a development into 'dualism', or the positing of the highest figure of the heavenly realms (I stress here *figure* as opposed to the presence of the divine) as something of a Demiurge. Of particular interest is the passage which we have previously encountered referring to the "[f]our [who] entered a garden" (i.e. engaged in 'mystic ascent'),

559 P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18, esp. pp.9-12. C.f. in particular the obvious influence of Palestinian apocalyptic and earlier Enoch traditions on the Hekhaloth text *3 Enoch*, as well as our previous observations (see above, pp.157ff.) regarding the influence of apocalyptic or apocalyptic-inspired speculation on certain of our 'Gnostic' texts. See also B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Apocalypticism to Gnosis' (2002), pp.146-163.

560 G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.14-17. See also P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180; S. Lieberman, *Mishnath Shir ha-Shirim*, which is given as Appendix D in Scholem's *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.118-126. C.f. *b.Ḥag.* 11b-16a; *y.Ḥag.* II, 77a.12ff. Note also that, as Alexander highlights [Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180, esp. pp.173f.], the Hekhaloth texts frequently claim to embody the teachings of R. Ishmael and/or R. Akiba, both of whom can be linked to the teachings of R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, to whom the Babylonian Talmud ascribes mystical instruction (*b.Ḥag.* 13a/14b). Of course, the veracity of such appeals to rabbinic authority is open to doubt [c.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.158ff. on the attribution of the *Zohar* to R. Simeon bar Yoḥai], but the important point to stress here is the clear conviction of the authors and/or editors of the relevant Hekhaloth literature that they were preserving older 'mystic' traditions. C.f. also N. Deutsch, *Gnostic Imagination* (1995), p.36.

561 See P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180.

562 E.g. *m.Ḥag.* 2:1; *b.Ḥag.* 14a. C.f. Origen's remarks in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* regarding the restrictions the rabbis place on the teaching of Genesis 1 (i.e. insofar as it relates to the *Ma'aseh Bereshit*), Ezekiel, and the Song of Songs.

of whom the last two were Elisha ben Abuya (that is the 'arch-heretic' Aḥer) and R. Akiba (to whom, as we have seen, numerous Hekhaloth writings are attributed)[563]. Now, the particular context of this account in the *Babli* is especially indicative, insofar as it occurs following a number of prohibitions and warnings regarding the dangers of Merkabah speculation: *b.Ḥag.* 13a relates the story of a young scholar who perceived the 'mystic' work and died, whilst *b.Ḥag.* 14a similarly recommends that the study of such tradition should not be attempted until one is at least fifty[564]. We then progress to this account of 14bff. which, as we shall see, explicitly links Aḥer's 'mystic' speculation with his apostasy, an apostasy which, as we have noted above, seems likely to have been 'dualistic' or demiurgical in nature[565]. Aḥer is thus presented in this context, as Alexander puts it, as someone "who immersed himself in mystical speculation and landed in heresy", and is thus "held up as a warning to all"[566]. Indeed, the specific, and explicitly hostile, details of Aḥer's error, as given in 15a, are particularly worth reproducing here:

> "Aḥer saw that Metatron was given permission to sit and write down the merits of Israel. He [Aḥer] said: It is taught that in heaven there is no sitting, no rivalry, no neck and no weariness. Perhaps – God forbid! – there are two powers. Thereupon they led forth Metatron and smote him with sixty lashes of fire, saying, 'Why did you not stand up when you saw him?' Then permission was granted to strike out the merits of Aḥer and a *bath kol* [heavenly voice, divine pronouncement] went forth and said, 'Return erring sons – except Aḥer!"[567]

It seems likely then that it was indeed Aḥer's mystic speculation that led him to a doctrine of two powers, whilst the vehemence of the 'orthodox' reaction to this thought (a hostility directed against both Aḥer and Metatron) clearly suggests that the writers were highly aware of the very real danger that 'mystical' speculation could lead to 'dualism'[568]. This should not, perhaps, be surprising: we recall our observations in chapter 3 that the 'mystic impulse'

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[563] See above, n.560. *b.Ḥag.* 14bff. C.f. G.G. Stroumsa, 'Aḥer' (1981), pp.808-818; P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180; D. Ariel, *op. cit.*, pp.26-28.

[564] C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180.

[565] See above, pp.46f. C.f. G.G. Stroumsa, 'Aḥer' (1981), pp.808-818. As Stroumsa notes, the application of the name אחר likely refers to a categorisation of him as 'another' or 'stranger', in reference to his apostasy. Intriguingly though, Stroumsa further raises the possibility that אחר might be an equivalent of the Greek ἀλλογενής, related to the 'Sethian' conception of being of σπέρμα ἕτερον. One need not suppose that Elisha became a 'Gnostic' but rather, as Stroumsa rightly notes, that his demiurgical apostasy seemed to the rabbis similar enough to that of the 'Gnostics' to ascribe such a designation.

[566] P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180.

[567] Trans. P.S. Alexander, *Ibid.*, p.177.

[568] Stroumsa ['Aḥer' (1981), p.811] plausibly suggests that the very reason this tradition is preserved only in the *Babli* might be due to Aḥer's apostasy having "left many scars and painful memories amongst the Palestinian sages", so that it is not surprising that in the Jerusalem redaction of the Talmud they chose not to fully record the details of his views; Babylonia, by contrast, was at a further remove from the events, and so recorded a fuller form of the episode.

often seeks to bridge the gap between the human and the ultimately transcendent divine, and we note that here such a task seems to be accomplished by contemplation stemming from Ezekiel 1 and its depiction of intermediary heavenly figures, which may then form a path of sorts to the higher levels[569]. It is perhaps then understandable that many of the rabbis might be justly concerned with the danger that one who embarks on this path of speculation might be tempted to view the highest of these intermediary powers as a second God, as indeed seems to have been the case with Aḥer[570]. The same difficulty is also observable in the text of *3 Enoch* which evidently preserves a number of traditions regarding the figure of Enoch-Metatron; as Alexander cogently argues, the text (which is clearly a composite work) cannot have been redacted any earlier than the late fifth century, and possibly quite a bit later, but likely contains at least some strata that reach back to the older traditions reflected in the Talmud[571]. Of particular note for our purposes is that the presence of various strata in this text seemingly witnesses to the development of the Enoch-Metatron figure, from the elevation of Enoch to the person of *Yahoel* / the lesser YHWH, the transfer of this figure's characteristics to the angel Metatron, and the separation of Metatron from the figure of Michael; whilst a further examination of this development would go somewhat beyond our focus here, what is perhaps most noticeable is Alexander's identification of a final 'orthodox redaction' to the text of *3 Enoch*, including (in chapter 16) the later addition of a 'humbling' of Metatron akin to that depicted in *b.Ḥag.* 15a[572]. As Alexander rightly observes, therefore, it seems plausible that we witness here a continuation of earlier Merkabah speculation, one which is matched by a similarly continuing uneasiness regarding the potential for such speculation to stray towards heresy by virtue of its enumeration and depiction of heavenly powers.

In the context of the above discussion, therefore, it does not seem to me unreasonable to propose the existence, around the turn of the millennium, of just such a tradition of Merkabah speculation as we have suggested, one which although essentially orthodox could potentially

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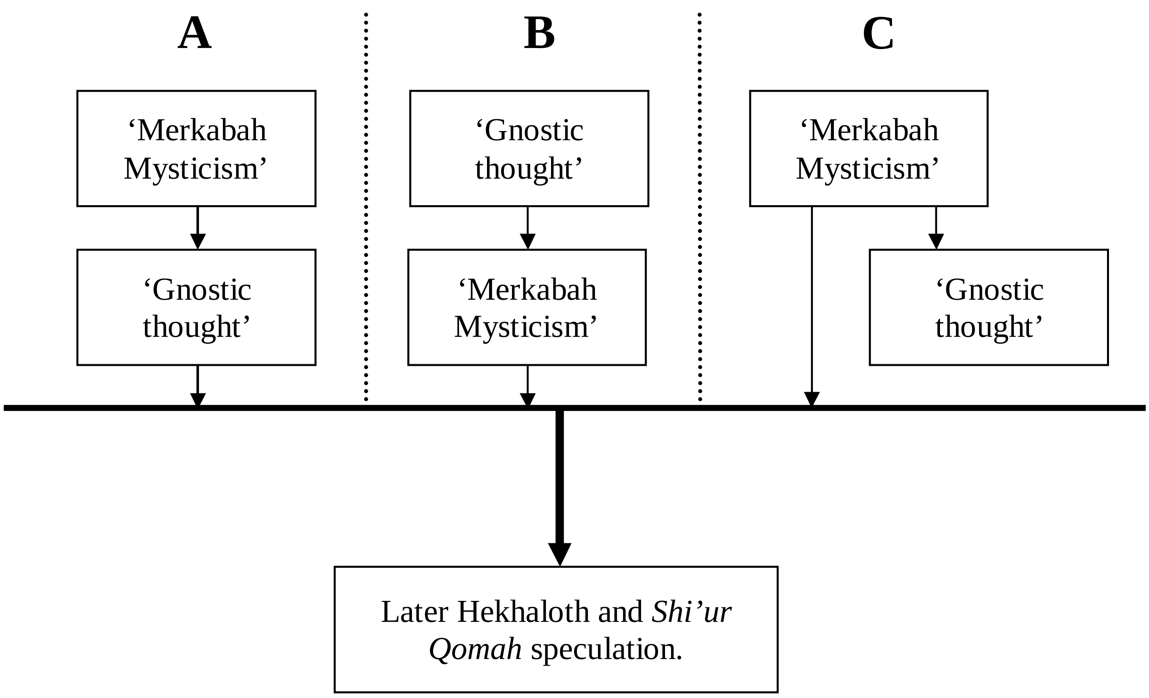
[569] See above, pp.48ff. As Alexander puts it ['Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), p.175], "[t]he void left by God's withdrawal to the heights of heaven is filled in the Hekhaloth texts with hosts of angels who mediate between God and the world".
[570] C.f. also below, pp.198ff.
[571] P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180. See also Scholem, [*Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.1-8, 31-35] who dates the oldest of the Hekhaloth texts (the *Lesser Hekhaloth*, היכלות זוטרתי) to a redaction no earlier than the fourth century, with most of the more complete texts being significantly later. He argues, however, that they nevertheless, in some strata, contain elements of much older traditions (although on this see below). C.f. Idem., *Major Trends* (1961), pp.44-47.
[572] P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), pp.67-70; Idem., *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.41-55.

lead towards a demiurgical ‘dualist’ position, a concern which is reflected both in the numerous rabbinic cautions and prohibitions regarding such speculation, as well as the extant evidence regarding Aḥer, who seemingly did indeed turn towards this position. Of course, the question then arises as to whether we are to see this essentially intra-Jewish tradition (albeit a tradition that *could* stray towards the fringes of acceptable Jewish orthodoxy) as being influenced by the ‘Gnostics’, or rather as having influenced them. The particular relevance of this question to our thesis regarding the ‘Gnostics’ and the Kabbalah will shortly be expounded upon, insofar as we shall wish to examine whether the Hekhaloth literature (which, as we have seen, seems to preserve and reflect older Merkabah traditions) might have served to inform the *Bahir*, and hence the Kabbalah. *If* this can be shown to be the case, then we may indeed have potentially located a genetic link between the ‘Gnostics’ and the Kabbalah; in the context, however, of the question as to whether the ‘Gnostics’ had any *influence* upon the Kabbalah, the deciding point must then be dependent upon the relationship between the ‘Gnostics’ and Merkabah speculation. Although we have already raised certain elements of this question above (see pp.169ff.), it is perhaps here worth restating it, again in something of a diagrammatic form:



If then, following our examination above, we accept the premise that the Hekhaloth literature contains, at least in part, elements of an older speculative tradition, then we must ask which tradition(s) it descends from. The above diagram is of course rather more homogenous than was likely the actual situation (as can be seen by a comparison with the previous diagram on p.170), but it merely serves here to illustrate certain possibilities in relation to the traditions behind the Hekhaloth literature namely that either **A)** Merkabah speculation influenced the 'Gnostics' (obviously here, for the sake of clarity of explanation, both these terms are treated rather broadly), and they in turn influenced the Hekhaloth texts; **B)** that the 'Gnostics' in fact influenced the Merkabah traditions, which then fed into the Hekhaloth literature; or **C)** that the Merkabah directly influenced *both* the 'Gnostics' and the Hekhaloth, the latter two each developing independently of each other[573]. Now, it already seems that option **C** is perhaps the most intrinsically attractive premise, as it does not presuppose any deviation in the chain of transmission beyond the bounds of Jewish orthodoxy. To elaborate, there does not seem to me to exist any evidence in our earlier analysis of Merkabah-Hekhaloth speculation to suggest that we are dealing with anything other than an intra-Jewish tradition, one which evinces links to Talmudic esotericism, and which is also shown to cause a certain amount of reticence and caution on the part of orthodox writers due to its possible development towards heresy. This point then is worth restating: what we have hitherto seen is merely a concern that this vein of speculation *might* lead an unwary one towards heresy, not that it is in itself intrinsically heretical; indeed, the orthodox cautions concerning this speculation, the virulent critique of Aḥer and 'humbling' of Metatron, and the more orthodox redaction of *3 Enoch* all seem to point to an acceptance of this speculative thought *per se*, provided that proper limits were set to prevent it straying into heresy. The logical question then, of course, is why such pains would be taken to establish these limits for a tradition that was already considered beyond the pale of orthodox Judaism? The obvious answer of course is that this would not be done: one does not generally seek to prevent something transgressing outside a boundary unless that thing is currently within the boundary. It seems, therefore, reasonable to contend,

[573] Again, I stress that this rather homogenous construction is applied here simply to afford a certain clarity to the current argumentation. The variety of 'Gnostic' thought streams and systems has of course already been much discussed in this thesis. Similarly, we have already noted that a reconstruction of Merkabah speculation essentially rests on the evidence of later (primarily Talmudic and Hekhaloth) sources, and that it is open to debate how far back we can date the speculation reflected therein. If Merkabah thought cannot thus necessarily be shown to pre-date the early 'Gnostics', it might then be more accurate to speak of an older Judaic speculative tradition which influences both the Merkabah and the 'Gnostics', as is reflected in the diagram on p.170, above. For our purposes here, however, such a debate is scarcely essential; we are more concerned with the question of whether a speculative tradition largely within the bounds of Jewish orthodoxy could ever have been influenced by 'Gnostic' thought. We can thus reasonably here apply the designation 'Merkabah' to such a hypothesised speculative tradition, so far as it is understood that this term is used largely for the sake of convenience, for want of a more suitable designation for any 'pre-Christian development of certain speculative strains within 'Jewish' thought, which *might* lead towards 'dualism''. C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.

as Scholem did, that the Merkabah was always within acceptable Jewish (or at the most extreme 'Jewish') orthodox bounds; were one to develop it outside those bounds, then it would essentially cease (in the eyes of the orthodox) to be Merkabah speculation, and would instead be simply another heresy[574]. Now, as we have already quite clearly seen, the 'Gnostic' systems generally breach this boundary, often in quite extreme ways, and thus from the point of view of an orthodox Jew are quite clearly heretical. Therefore, should one wish to speak of the 'Gnostic' influence on either the Merkabah or the Hekhaloth speculation, it must be answered *why* a clearly heretical tradition would essentially be adopted, shorn of its heresy, and defended as orthodox. As we observed earlier, in relation to the use of haggadic motifs in the 'Gnostic' texts, it is surely more logical to suppose that the chain of transmission ran in the opposite direction; that is to say that the 'Gnostic' systems represent not an influence on Merkabah-Hekhaloth speculation, but rather as the rabbis feared, and as is the recorded case with Aḥer, they represent a development of an essentially orthodox speculative tradition to heretical extremes[575].

To restate this point then, the three potential methods of transmission outlined above can, it seems, perhaps be best essentially defined in relation to their status as regards acceptable orthodox standards within the Judaism of their time. As such, therefore, method **A** suggests that an orthodox speculative tradition diverged into 'Gnostic' heresy, and that this heresy was then subsequently brought back into the relatively orthodox Hekhaloth literature. Method **B** proposes that an originally heretical 'Gnostic' speculative thought stream was basically 'Judaised', and developed into an orthodox Merkabah-Hekhaloth tradition. By contrast then, method **C**, which must surely emerge in light of the above discussion as the most logically plausible, supposes a continual development of intra-Jewish speculative thought operating within the bounds of orthodoxy from the Merkabah to the Hekhaloth; that one early offshoot of this tradition was developed into a heretical 'Gnostic' theosophy is thus largely an incidental occurrence, with little real impact on the remaining and continuing orthodox speculative tradition (apart, *perhaps*, from contributing to the rabbinic cautions about the

[574] G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), p.10: "The texts of Merkabah mysticism that have so far come to our knowledge also display what I have called an orthodox Jewish tendency, and are in no way heretical. By this I mean that although they do expound some ideas of a highly mystical character, these texts adhere strictly to monotheistic concepts... [t]hese mystical aspects, however, do not detract from the basic fact that the theology presented, or rather implied, here does not conflict with the biblical concept of God...". C.f. N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.18-55.

[575] C.f. also P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18, which similarly concludes that it is highly implausible that the 'Gnostics' could have influenced any orthodox Jewish tradition.

dangers of this speculation). Both logically and, as we have seen, on the basis of the extant evidence, method **C** thus seems perhaps the most plausible mode of development.

Now, we shall return to this debate shortly, especially insofar as it impacts on the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation, but it is here worth first saying something regarding Scholem's assessment of the situation and his approach to the above methods of transmission, especially as regards his identification of potential similarities between the 'Gnostic' and the Hekhaloth texts. An important point to note, however, in this context, is the variation in Scholem's thought between phenomenological and historical approaches; in particular, Nathaniel Deutsch in his excellent comprehensive survey of Scholem's work, entitled *The Gnostic Imagination: Gnosticism, Mandaeism, and Merkabah Mysticism*, has highlighted that Scholem variously adduces both phenomenological and historical explanations for the parallels he perceives between 'Gnostic' thought, Merkabah speculation, and indeed the Kabbalah[576]. Indeed, it is clearly noticeable that Scholem typically treats the term 'Gnosticism' as more an indicator of a particular *typos* of thought than as an indicator of a particular group or groups; the obvious example would of course be his persistent identification of Merkabah speculation as a type of "Jewish Gnosticism" (the title which he gave to perhaps his most comprehensive treatment of the subject)[577]. It should of course be stressed that Scholem was largely writing before the formulation of the Messina definition (which proposed the limitation of the term 'Gnosticism' to only those specific second century currents which might be called 'Gnostic' in a typological sense), and he generally seems to view the terms 'Gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' as largely synonymous markers of a particular phenomenological type[578]. To be sure, as we have already observed somewhat in chapter 3, one might even argue that Scholem did not draw too great a distinction between his phenomenological categories of 'Gnosticism' and 'mysticism', and in fact states that he finds the former to be a "convenient term for the religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine"[579]. Perhaps in fact the best statement on Scholem's

[576] N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.9-17.
[577] *Ibid.*, pp.18-55, esp. pp.24-31. As Deutsch puts it [p.24], "[s]uch a broad understanding may have allowed Scholem to describe Merkabah mysticism as a form of Gnosticism without being unduly disturbed by the significant differences between the two movements. But it has also frustrated many scholars interested in differentiating between "Gnosticism" as a particular historical movement, "Gnostic" as a specific type of religiousity [*sic*], and 'esotericism" [*sic*] as a particular religious category".
[578] C.f. R. McL. Wilson, 'The Messina Definition' (1994), pp.539-551.
[579] G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), p.1. C.f. above, pp.48ff. and N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.13-36, esp. pp.30-35; J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* (1998), pp.ix-xlviii. See also G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed* (1984), pp.3-5.

phenomenological approach *viz.* 'Gnosticism' is to be found in a comment in his *Origins of the Kabbalah*, where he rather explicitly asserts that:

> "[t]he discussion as to what exactly is to be understood by "gnosis" has gained in prominence in scholarly literature and at conferences during the last decades. There is a tendency to exclude phenomena that until 1930 were designated gnostic by everyone. To me it does not seem to matter greatly whether phenomena previously called gnostic are now designated as "esoteric," and I for one cannot see the use or value of the newly introduced distinctions (for example, gnosis–Gnosticism and the like)."[580]

Of course, the definitional work which has permeated this thesis (especially in the first two chapters) cannot really allow us to agree with Scholem on this point, and nor to my mind should it; what is particularly important to emphasise here, however, is that in general Scholem's usage and application of the terms 'Gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' must be understood within the context of his phenomenology, and should not therefore necessarily be taken to imply anything of a historical relationship. To elucidate, Scholem's identification of Merkabah speculation as "Jewish Gnosticism" *might*, within the definitional framework established in this thesis, cause us to suspect that he envisages a historical framework akin to method **B**, wherein 'Gnostic' thought (which we understand in the more specific sense) is seen to directly influence the development of Jewish speculation. The fact is, however, that as we have noted Scholem generally applies this term of "Jewish Gnosticism" primarily in a solely phenomenological sense of typological similarity. Historically speaking, he more usually seems to advance an approach closer to methods **A** or **C**, in which essentially orthodox Merkabah speculation is seen to influence the development of our 'Gnostics', rather than *vice versa*; as such, we may therefore wish to speak in this thesis, for the sake of clarity, not of the Merkabah as a type of "Jewish Gnosticism", but rather, in a way that perhaps better reflects the historical chain of transmission, to speak of our 'Gnostic' theosophies as a type of '*Gnosticised* Jewish speculation'[581].

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[580] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.21, n.24.

[581] C.f. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.33-42, 48f., 65-74. Indeed, in reference to Jewish speculative ideas, Scholem is quite clear [p.72] that "Gnostics [by which he this time means the second century groups] frequently borrowed such material and deliberately changed it". We might also note that in this context that in *Major Trends* [originally published 1941] (1961),p.65, Scholem argues that *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation likely originated amongst 'heretical mystic' groups (and he here mentions Markos, on which see below, pp.183f.), and only subsequently "blended" with the orthodox speculation of the Merkabah, which he refers to as "that form of Jewish Gnosticism [as he defines this term] which tried to remain true to the Halakhic tradition". In his later work *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* [originally published 1976] (1991), pp.34f., he however refuted this position, concluding instead that the *Shi'ur Qomah* must have originated within orthodox Merkabah speculation, arguing that there could be "no doubt that the bearers of these speculations were at the very center [*sic*] of rabbinic Judaism in tannaitic and talmudic times". C.f. N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.40f.

Now, when we take these observations in conjunction with our examination of Scholem's hypothesised parallels between the 'Gnostics' and the *Bahir*, which we examined in chapter 4, it should be evident that Scholem's primary mode of examination seems to be phenomenological; that is to say that he generally draws connections between his sources on the basis of what he perceives as structural, typological, or ideological similarities between them. Of course, such a method of phenomenological comparison need not necessarily be taken to imply a historical connection; as we have already noted repeatedly, a mere resemblance between two motifs does not in itself prove anything[582]. Nor should I wish to claim that Scholem inevitably draws such conclusions: as we saw, for example, in chapter 5 (in relation to the Lurianic Kabbalah) and in chapter 6 (in relation to the 'Cathars'), Scholem in both these cases concludes that the potential parallels which might be adduced between these systems are best explained as having developed relatively independently of each other[583]. On the other hand, however, as we saw extensively in chapter 4, in some issues especially as regards the book *Bahir*, Scholem remains certain that the essentially phenomenological parallels which he adduces must indicate the presence of a historical connection[584]. We can see, therefore, that Scholem's position *viz.* questions of historical filiation is scarcely dogmatically rigid (which must surely be counted as a positive), and he is willing to envisage a complex situation regarding potential parallels between different systems. Indeed, it is perhaps here most straightforward to elucidate Scholem's position through the, admittedly by necessity, somewhat extensive use of his own words:

> "Are these images, with which the Kabbalists describe the secret world and hidden life of the Godhead, indigenously Jewish, or do they spring from an older heritage? Here the situation is highly complex. Some of these symbols show a definite affinity to older material, but it is difficult to say for sure how much was actually borrowed... Suffice it to say that *tenuous as the threads connecting the oldest Kabbalistic tradition with gnostic tradition may be, I am convinced that they existed*. On the other hand, certain arguments might be adduced to account for the presence of gnostic themes in Kabbalism, not so much by historical contact as by a parallelism of psychological and structural development, which would seem more plausible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than direct historical influence. For even the Catharist heretics were relatively free from the gnostic elements in Manichaeism and largely unfamiliar with them. In the light of prolonged investigations on the subject, I feel justified in saying that apart from certain basic features whose importance I do not wish to minimize the gnosis of the Kabbalah developed independently from within. *There is no need to choose between a historical and a psychological explanation of the origin of the Kabbalah; both elements played a part.* Precisely those Kabbalistic systems that are most gnostic in character, those for example of the *Zohar* and of Isaac Luria, can be fully explained as developing from within, on Jewish foundations."[585]

[582] See also below, pp.193ff.
[583] See above, pp.92ff., 113f.
[584] C.f. above, pp.66ff.
[585] G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* (1969), pp.97f. Emphasis added. C.f. N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.10-17.

Certainly there is much to attract one to Scholem's viewpoint, which emerges as a balanced consideration of the evidence, with an acceptance of both historical and psychological factors as being active in producing phenomenological parallels between the medieval Kabbalah and the second century 'Gnostics'. That being said, however, as we have stressed throughout this thesis, Scholem's position still remains for me somewhat unconvincing, and ultimately overly hypothetical. As regards the role of psychological factors in his argumentation, we have already noted certain *caveats* regarding such an approach; for the moment, however, let us set this sphere of inquiry aside, as we shall again return to it more fully in the next chapter. Rather, for the remainder of the present chapter I wish now to focus upon the historical potentiality of Scholem's view for although, like him, I agree that "the threads connecting the oldest Kabbalistic tradition with gnostic tradition" are tenuous, as we have already to some extent noted I am not, on the basis of the available evidence, truly "convinced that they existed". Let us then examine Scholem's thesis of historical connection on the basis of two points, which we have already to some extent examined, namely (i) the phenomenological comparison of potential parallels and (ii), the possibility of constructing a reliable chain of historical transmission.

It is perhaps then at this point worth restating our previously established methodology, *viz.* that *a logical method by which to proceed is to assume in the first instance that all correspondences identified are essentially coincidental, dismissing this assumption* only *if we can identify a high level of exactness in our comparisons (such as would render pure coincidence relatively improbable) and/or establish a secure chain of transmission between two sources, a chain which renders the transmission of ideas not only possible but indeed probable*. As we saw above, the parallels which Scholem adduces between the *Bahir* and the 'Gnostic' evidence do not seem, in context, to be anywhere near exact enough to justify an *a priori* assumption of the existence of a historical connection, and it is thus necessary to attempt to adduce reliable evidence that would link the second century 'Gnostics' to the medieval Kabbalah[586]. As we have already occasionally suggested, the Hekhaloth literature *might* potentially provide an early step in the establishment of such a chain. We shall return to this possibility shortly, but first we must revisit an earlier discussion, namely that regarding our three methods of transmission, **A**, **B**, and **C**; for before we can discuss whether the Hekhaloth literature could have had a historical influence on the Kabbalah, we must of course

[586] See chapters 4 and 5, above.

first, in relation to the primary purpose of our thesis, question whether the 'Gnostics' could have had any historical influence on the Hekhaloth literature.

As we have previously highlighted, I do not generally believe that a chain of transmission from the 'Gnostic' thought streams *towards* either or both of the Merkabah or Hekhaloth speculations is wholly plausible: that is to say I find both methods **A** and **B** unconvincing in comparison to **C**. As we have argued above, the essential orthodoxy of Merkabah-Hekhaloth speculation must engender a certain amount of scepticism as to whether they were likely to interact with, and more importantly adopt motifs *from*, any of the blatantly heretical 'Gnostic' systems[587]. As we have seen, this position agrees to a certain extent with Scholem's later work, insofar as he there generally envisages the direction of transmission running from the Merkabah speculations *to* the 'Gnostic' systems; on the one hand, therefore, it might thus be argued that Scholem's later work supposes that the 'Gnostic' parallels which he identifies in the Kabbalah are to be explained by the fact that both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah essentially drew upon the same vein of Merkabah speculation: in other words, the 'Gnostics' did not historically influence the Kabbalah, rather both merely happened to share in the same older influence[588]. Such an assessment of Scholem's position would, however, only be half correct, as in truth it seems to me that his proposed chain of development is in fact closer to method **A**. That is to say that whilst, as we have seen, he hypothesised that Merkabah speculation influenced the development of certain 'Gnostic' ideas, it was *not* these ideas which were transmitted to the Kabbalah; this would of course be unnecessary, because the essential Jewish basis for these ideas already existed within the orthodox tradition, so their adoption from 'Gnostic' circles would be pointless. Rather, Scholem contended that it was precisely those elements in 'Gnostic' thought that were *not* Jewish in origin that were adopted into the oldest strata of the Hekhaloth literature, in the process being 'de-Gnosticised' and instead 'Judaised', thereby making them amenable to orthodox Judaism, with the result that they were preserved in the esoteric literature of Judaism, and eventually transmitted to the Kabbalah[589]. There is, admittedly, a certain advantage in this sphere of inquiry, in that we are to a greater or lesser extent able to readily accept certain elements of historical transmission as highly plausible; which is to say that, as Alexander notes (albeit with a few reasonable

[587] See above, pp.174ff. C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.
[588] C.f. above, pp.179, esp. n.581.
[589] See, for example, G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.41-48, 68-96, 119-123, 193f; Idem., *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.32-44, 50f., 65-74. C.f. N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.6-12, 15-17; M. Idel, 'Hadash Asur Min Ha-Torah', *Zion* 54 (1989), pp.223-40.

caveats), the relative chronological and geographical proximity between our 'Gnostics' and those Jewish speculative traditions which we have already seen to be likely to have fed into the Hekhaloth literature makes the possibility of historical transmission between the two quite possible, thus placing us already on a surer footing than with an examination of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic historical transmission[590]. To be sure, we have already expressed scepticism regarding the historical possibility of 'Gnostic' ideas being transmitted to the Merkabah-Hekhaloth tradition, but this objection must of course be set aside briefly, since were one to identify a non-Jewish 'Gnostic' idea within the Hekhaloth literature, then one would of course have to re-evaluate this sceptical position. In the first instance, therefore, let us here examine the outworking of Scholem's position on a phenomenological basis, in order to ascertain whether the parallels he adduces are similar enough as to justify a modification of this scepticism. This we shall do through the illustrative examination of two examples, each of which represents to Scholem a different stream: the speculation of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, which to Scholem reflects an orthodox Merkabah tradition utilised by the 'Gnostics', and the Plērōma, which he sees as a thoroughly non-Jewish conception evident in the 'Gnostic' literature, which is conveyed to the Hekhaloth, 'Judaised', and from there transmitted to the Kabbalah.

In the first instance, as we have already seen Scholem draws attention to the speculations of the 'Valentinian' Markos, recorded in Irenaeus *Haer.* I.14-16, and the potential parallels of Markos's speculations on the divine form to the *Shi'ur Qomah*[591]. Of particular interest here though is the fact that, as we previously saw, Scholem eventually concludes in his later work that the likely chain of transmission ran *from* the *Shi'ur Qomah*, and that the evidence of Markos thus represents a 'Gnostic' adoption of Merkabah-Hekhaloth thought. Whilst, on the basis of our preceding discussions, there seems little reason to doubt a transmission in this direction, I admittedly retain some scepticism, as per our established methodology, regarding the potential for drawing such a conclusion on the basis of this evidence. Firstly, as Stroumsa highlights, it must be noted that speculation on the bodily form(s) of the divine was particularly ubiquitous in Antiquity, although to be sure the system of Markos arguably

[590] P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.

[591] See above, pp.47f., 179. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.36-42; Idem. *Major Trends* (1961),p.65 and *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (1991), pp.34f. The parallel was of course first noted by Moses Gaster, ['Das Shiur Komah', *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* XXXVII (1893), pp.179-185] and has to a greater or lesser extent been supported by most subsequent scholars. C.f. the brief survey in N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.90-94. See also G.G. Stroumsa, ''Form(s) of God' (1983), pp.269-88.

presents by far the closest parallel to the *Shi'ur Qomah*[592]. It should, however, be stressed that the closeness of this parallel remains only a relative one; in particular, the obvious fact that Markos's speculations are built around Greek letters would suggest that his system was originally composed in Greek, and thus perhaps at best presents only potential evidence of a usage of the *concept* of the *Shi'ur Qomah*, rather than any source dependence; by contrast, let us recall the evidence set out on p.163, above, where the Aramaic and/or Hebrew origins of certain elements in the Nag Hammadi texts are still evident, even in spite of these texts being Coptic translations of Greek originals[593]. Finally, it is also worth observing that this evidence is preserved only in secondary heresiology, and only in relation to one specific figure, Markos; if we also recall our earlier conclusions regarding the likely individualised nature of the thought of most 'Valentinian' figures, then we may well wish to be wary about inferring too much regarding the general schema of 'Gnostic' interaction with the Merkabah-Hekhaloth speculations on the basis of this one example[594].

The above being said, however, I should not of course wish to necessarily dismiss the possibility of a relationship between *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation and Markos; rather, I prefer to reserve judgement on this matter since, for the purposes of our thesis, it arguably becomes rather irrelevant. That is to say that even if Markos were shown to have been directly influenced by the *Shi'ur Qomah*, such an observation would, given the focus of this thesis, ultimately stand as little more than *another* example of the 'Jewish' background of 'Gnostic' speculations, such as we have previously outlined in this chapter, an observation which thus still conforms with method **C**, and does not therefore suggest anything in conflict with our position up to this point, *viz.* that the direction of influence only ever flowed *from* Jewish speculative thought *to* the 'Gnostics'. As such, therefore, of far greater interest to us here is Scholem's suggestion that the throne world of the Hekhaloth literature, which is eventually conveyed to the Kabbalah, in fact represents a 'Judaising' of the originally non-Jewish 'Gnostic' concept of the Plērōma[595]. Unfortunately, however, Scholem's view on this point cannot, it seems to me, be acclaimed as convincing: in the first place, as we have already

[592] G.G. Stroumsa, 'Form(s) of God' (1983), pp.269-88.
[593] See especially Irenaeus, *Haer.*, I.14.2-9. Interestingly, Scholem [*Origins* (1990), pp.28-32] also attempts to link Neo-Pythagorean thought to later speculations concerning the *Sefirot*. Arguably, however, this hypothesis of Scholem's is, on the basis of the evidence he presents, scarcely more definite than his arguments regarding 'Gnostic' influence; furthermore, he in any case still suspects the presence of 'Jewish' thought *behind* these Neo-Pythagorean conceptions. C.f. P. Kingsley, *op. cit.*, pp.317-334. See also below, pp.195, n.625.
[594] See above, pp.28ff.
[595] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.22f, 68f; *Major Trends* (1961), pp.43f, 73-75.

noted, there exists always the difficulty with such a hypothesis of explaining *why* an essentially 'orthodox' Jewish tradition would adopt an essentially 'alien' concept; we have repeatedly stressed that such a direction of transmission emerges as far less plausible than any 'Gnostic' adoption of 'Jewish' elements. Furthermore, as Deutsch rightly notes, Scholem's parallel constructions of the throne world and the Plērōma is at least in part inaccurately based on his identification of not only aeons, but also archons, as residing in the heavenly Plērōma; this is of course a fundamentally un-'Gnostic' conception (so to speak), as in general in 'Gnostic' theosophies the archons are at least somewhat malevolent, and exist both below, and in opposition to, the world of the Plērōma[596]. To be sure, Scholem is right in observing that both the Plērōma and the throne world of the Merkabah represent a higher divine world, populated by a number of entities, but such is scarcely an unubiquitous concept[597]. Moreover, it is worth noting that whereas the divine worlds of the 'Gnostic' systems are generally populated by abstract entities, a conception which *perhaps* owes something to Platonic and Middle-Platonic thought, the Merkabah-Hekhaloth traditions are evidently far more influenced by 'royal' imagery (as indicated by the very terminology of 'thrones' and 'palaces'), and potentially reflect more the idea of a divine court[598]. Indeed, as we have already noted, it is surely far more plausible to see the throne world of the Merkabah as developed from intra-Jewish speculation on Ezekiel 1, than as a 'Judaisation' of an essentially 'alien' Plērōma; we might also recall here our earlier observations regarding the likely indebtedness of passages from *Orig. W.* to Ezekiel 1, or a related speculative tradition[599]. That the heavenly world depicted in these particular passages corresponds far more closely to the Merkabah throne world than does the more common 'Gnostic' motif of the Plērōma must again suggest, as we noted above, that the probable direction of influence ran in the opposite direction to that which Scholem proposed[600]. Thus, as Deutsch rightly concludes, whilst the Plērōma of various 'Gnostic' thought streams and the throne world of

[596] N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.68-75. C.f. G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.44. Arguably, Scholem also makes a similar error in his treatment of the *Bahir*, when he links this text with 'Gnostic' sources partly by translating the heavenly שׂרים in the *Bahir* as 'archons'. C.f. pp.64ff., above, and pp.189f., below.

[597] See especially our observations on pp.87f. above, and c.f. J. Z. Smith, 'Here, There' (2004), pp.323-339. C.f. also M. Idel, 'The Problem of the Sources of the Bahir', in J. Dan (ed.), *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe* [= Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought VI, 3-4] (Jerusalem: The Jewish National and University Library, 1987), pp.55-72, on the interesting idea that the origin of the Plērōma may in fact lie in *Shi'ur Qomah* usage of המלא.

[598] C.f. B.A. Pearson, 'Gnosticism as Platonism' (2006), pp.148-164; P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18.

[599] See above, pp.171ff.

[600] As Deutsch [*op. cit.*, p.73] succinctly summarises it, "these Gnostic passages are heavily indebted to traditional Merkabah imagery. So much so, that if they were severed from their Gnostic context, they would read very much like 'orthodox' Merkabah descriptions".

the Merkabah-Hekhaloth texts do both "represent the divine realm...[, t]heir extremely different natures and origins, however, make this general parallel much less significant than Scholem proposed"[601]. Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting here that the evidence hitherto examined arguably demonstrates that once the 'Gnostic' thought streams had decisively separated from their 'Jewish' origins it seems highly unlikely that they then subsequently developed a level of rapprochement (so to speak) with Judaism, such as would permit the *direct* influence of uniquely 'Gnostic' concepts upon the parent religion. Rather, as we have seen, the chain of influence seems to generally flow solely in the one direction, and such influence as the 'Gnostics' *might* have had upon orthodox forms of Judaism can be properly spoken of only in a negative conception, insofar as orthodox Jews *may* have deliberately reacted against contemporary 'Gnostics'[602].

In light of the above discussions then, it seems to me that two conclusions can, with a reasonable degree of certainty be drawn. Firstly, although we might wish to leave open the question of whether Markos did in fact draw upon elements of *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation, we can still reasonably conclude, on the basis of the entirety of our observations in this chapter, that the likelihood of a variety of Jewish and Judaic elements being adopted and utilised by 'Gnostics' remains high, and that in fact it may even be plausible to suppose that it was certain of these Jewish speculative traditions, especially those which could potentially have developed towards a demiurgical 'dualism', which provided the original impulse and point of origin for the development of the 'Gnostic' systems[603]. For the purposes of our primary aim in this thesis, however, this observation must unfortunately largely remain irrelevant. Since, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, an intra-Jewish chain of transmission seems the most plausible (or indeed perhaps the *only* plausible) conduit for these second century motifs to have been conducted to the medieval Kabbalah, then regardless of whether or not certain

[601] N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, p.72.
[602] C.f., for example, R. Gershenzon and E. Slomovic, *op. cit.*, pp.1-41. This is not the place to delve into the contentious textual and hermeneutical debates regarding the *birkat ha-minim*, but see W. Horbury, 'The Benediction of the Minim' (1982), pp.19-61, for a balanced assessment of the relevant evidence. An obvious analogy to our situation here is, of course, the parallel development of early 'orthodox' Christianity which, following its separation from the parent religion, does not appear to have directly influenced Jewish thought or practice: rather its influence is felt only in oppositional or reactionary forms. C.f. G. Strecker ,'Jewish Christianity' (1972), pp.241-285; J.E. Taylor, 'Early Jewish-Christianity' (1990), pp.313-334. See also F. Talmage, 'Hebrew Polemical Treatise' (1967), pp.323-348, on the continuance of this situation into the medieval era. Indeed, probably the most prominent instance of direct Christian influence upon Judaism of which I am aware would be the developments of reformist Jews in the Enlightenment, specifically the gradual codification of the rabbinate into an ordained order akin to the priesthood, and the increasing introduction of homiletic preaching into synagogue services.
[603] See above, pp.172ff.

ideas were developed beyond the bounds of acceptable Jewish orthodoxy into 'Gnostic' heresy, what is strictly relevant to our inquiry is only the existence of such elements *within* this Jewish tradition, as only motifs contained within the orthodox boundaries could plausibly have been transmitted by that route to the Kabbalah. Unfortunately then, as we have seen *pace* Scholem, the most reasonable position still seems to be one of scepticism regarding the possibility that the ideas of noticeably heretical 'Gnostic' systems would have been adopted into an orthodox vein of Jewish speculation. We have noted that the phenomenological methodology by which Scholem adduces the presence of non-Jewish 'Gnostic' thought within the Hekhaloth evidence does not generally, in context, produce a close enough parallel to override this sceptical position, nor does the evidence which we have previously adduced give any indication that the adoption of 'Gnostic' ideas into the Merkabah-Hekhaloth tradition would have been likely[604]. It seems, therefore, that the most logical explanation for 'Gnostic'-Merkabah-Hekhaloth filiation thus remains as method **C** (of course taken in conjunction with the diagrammatic argument on p.170). That is to say that although the 'Gnostics' may well have emerged from a background of Judaic speculation, it seems highly unlikely then that any unique element of their systems subsequently re-entered that tradition.

As a final point in this chapter then, I should now like to briefly consider the possibility that the Hekhaloth texts might form a secure historical chain of transmission to the Kabbalah. Of course, for the purpose of our argument this question now becomes largely incidental, since if 'Gnostic' ideas were not, as we have seen, likely to have been present in the Hekhaloth literature, then the question of whether or not it was transmitted to the Kabbalah can prove little in relation to the matter of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation. Nonetheless, it is still perhaps worth briefly considering the issue, if only for the sake of completeness regarding the picture which we have hitherto drawn.

Now, it must of course be stated at the outset that extant evidence for the transmission of such speculative ideas between the Hekhaloth literature and the *Bahir* is generally lacking; although Scholem remained convinced of the transmission of such material, it must be admitted that he never gave a particularly comprehensive account of precisely *how* such a

[604] See above, pp.178ff.

transmission was enacted[605]. As Scholem notes, the majority of the extant Hekhaloth texts are relatively recent re-discoveries, and the history of their transmission between the fifth and sixth centuries (when most of them were probably redacted into their current form) and the late Middle Ages (from when our current manuscripts largely originate) is quite unclear[606]. We have already noted that some references to 'mystic' speculation are preserved in the Talmud, but as we observed, these references are generally by their nature quite oblique, and do not usually preserve any specific details of 'mystic' motifs[607]. In a similar vein it is also worth highlighting, as Scholem does, a certain reticence within the Hekhaloth literature regarding the possibility of its widespread dissemination; rather, the texts often seem to envisage a certain esoteric concealment, so that the speculation contained within is revealed only to the worthy elite[608]. It is of course noticeable that this attitude corresponds somewhat with the earlier mentioned rabbinic injunctions against the widespread teaching of the Merkabah. To be sure, Scholem claims to locate hymnic material from the *Greater Hekhaloth* within the Talmud, and further locates references and allusions to Merkabah speculation within certain passages of the aggadic literature (albeit these often require a certain amount of interpretation to reveal, and are generally quite rare)[609]. Unfortunately, however, it must ultimately be conceded that these few scant potential traces of speculative traditions, which generally do not seem to contain any of the motifs especially familiar to us from the *Bahir*, cannot really serve to *prove* the continual transmission of the Hekhaloth speculations up to the Kabbalah. Similarly, although Scholem's reconstruction of the *Raza Rabba* is certainly compelling, being a purported 'Jewish Gnostic' document (as Scholem puts it) which transmitted Merkabah traditions to the German Ḥasidim, and from there to the Kabbalah, it must of course regrettably be noted that as with any reconstructed document, compiled from potential references to it from both during and after the suggested time period in which it transmitted these speculative ideas, the results cannot but remain hypothetical, for

[605] It is of course possible, technically speaking, that such material might have been preserved between the Hekhaloth literature and the *Bahir* within esoteric circles, perhaps maintaining an oral tradition. Unfortunately, however, we do not by definition possess any extant evidence for such an oral tradition. C.f. M. Idel, 'Hadash Asur Min Ha-Torah', *Zion* 54 (1989), pp.223-40; N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.4-17.

[606] G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.5-8; Idem., *Major Trends* (1961), pp.43-48. C.f. also Hugo Odeberg's commentary on his edition of *3 Enoch* (1928).

[607] See above, pp.172ff. C.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Hebrew Book of Enoch' (1977), pp.156-180, on the potential continuum between Hekhaloth speculation and Talmudic esoteric traditions, most especially as preserved in *b.Ḥagigah*.

[608] G. Scholem, *Major Trends* (1961), p.48. See also the thirteenth chapter of the *Greater Hekhaloth*, (רבתי היכלות) which lists "eight moral requisites of initiation" required before one is permitted knowledge of the Hekhaloth traditions.

[609] G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.20-30, 56-64; Idem., *Major Trends* (1961), pp.70-74. C.f. N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.6-10.

want of extant evidence for the actual contents of the text, and cannot thus really be used to again *prove* anything regarding historical transmission[610].

The above being said, however, I admit that it does not seem to me unlikely that elements of the Merkabah-Hekhaloth traditions were in fact transmitted to the *Bahir*; to be sure, as per our methodology we cannot substantially and definitely prove such a contention, but certain factors do seem to suggest this possibility. Firstly, unlike the difficulty which a hypothesis of 'Gnostic' dependence engenders, there is no need to explain *why* the Kabbalists would have adopted these traditions: rather than the noticeably heretical ideas of 'Gnostic' systems, as we have seen the Merkabah-Hekhaloth speculation remained rigorously orthodox, and indeed thus, as an intra-Jewish, essentially extra-biblical tradition, sits perfectly with the concept of קבלה, which is to say 'reception' of an older learning[611]. Secondly, as we have repeatedly noted, the *Bahir* does after all emerge as a stratified composite document, which clearly contains some older elements (such as the ideas of the *Sefer Yetzirah*)[612]. It scarcely then seems implausible that this work could also encompass motifs and ideas from another Jewish tradition, namely that of the Hekhaloth literature. Furthermore, as we have already observed, much of the *Bahir*'s speculation, especially concerning the enumeration and role of the *middoth*, bears a certain resemblance to *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation, albeit perhaps a *Shi'ur Qomah* system which has been combined with the cosmological thought and the *Sefirot* of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a hypothesis which, as we have seen, does not seem implausible in the context either of the *Bahir*, or the literary reception history of *Yetzirah*[613]. Again, the fact that we are dealing here with solely intra-Jewish traditions and speculations must surely increase the plausibility of reliable correspondences between them. Finally, we might also note as we have previously done the occurrence of 'royal' language, metaphors, and imagery in both the Hekhaloth literature and the *Bahir*[614]. In this context then, we might thus return to our discussion from chapter 4 regarding Scholem's translation of the occurrences of שׂר in the *Bahir*, especially when we consider the frequent adjuration in the Hekhaloth literature of the

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610 G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.48f; Idem., *Origins* (1990), pp.97-123.
611 See above, pp.137f. C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.38.
612 See above, pp.59ff. C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.24-35, 49-68; J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* (1998), pp.ix-xlviii.
613 See above, pp.59f., 71ff. C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.38f.
614 See above, pp.65-72, 185. See also, for example, G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.83-86, 124-126, 145f. on the use in the *Bahir* of מלכים (sections 19, 32, and 49) and כתרים (sections 23 and 101), and of course recall that the highest *sefirah* becomes identified as כתר. The usage of such language in the Hekhaloth (i.e. 'palaces') literature need hardly be stressed, although c.f. P.S. Alexander, 'Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism' (1984), pp.1-18, on the potential 'royal' models behind Merkabah speculation.

figure שׂר תורה, a term which in the context of the texts seems clearly to be best translated as 'Prince of the Torah'[615]. Now, if we recall our earlier observation that Scholem's translation of שׂרים in the *Bahir* as 'archons' suggests, perhaps somewhat artificially, a connection between that text and the 'Gnostics', might we not therefore suggest that a translation of 'princes' would instead suggest a far closer connection between the *Bahir* and the Merkabah-Hekhaloth traditions? In the context of the above arguments then, might not this latter translation, and all that it implies, potentially seem a slightly more accurate rendering of the *Bahir*'s שׂרים?

Conclusion

> "[The thesis that the *Bahir* was *not* historically related to the earlier 'Gnostics'] can be proved wrong by the demonstration that there is a connection between the text of the *Bahir* concerning the subjects mentioned [in the preceding discussion] as "gnostic" and either non-Jewish gnostic sources or esoteric, hidden ones of "Jewish gnosticism." This has not happened as yet; until it does the conclusion should stand: The new terminology and the novel concept of the divine world presented in the *Bahir* are the result of a reworking of ancient Jewish sources, to which the mystic author of the *Bahir* added his own inspiration, his own visions, which he presented in the unique exegetical format he chose for this treatise."
>
> Joseph Dan[616]

We can see then that, at least on a surface level, our conclusions generally agree with the rather pessimistic outlook of Joseph Dan regarding the potential for 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation, at least insofar as the conclusion is shared that in the absence of extant source evidence to *prove* a historical connection betwixt the two, one cannot therefore reasonably state with any certainty that the earlier thought stream(s) held any historical relation to the latter. That being said, however, as we have seen in this chapter a slightly more optimistic picture than the one Dan presents may arguably with some justification be constructed. To be sure, Dan rightly notes the unscientific nature, insofar as the hypothesis can be neither proven nor disproven, of appeals to a potential stream of oral tradition but, as we have noted, it must surely be admitted that such a stream, existing within an intra-Jewish environment, is at least *plausible*[617]. As we have seen, the *Bahir* seems a somewhat stratified document, most likely containing elements of older sources, and it should be noted that Dan does not disagree with this conclusion *per se*; indeed, he notes both the textual influence of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and

[615] See above, pp.64ff. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism* (1965), pp.12f. C.f. N. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp.22f., 57.
[616] *Jewish Mysticism* (1998), p.xlvii.
[617] *Ibid.*, pp.xlv-xlviii. C.f. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.38-45.

the Hekhaloth literature upon the *Bahir*, and also highlights the possible influence of the eighth century form of the *Pirkey de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which may in itself preserve elements of older traditions[618]. Although, as we have highlighted, there still remain large gaps in any potential chain of transmission from older sources to the *Bahir*, and thus as we have noted, we cannot as such, due to our lack of evidence, *prove* the descent of any older traditions to the *Bahir*, we can perhaps, in the context of an intra-Jewish situation, with good reason *suspect* the preservation and transmission of such traditions. Indeed, although whilst in reference to the potential older elements in the *Pirkey* Dan states that "[t]he unusual historical fact is not the appearance of these concepts in this midrash, *but their long absence from the literature of rabbinic Judaism*", and in spite of his negative conclusions regarding the construction of historical chains without extant evidence, he nonetheless maintains the probable influence of the Hekhaloth literature upon the *Bahir*, a conclusion which, as previously noted, we have little reason to dispute[619]. As we have observed, therefore, in this chapter, whilst a general lack of source evidence prevents us from conclusively tracing elements of the *Bahir* back to the Hekhaloth literature, and from there to Merkabah speculation, nonetheless such a possibility should at the very least be left open. With this conclusion accepted then, we can also observe, *pace* Dan, that a historical genealogical relationship between the second century 'Gnostics' and the earliest Kabbalah *can* be if not proven, at least reasonably suspected.

Ultimately then, whilst in this thesis we on the one hand move away from the perhaps overly negative position of Dan, on the other hand it must be stressed that we do not, however, in so doing approach too closely the arguably overly optimistic position of Scholem. That is to say that although we have in this chapter seen the plausibility (albeit, by the nature of the extant evidence, unproven) of a chain of transmission within an intra-Jewish context, such as allows us to strongly suspect the influence of Merkabah-Hekhaloth traditions (amongst others) on the *Bahir*, to describe this as an instance of genealogical relationship to the 'Gnostics' can be done only in the most literally correct sense of the term, *viz.* that the 'Gnostics' and the *Bahir* can be said to be 'related', but only insofar as they both owe a part of their ultimate origin to a common ancestor of Judaic speculative thought, from which both to some extent descend, and diverge in different directions. Beyond this observation, as we have noted, any further relationship between the two, especially with regard to Scholem's thought that the 'Gnostics'

[618] G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), pp.56-59. C.f. J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* (1998), pp.ix-xlviii, esp. pp.xl-xlv.
[619] *Ibid.*, pp.xliii-xlv. Emphasis added.

may, through the Hekhaloth literature, have *influenced* the *Bahir*, emerges as an hypothesis both beyond proof and beyond plausibility. In his *Origins*, Scholem observed in relation to the *Bahir*, and the 'Gnostic' parallels which he located in the text, that "[i]t is evident that the gnostic material was radically Judaized"[620]. As we have seen, it is surely both far more logical and far more plausible to argue that the material was in fact never anything else but intrinsically Jewish, with a separate existence far removed from its 'Gnostic' adaptations!

620 G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.96.

Chapter 9
The Repetition of Originality: On the 'Independence' of Ideas

The aim of this thesis has of course been the exploration of the potential for a genetic and historical relationship of dependence between the 'Gnostic' thought streams of late Antiquity and the medieval emergence of Kabbalah. In the course of our investigation, we have sought to establish a secure methodological approach for assessing the possibility of such a relationship, and have concluded with, I should hope, a reasonable level of justification, that on the basis of the extant source evidence no such direct historical relationship can be *proven*. Let us again here stress that the primary factor for our scholarly inquiry has been the issue of whether or not such a relationship can be *proven* in a secure way; as we observed in the previous chapter, the possibility of an indirect relationship between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, on the basis of their common dependence on Merkabah speculation, might be considered *plausible*, but we likely cannot responsibly say anymore than that. Indeed, although we argued that the hypothesis that the Kabbalah drew on an oral tradition built upon the Merkabah-Hekhaloth systems is certainly a possible, even perhaps probable explanation for certain instances of correspondence between the *Bahir* and the older sources, we nonetheless noted, in measured agreement with the negative conclusions of Joseph Dan, that the existence of such an oral tradition remains, by its very definition, wholly speculative[621]. Ultimately, therefore, in the last chapter we concluded that whilst neither the existence of a Merkabah-Hekhaloth influence, nor a 'Gnostic' influence upon the book *Bahir* can be evidentially *proven*, such evidence as is currently extant does at least suggest that the former hypothesis remains at least *plausible*, an assessment which we found could likely not be responsibly made in reference to the theory of historical 'Gnostic' influence.

As a result of our preceding analysis, we thus challenged the view espoused by Scholem that the potential correspondences between the 'Gnostic' sources and the *Bahir* were to be explained on both historical and phenomenological grounds[622]. As we have seen throughout this thesis, a reliable methodological approach cannot conclude, on the basis of the source evidence, that such a historical connection emerges as a tenable hypothesis, and indeed such is the primary conclusion of our overall examination of the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation.

[621] C.f. J. Dan, *Jewish Mysticism* (1998), pp.ix-xlviii.
[622] C.f. G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* (1969), pp.97f.

Whilst the above conclusions must necessarily, therefore, form the historical and evidential crux of our analysis, it may however be germane to the discussion to turn briefly in this final section of our argument to certain psychological and phenomenological observations relevant to the question of correspondence between the 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic sources; to be sure, such observations cannot ever *prove* anything, but they may perhaps *suggest* a possible explanation for the occurrence of potentially roughly comparable instances of conceptual similarity between our sources. In particular, the relevance of such an undertaking to our thesis becomes evident when we recall the critique that has frequently been made of Scholem's methodology in our previous discussions, *viz.* that his identification of phenomenological similarities between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah led him to thus hypothesise the existence of a historical connection betwixt the two. As we noted, however, a) such similarities are generally, when taken in context, scarcely exact enough to presuppose such a connection, and b) that the lack of any extant evidence to demonstrate, or even support the possibility of a historical relationship renders such a thesis unverifiable[623]. Having provided such a critique of Scholem's historical approach, therefore, it may thus be worth advancing a certain controlled level of speculation as to how else these conceptual similarities might be explained. Indeed, this point bears repeating, and indeed emphasising, in line with our methodology: such psychological and phenomenological observations as might be made here can, by definition, *only ever be purely hypothetical*, and as constructs which cannot be solidly proven, must necessarily remain mere speculations; although of course they may act in an interlocutory fashion to aid in delineating our argument, we cannot responsibly ever allow them to exercise a determinative role upon our conclusions. To be sure, we have already stressed the inherent dangers of interposing psychological explanations into an historical examination, and thus we aim to approach this discussion with due caution, aiming primarily merely to question rather than to definitively conclude[624].

Now, we have already touched upon this subject several times, in relation to the question of ubiquitous ideas, and the observation that certain overarching motifs occur in a number of different systems, with the result that we cannot therefore reasonably accept the occurrence of a similar motif in two seemingly separate thought streams as verifiable evidence of a

[623] See especially chapters 4 and 8 above. Recall also Scholem's surprising assertion [*On the Kabbalah* (1969), p.97] that "tenuous as the threads connecting the oldest Kabbalistic tradition with gnostic tradition may be, I am convinced that they existed".
[624] See above, pp.90, 132f. C.f. M. Idel, *Kabbalah* (1988), pp.264-267.

historical relation between them[625]. This line of inquiry is perhaps well illustrated with reference to the still relatively small amount of scholarship which has been undertaken regarding the potential comparisons between our ‘Gnostic’ systems and the mythologies of a number of Native American nations. In an intriguing article published in a *Festschrift* for Ugo Bianchi, Åke Hultkrantz examines the potential parallels between the ‘dualist’ systems of several North American mythologies and those of the late Antique ‘Gnostics’, and considers whether such parallels are to be best explained by historical transmission, underlying universal ideas, or independent invention; the relevance of this inquiry to our work is of course obvious, as we similarly have to contend with these various potential explanations for our possible ‘Gnostic’-Kabbalistic similarities[626]. Indeed, Hultkrantz reaches somewhat similar conclusions to those which we have advanced, in the first place noting that the potential conceptual similarities between the systems do not, in context, necessarily seem that exact. A paradigmatic example would be the question of whether, and if so to what extent, the North American trickster figure can be seen as conceptually related to the ‘Gnostic’ Demiurge, a view most recently and provocatively asserted by Ingvild Gilhus[627]. Hultkrantz rightly notes that Gilhus’s positive comparison is highly unconvincing, not least because whilst Gilhus does somewhat address the fact that the conceptions of the two figures and the roles they play in their respective ‘myths’ are vastly different, especially in the context of the differing types of humour and comedic roles which are assigned to them, she does not see this disparity as essentially damaging to her thesis that the two figures are

[625] See above, pp.109ff. In line with this point we might also briefly mention the role of ‘Platonic’ thought. Although, as noted throughout our analysis, the particularly specific and inter-textual focus of our examination has largely required us to somewhat occlude the influence of the numerous strains of Platonism, Middle-Platonism, and Neo-Platonism upon both the ‘Gnostics’ and the Kabbalah (especially post-*Bahir*), it is hopefully all but self-evident that such influence can scarcely be denied. Indeed, Scholem devotes much of the second half of his *Origins* [(1990), p.199ff.] to the influence of Neo-Platonic thought upon the Kabbalah after the *Bahir* (c.f. pp.67f., where he largely dismisses the suggestion of such influence in the *Bahir*). Similarly, whilst the precise extent of ‘Platonic’ influence upon the ‘Gnostic’ sources is still debated, that at least some influence existed is now generally accepted. In this context then, it might be apposite to recall our observation in chapter 5 (pp.88ff., above) that closer structural parallels to the ‘Gnostic’ evidence are to be found in the later Kabbalah than in the *Bahir*. C.f. M.J. Edwards, ‘Neglected Texts’ (1990), pp.26-50; B.A. Pearson, ‘Gnosticism as Platonism’ (2006), pp.148-164; J.D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism* (2001), pp.1-54. See also the observations regarding Neo-Platonism in chapters 1 and 3 above. Ultimately, however, for our purposes the wide, near ubiquitous spread, and great variety of ‘Platonic’ ideas renders them generally unconstructive in an examination of ‘Gnostic’-Kabbalistic filiation.

[626] Å. Hultkrantz, ‘Gnostic Parallels in America?’ (1994), pp.463-478. Bianchi had long noted the potential correspondence between the North American trickster figure and the ‘Gnostic’ Demiurge: see especially those articles collected in his *Selected Essays on Gnosticism* (1978), esp. pp.3-48, 65-74, 75-85, 86-102.

[627] I.S. Gilhus, ‘The Gnostic Demiurge’ (1984), pp.301-311.

basically similar[628]. Moreover, as Hultkrantz highlights, Gilhus is scarcely consistent in her analysis of the trickster, and sometimes obscures or even opposes his dual role as culture hero, likely because such a role could hardly be ascribed to the 'Gnostic' Demiurge; to be sure, the Demiurge does embody the creative aspects of the culture hero role, but unlike in the Native American systems none of his actions can be identified as beneficial for mankind: indeed they are quite deliberately detrimental[629]!

Further examination of this question would, of course, be rather beyond the scope of our examination here, but it does allow us to highlight that although certain *vaguely* similar correspondences can be shown between motifs in North American and 'Gnostic' mythic systems, these parallels are scarcely in detail exact enough to suggest historical relation; a conclusion familiar enough to us from our own preceding analyses[630]. This conclusion is of course sharpened by the greater difficulty in demonstrating the transmission of motifs across geographical and chronological spheres; we have found this hard enough to demonstrate in relation to our sphere of enquiry, so it is hardly surprising that Hultkrantz remains cautiously sceptical regarding the potential transmission of 'Gnostic dualism' to North America. For our purposes, however, the lack of concrete evidence for such a transmission, combined with the relative inexactness of the parallels, must count against such a conclusion; this then leaves us with the possibilities of underlying universal ideas and independent invention[631].

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[628] Oddly, although Gilhus's article seems to highlight the notable differences between the two figures more than it does their (limited, and somewhat vague) similarities, she does not seem to let this analysis damage her hypothesis!

[629] Å. Hultkrantz, 'Gnostic Parallels in America?' (1994), pp.463-478; C.f. Idem., 'Trickster and Culture Hero' (1984), pp.113-126. B.A. Pearson ['California Coyote' (1991), pp.257-263] similarly critiques Gilhus's thesis, noting that she seems to essentially misunderstand the 'Gnostic' Demiurge and his role. Incidentally, Pearson also highlights Gilhus's claim to present a "new perspective" on the Demiurge; she is seemingly unaware of Bianchi's earlier work (see n.626, above). C.f. also C.G. Jung, 'Psychology of the Trickster-Figure' (1968), pp.255-272.

[630] It might also be stressed that the Native American 'dualist' systems are hardly one dogmatic unity, and can vary greatly between different areas. Pearson ['California Coyote' (1991), pp.257-263] notes that one of the most common trickster figures used for comparison with the Demiurge is the 'Coyote' prevalent in the California mythologies; note that 'Coyote' is frequently there portrayed as a creator figure, but one whose creations are sometimes beneficial, sometimes detrimental to mankind, but seldom intentional. C.f. Å. Hultkrantz, 'Trickster and Culture Hero' (1984), pp.113-126. We are thus again warned against the dangers of 'picking and choosing' elements from different systems in order to create conceptual parallels, an analogue perhaps to the tendency which we have frequently observed in Scholem's use of the 'Gnostic' evidence.

[631] Admittedly, Hultkrantz ['Gnostic Parallels in America?' (1994), pp.463-478] does note that the earth-diver myth likely managed to cross the Bering Strait, and that the diffusion of 'Gnostic dualism' eastward across Mongolia to America is thus similarly not impossible; nevertheless, he feels that the time sphere in which this motif would have needed to reach America and spread throughout it makes 'Gnostic' influence unlikely, although he does highlight that there is no consensus view on this point. As noted above, however, I feel the lack of exact parallels counts against such a supposition, or at least against it being verifiable to any reasonable extent.

As regards the concept of underlying universal ideas, Hultkrantz notes that the potentially corresponding "phenomena described may be diagnosed as having grown forth from a pervasive, basic stratum of religious beliefs which may have been universal from the very religious beginning of mankind"; as he rightly highlights, however, the nature of such a thesis makes it a "difficult, indeed, impossible problem to penetrate"[632]. To be sure, although Hultkrantz largely advocates a conclusion of independent invention to explain the majority of the parallels which he adduces (on which more shall be said presently), he nonetheless cautiously accepts the proposal that the basic idea of 'dualism' may represent an "archaic residue" of an underlying universal concept[633]. Whilst we should not, perhaps, necessarily dismiss such an hypothesis, neither for our purposes can we really in any substantial way acclaim it; that is to say that the inherently unverifiable, and arguably reductionist approach of any thesis built upon a concept of proposed basic universal concepts ultimately requires us to largely exclude it from our primarily evidential approach: whilst we cannot, by definition, ever truly disprove such an argument, neither can we reasonably prove it, and thus it seems most logical to at least strongly temper its influence upon our analysis[634]. We might briefly elucidate this point by reference to perhaps the paradigmatic formulation of the thesis, namely the concept of Jungian archetypes within the collective unconscious. As Carl Jung argued, since, in his opinion, "all mythical figures correspond to inner psychic experiences and originally sprang from them", one should therefore expect to encounter similar motifs in a number of different systems (which need not necessarily be solely 'mythological'), as each occurrence of a motif ultimately represents the outworking of a primal psychological impulse, expressible on a deep level as an archetype, a facet of the collective unconscious thus common to all humanity, and developed into a symbolic motif at a level closer to the surface, informed by the individual's paradigm or world view[635]. Although intriguing, as we have noted this line of argumentation cannot generally be allowed to influence our analysis, as it remains essentially speculative, by reason of its unverifiable nature; moreover, we might further add that such a theory, in the same way as most structuralist arguments, notably runs the risk of being overly reductionist. That is to say that such an approach necessarily requires

[632] Å. Hultkrantz, 'Gnostic Parallels in America?' (1994), pp.463-478. C.f. M. Eliade, 'Prolegomenon to Religious Dualism' (1969), pp.127-175.
[633] Å. Hultkrantz, 'Gnostic Parallels in America?' (1994), pp.463-478.
[634] Recall that we have already noted (pp.98ff., 122, above) similar positions both in relation to the widespread concept of the primordial man, and the potential application of syntagmatic structuralist methods. C.f. E. Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, (2005), pp.189-211; M.J. Edwards, 'Hebraism, Hellenism' (2001), pp.222-226.
[635] C.G. Jung, 'Psychology of the Trickster-Figure' (1968), pp.255-272. See further Idem., 'Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious' (1968), pp.3-41; 'The Concept of the Collective Unconscious' (1968), pp.42-53.

the separation of each motif from its individual characteristics, in order to locate the basic archetype: to phrase it in more Jungian terms, in order to identify the deep level archetype, it is necessary to divest each symbol of its expression in the symbol world closer to the surface, as this represents the interpretation of the primal impulse, and its rendering into a form more acceptable to the individual conscious[636]. Of course, a more critical way of phrasing this statement would be to say that by stripping each motif of both its context and its individual aspects, diverse motifs can then be seen to be equatable once they have been shorn of all but the one element which they share. Thus, for example, Jung identifies the feminine archetype of the *anima* as the underlying basis for such diverse figures as the nixie and mermaid of folktale, the goddess of mythological systems in Antiquity, the biblical Eve, the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic devotion, and the medieval man's conception of Mother Church[637]! Admittedly, Jungian psychology does perhaps represent somewhat of an extreme form of the argument for underlying universal ideas, but for our purposes it serves to well illustrate the dangers of applying a similarly unverifiable and potentially reductionist methodology to our thesis. Unfortunately, it would be somewhat beyond our scope here to explore further the implications of such approaches, but it is perhaps to be hoped that the preceding discussion has provided some justification for our general exclusion of this argument from our evidential methodology[638]. This conclusion might then also be further supported by reference to our third potential explanation, that of independent invention.

Now, we have already posited something of this idea in chapter 5 both in relation to the correspondences between numerous different systems regarding the composition of the primordial man, and the ubiquity of the number seven in numerological speculations[639]. Applying, in a sense, the principle of Occam's razor, it arguably seems more reasonable to propose that rather than advocate the existence of unproven historical connections between various thought streams, the presence of a hypothetical *Urmyth*, or a common psychological root of universal ideas, the most straightforward explanation might be to view these

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[636] C.f. C.G. Jung, 'Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious' (1968), pp.3-41. That is not, however, to say that Jung necessarily advocated too great an encounter with the archetypes; man after all constructed the symbols of the conscious as a wall against the unrestrained impulse of the archetypes. Thus, according to Jung, the rise in modern mental illness, western adoption of eastern religions, and even the advent of Fascism can all be blamed, at least indirectly, on Protestantism and the Reformation, as their "chronic iconoclasm" destroyed the existing symbols, and left mankind either desperate to locate new symbols, or else falling prey to unrestrained encounters with the archetypes!
[637] C.G. Jung, 'Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious' (1968), pp.3-41.
[638] C.f. also M.J. Edwards, 'Vessel of Zosimus' (1992), pp.55–64.
[639] See above, pp.100f., 109-111.

similarities as simply the result of an obvious internal logical development. That is to say that, as we saw in chapter 5, the reason for the widespread equation of the primordial man's blood with a liquid element of creation, such as water or the sea, might be best explained by the simple observation that it would be a somewhat surreal culture which saw a natural similarity between an assuredly liquid element of the primordial man and a determinedly solid aspect of creation: instead the most obvious pattern, and one which we find repeated across cultures, quite logically equates the primordial blood with water, bone with stone, and breath with wind[640]. In the same way, as we also noted above, the prevalence of the number seven is probably best explained by the fact that many of the cultures we are dealing with knew of only seven planets, making seven an obvious numerological choice. Similarly, as we observed in chapter 8, a likely motivation for the development of the 'dualist' impulse in 'Jewish' thought lay in the elevation of the divine to a transcendent sphere, and thus the need to fill the resultant space with intermediary figures: the danger of course being that if the status of one of these figures were to be too exalted, it could lead to a 'dualist' conclusion, as indeed we saw in relation to the figure of Metatron and the apostasy of Aḥer[641]. Further, it is worth noting that a monotheistic system which acclaims the divine as omnipotent and benevolent (such as was the case in the 'Jewish' circles out of which, as we have seen, both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah likely emerged) necessarily faces the paradox of theodicy: the 'dualist' ascription of the origin of evil to one of these originally intermediary powers arguably provides a resolution to this problem[642]. To be sure if, as we have argued, both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah had strong origins in 'Jewish' thought, then it is perhaps not unremarkable that the systems of both serve to resolve the classic monotheistic paradoxes of the transcendent creator and theodicy: as we have seen throughout this thesis, in each case the paradoxes are settled by essentially transferring the prime creative impulse and the origin of evil to intermediary figures. In the various 'Gnostic' systems, these figures are Sophia, the Demiurge, and the archons, all of whom are below the transcendent divinity; in the Kabbalah, they are the *Sefirot*, the aspects of the divine below the infinite *Eyn Sof*[643]. Of course, as we

[640] See above, p.100 To be sure, there do exist exceptions to this pattern, such as the Japanese Shintō creation myth, in which the two creator-*kami* stir the primordial liquid of the earth with a spear; when they lift the spear out of the liquid, the droplets that fall solidify and become islands. Yet it is notable that this account still presents an observable internal logic: the image of land as solidified drops of liquid is arguably one that naturally presents itself in Japan, the country being an archipelago of islands in the midst of a vast sea. C.f. M. Ashkenazi, *Japanese Mythology* (2003), pp.76f.
[641] See above, pp.172ff.
[642] C.f. above, pp.72ff., and also G.G. Stroumsa's observation ['Aḥer' (1981), pp.808-818] that it was likely in grappling with the question *unde malum* that Aḥer developed towards heresy.
[643] C.f. above, pp.4f., 46f., 68ff.

have repeatedly stressed, the major differences between the forms in which these figures are portrayed counts against any historical relationship (or even, arguably, shared archetypal psychic origin), but it does not seem too unreasonable to suggest that the basic logical impulse behind all these systems is the same, namely the resolution of the dual paradoxes of an exalted monotheism[644]. The key difference is, of course, that whilst (as we argued in the previous chapter) the 'Gnostics' essentially pushed the intermediary figures into a fully 'dualist' conception, thereby abrogating monotheism and straying beyond the bounds of acceptable normative Judaism, the Kabbalah, although in some formulations straying close to heresy, ultimately refrained from taking the final 'dualistic' step, as it were, and continued to acclaim the intermediary *Sefirot* as still existent within and of God, thus preserving the monotheistic concept, and remaining within the boundaries of normative Judaism[645].

In fact, we might perhaps press this hypothesis a little more, and question the potential reasons as to *why* the Kabbalah emerged when and where it did. As we have already noted, Scholem plausibly suggests that the *zeitgeist* of the twelfth century Occident (which also included the 'Cathars' and the German Ḥasidim) may well have been conducive to the emergence of the Kabbalah[646]. We might then build upon our observations from the previous chapter that the elevation of the divine and the introduction of numerous intermediary figures in the Enochian and Merkabah speculations potentially created a situation for the genesis of the 'Gnostic' systems, the 'dualist' impulse developing these speculations towards the solution of the monotheistic paradoxes[647]. As we saw, however, a growing reticence within orthodox Judaism towards such intermediary figures likely led to a diminishing of such speculation (as we observed in the redacting of *3 Enoch* and the Talmudic cautions), and this perhaps potentially suggests why the concepts of Merkabah-Hekhaloth thought became less prominent, possibly continuing only within oral tradition[648]. Let us again here stress that this construction is merely, and in the absence of evidence can only ever be, purely hypothetical,

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[644] It might be noted that the 'Cathars' also espoused a similar 'dualist' resolution of the paradoxes, most especially in the 'moderate dualist' conception of the role of Satan. See above, pp.115ff. As regards more 'orthodox' Christian approaches to the paradoxes, it is for Trinitarian theologians to discuss the extent to which the role of Christ in the divine economy can be seen as a resolution of the transcendent creator problem effected by transferring the work of creation to an intermediary figure...
[645] C.f. above, pp.46f.
[646] See above, pp.113f.
[647] See above, pp.171ff.
[648] See above, pp.172-174. One might also add to this that the rise of Christianity and its separation from Judaism may potentially have also served to discourage intra-Jewish speculation regarding intermediary powers. To a Jew in this time period, the figure of Christ may well have appeared rather like a 'second power in heaven'. C.f. F. Talmage, 'Hebrew Polemical Treatise' (1967), pp.323-348.

but as we previously noted it is at least perhaps plausible. We might then suggest that the development of medieval Jewish philosophy within the abovementioned *zeitgeist* might have provided the situation for these speculations to again rise to prominence in the form of the Kabbalah. To expand this point, the interconnectedness of medieval philosophy and the Kabbalah has been frequently remarked upon, especially insofar as it is proposed that the latter grew in response to the depersonalisation of the divine engendered by the former[649]. Of course, we should be careful not to overstate this point regarding the reaction between these two trends; Scholem rightly notes the absence in much Kabbalistic literature of either anti-philosophic polemic, or indeed any real acknowledgment of the philosophical debates, suggesting that the emergence of the Kabbalah was less a conscious opposition to Jewish philosophy, but rather a resurgence of an older 'mystical' tradition, brought to the fore by the speculations of twelfth century Occidental Judaism[650]. To put it another way, the philosophic depersonalisation of God arguably served to elevate the divine to a transcendent state, which thus required the presence of intermediary conceptions to fill the resultant space, and effect the immanent aspects of the divinity; thus, just as Merkabah speculation once performed this function at the turn of the millennium, so too did it again do so in the twelfth century, albeit in a new form, developed into the Kabbalah.

Conclusion

In closing then, let us once again heavily stress that the above narrative is purely speculative, and should therefore have no major determinative influence upon the conclusions of this thesis, which is centrally grounded on an evidential methodology. Rather, this hypothesis is offered merely as a more possible alternative to the thesis of direct 'Gnostic' influence upon the Kabbalah. Although our strict evidential approach must (as we saw in the preceding chapter) force us to conclude, on the basis of available evidence, that whilst the *Bahir* likely contains older sources, we cannot reliably trace them back particularly far, and that essentially the similarities between the 'Gnostics' and the *Bahir* (which as we have seen are generally little more than surface deep) are to be explained merely by chance, it is hoped that in this chapter we have at least suggested a perhaps plausible account of the reasons for the *prima facie* correspondences between them. The similarities are thus arguably not to be

[649] See, for example, G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* (1969), p.52f, 60-64, 88-90, 99f; Idem., *Origins* (1990), pp.57-59, 66-68; D. Ariel, *Kabbalah* (2006), pp.41f, 56-58, 96-100.

[650] E.g. G. Scholem, *Origins* (1990), p.68. C.f. pp.14ff., above. See also M. Idel, 'Particularism and Universalism' (1992), pp.324-344, on the relative absence in the early Kabbalah of anti-philosophic attitudes, in contrast to the greater prevalence of such concepts amongst the later Kabbalists.

explained by an unproven direct historical descent, nor by a universal consciousness, but rather as a result of independent invention, but in response to similar problems; the history of philosophy and world religions arguably suggests that there are only so many ways to solve the paradoxes of dual transcendence and immanence and of theodicy, so it is perhaps not so surprising that both the 'Gnostics' and the early Kabbalists reached mildly similar conclusions. Indeed, this supposition seems all the more plausible when we recall that in both cases they were working with the same sources and religious paradigms, most especially the Old Testament scripture, and extra-canonical and (potentially) Merkabah traditions: if tackling the same problems within initially similar thought streams, that similar answers are reached would seem a reasonable outcome. The deeper differences between the two are likewise arguably explicable by the very fact that they emerged in different times and in different places, and developed their paradox resolutions to different levels: again, most notably, the 'Gnostics' were seemingly willing to push their speculation into the realms of 'dualism', and thus beyond the sphere of Abrahamic monotheism; by contrast, the early Kabbalists were evidently unwilling to make such a severe break with Judaism, and instead (potentially with the aid of the natural philosophy of the *Sefer Yetzirah*), succeeded in incorporating the Merkabah-Hekhaloth traditions into a more 'mystic' formulation of the divine, that was to a greater or lesser extent acceptable within the normative Judaism of the time.

How precisely this conclusion matches the true picture of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation we cannot, given the available evidence, really say, and barring the emergence of further sources, we can probably never know; it does, however, seem to me to be an account that, although speculative, emerges as more plausible than the narrative which Scholem advances, and perhaps slightly more cautiously optimistic than the somewhat nihilistic position of Dan[651]. To posit independent development of ideas on the basis of shared sources, shared intellectual quandaries, and a shared internal sense of logic does not therefore seem to me to be a wholly unreasonable hypothesis; without relying on either direct historical dependence or archetypal ideas, we may simply suggest that roughly similar people in roughly similar ideological contexts will likely independently produce roughly similar ideas. I have thus named this final chapter, and indeed this entire thesis, *The Repetition of Originality,* as whilst we may correctly argue that the earliest Kabbalah, as expounded and redacted in the *Bahir* was quite

[651] C.f. above, pp.190ff.

probably a genuinely original construct of its author(s), and so too were the 'Gnostic' systems, insofar as the circumstances of their proponents repeated each other, so too did the independently original content of their ideas. Jung observed that "there is not a single important idea or view that does not possess historical antecedents"; although, as previously noted, we cannot really agree with his archetypal rationale for this statement, as we have seen throughout this thesis we can at least agree with the statement itself, so long as we remain mindful of the fact that a historical antecedent need not necessarily imply a historical debt[652]. To be capable of independent thought is, after all, to be capable of independently reaching similar conclusions to another.

> "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun."
>
> Ecclesiastes 1:9 (*RSV*)

[652] C.G. Jung, 'Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious' (1968), p.33.

Coda

In closing then, let us here briefly summarise the primary areas of examination upon which we have concentrated in this thesis, and in so doing restate the essential conclusions which we have formed during our analysis of the question of the potential filiation of 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic thought streams.

In our first three chapters we undertook a certain amount of necessary prolegomena in order to more securely lay the ground for our subsequent investigations. In **Chapter 1** we began by examining the complex question of 'Gnostic' definition, and ultimately chose to avoid the application of terminology which would imply too great a level of homogeneity and organisational unity amongst what we identified as essentially disparate schemes of thought. We concluded that rather than attempting to construct an overarching concept of 'Gnosticism', it was instead preferable to restrict our focus to more tightly defined individual streams of thought, such as those of the so-called 'Sethians' and 'Valentinians', whilst nonetheless retaining the term 'Gnostic' (albeit expressed within inverted commas) as a convenient shorthand to designate a number of these second century thought streams. Temporarily switching our focus, we then sought to locate the Kabbalah within the wider context of 'Jewish mysticism', and in particular highlighted several key elements in the development of Kabbalistic tradition, perhaps most importantly agreeing with Scholem on the identification of the *Bahir* as representing a plausible *terminus a quo* for the emergence of the Kabbalah. In **Chapter 2** we returned to our earlier discussion of 'Gnostic' definition and, building on our preceding work, we thus attempted to further define the two 'Gnostic' streams which might be most useful in our analysis, namely the 'Sethians' and the 'Valentinians'. We were, however, careful to note the extent to which these terms might essentially be viewed as artificial constructions, and as such should not be taken to imply an absolute dogmatic unity within each stream. Similarly, we also stressed that the extant sources generally gave us little definite evidence regarding the specific practical and organisational elements of these second century 'Gnostics', and thus we found it preferable to speak of 'Sethian' and 'Valentinian' as terms more indicative of a 'mode of thought' than a particular 'group' identity or *habitus*. For our final piece of prolegomena, in **Chapter 3** we examined the wider concept of 'mysticism', with especial reference to Scholem's schema of religious development. Although we chose to reserve judgement on the potential categorisation of 'Gnostic' thought streams as being 'mystic' (noting here again our regrettable lack of evidence for much 'Gnostic' praxis), we did propose that the *prima facie* similarities which much 'Gnostic' evidence bore to certain other trends which are often acclaimed as 'mystic' (including the Kabbalah) might at least suggest the need to consider the potential 'mystic' aspect of 'Gnostic' thought more deeply, especially for our purposes insofar as it permits a comparison with the 'mysticism' of the Kabbalah.

Building on this foundation then, we moved in **Chapter 4** and **Chapter 5** to consider the potential conceptual correspondences which might be adduced between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah, with particular focus on the arguments which had been made in favour of this position by Scholem. We observed, however, that in the main these correspondences were, when properly contextualised, either too vague or in fact too essentially dissimilar to conclusively argue in favour of historical filiation. In particular, we also noted the logical fallacies of building comparisons based on a collection of motifs culled from disparate 'Gnostic' and Kabbalistic sources; we argued that a determinative 'Gnostic' influence on the Kabbalah would have to be best demonstrated in the earliest Kabbalistic work, the *Bahir*, and we thus concluded that the imprecise echoes in this text of various motifs from different 'Gnostic' thought streams which Scholem identified could not therefore serve to necessarily justify a thesis of historical descent from any actual 'Gnostic' stream. Furthermore, we also highlighted certain *caveats* regarding the presence of motifs which emerge as somewhat ubiquitous across various religious and mythic systems; the widespread nature of a motif, as we saw, must logically mitigate its utility for proving a historical connection between any two particular systems.

On the basis of our analysis thus far, we were therefore able to propose a reliable methodology for properly assessing the potential for historical connection between any proposed instances of correspondence, *viz.* that *a logical method by which to proceed is to assume in the first instance that all correspondences identified are essentially coincidental, dismissing this assumption* only *if we can identify a high level of exactness in our comparisons (such as would render pure coincidence relatively improbable) and/or establish a secure chain of transmission between two sources, a chain which renders the transmission of ideas not only possible but indeed probable*. Applying this methodology, we then proceeded to examine three potential historical routes by which second century 'Gnostic' ideas could have been transmitted to the *Bahir*, and in **Chapter 6** turned our focus to the 'Cathars' and their proposed 'dualist' antecedents. We concluded, however, that a historical connection between the 'Cathars' and the 'Gnostics' of Antiquity could not be reliably proven in line with our methodology, and that in any case it seemed highly implausible that 'Cathar' motifs might have been adopted by the early Kabbalah, especially within a time period relevant to the emergence of the *Bahir*. In **Chapter 7** then we considered the role of the 'alchemic tradition', and whilst we remained somewhat undecided regarding the level of interaction between the 'Gnostics' and 'alchemy' in Antiquity, we expressed a justifiable scepticism that there existed a stable 'alchemic tradition' which ran *from* the 'Gnostics' *to* the *Bahir*, and which could accurately transmit motifs from the former to the latter. We then considered our final route, an essentially intra-Jewish speculative tradition, in **Chapter 8** and concluded that whilst such a line of transmission running from the Merkabah-Hekhaloth tradition to the *Bahir* could not be proven by the available evidence (as our methodology rightly requires), we could agree that such a theory was at least far more plausible than the previously considered routes of transmission. In relation to the question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation, however, we argued that *pace* Scholem, it seemed highly unlikely that any 'Gnostic' systems had a direct influence on the older strata of the Merkabah-Hekhaloth tradition. Rather, we noted that it was far more probable on the basis of the extant evidence that this tradition in fact influenced the development of much 'Gnostic' thought, rather than *vice versa*. As such, we suggested that from a historical standpoint any potential similarities between the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalah might be explicable by an *indirect* relation, by virtue of both sharing a common ancestor, although we regrettably concluded that such evidence as is available does not permit us to securely verify this hypothesis as our methodology requires.

Finally, in **Chapter 9**, we briefly considered certain phenomenological aspects of the question, although we remained highly cognisant of the purely speculative nature of such an undertaking. Developing the hypotheses of the preceding chapter, we thus proposed that if both the 'Gnostics' and the Kabbalists shared similar sources and sought to resolve similar paradoxes, then it was perhaps logical that they would develop vaguely similar concepts in spite of their geographical and chronological separation. Of course, as we noted in the preceding chapter, a reliable methodological approach can regrettably, given the state of the evidence, only permit us to advance a negative conclusion to the issue of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation, and such must therefore be the determinative conclusion of our thesis. Whilst, therefore, we were unwilling to ascribe too much weight to our hypothesis advanced in regard to the potential surface similarities between our sources, we could at least with some confidence conclude that although avowedly speculative, such a hypothesis was nonetheless arguably far more plausible than the theories of direct 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation which we had previously examined.

In closing then, let us note that, through the analyses of this thesis, we have hopefully managed to ascertain both a general and a specific conclusion. The general conclusion is, of course, the establishment of our methodology, which has hopefully been proven viable by its successful application to a number of possibilities regarding 'Gnostic' antecedents to the *Bahir*. The specific conclusion, however, must perhaps regrettably remain rather negative, in that the application of our methodology to the particular question of 'Gnostic'-Kabbalistic filiation does not reasonably permit us to acclaim such a hypothesis as proven; indeed, as we have seen throughout this thesis, with the greatest respect to Scholem, we cannot however really say that his proposal of direct 'Gnostic' influence is even particularly likely. To be sure, whilst it is to be hoped that our general conclusion is, and will remain, relatively solid, it must be admitted that our specific one may well in the future be challenged by the emergence of new source evidence. It is, after all, not beyond the bounds of possibility that such evidence is currently in a hidden cache, waiting to be discovered *à la* Nag Hammadi, or perhaps more likely, is merely resting uncatalogued and unassessed in the depths of a library archive. Ultimately, therefore, we may well hope for the future emergence of such evidence as might challenge our specific conclusion, but for the moment given the sources we have, the most we can reasonably and verifiably say, as per our methodology, is that the instances of similarity and correspondence hitherto adduced between the second century 'Gnostics' and the medieval Kabbalah are mere coincidence, 'only this, and nothing more'.

> "Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material..."
>
> William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*[653]

[653] (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), p.77

Alphabetical List of Abbreviations Used

ANF – Ante-Nicene Fathers
Apoc. Adam – The *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V.5)
Apoc. John – The *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II.1; III.1; IV.1, BG II)
BasFrA-H – Basilides, Fragments A-H [in B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.427-444]
BG – Berlin Gnostic Codex
Eugnostos – Eugnostos the Blessed (NHC III.3; V.1)
Flora – Ptolemy, *Epistle to Flora*
Gos. Eg. – The *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III.2; IV.2)
Gos. Mary – The *Gospel of Mary* (BG I)
Gos. Phil. – The *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II.3)
Gos. Thom. – The *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II.2)
Gos. Tru. – The *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I.3; XII.2)
Haer. – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*
Haer. fab. – Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*
Hyp. Arch. – The *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II.4)
Interrogatio – The *Interrogatio Johannis* (also referred to as the *Secret Supper*)
KJV – King James Version Bible
Modesty – Tertullian, *On Modesty*
NHC – Nag Hammadi Codex
OED – Oxford English Dictionary
Omega – Zosimos of Panopolis, *On the Letter Omega*
Orig. W. – On the Origin of the World (NHC II.5; XIII.2)
Soph. Jes. Chr. – The Sophia of Jesus Christ (NHC III.4, BG III)
PEH – Ḥayim Vital, *Peri ʻetz ḥayim*.
Praxeas – Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*
RSV – Revised Standard Version Bible
Silvanus – The *Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII.4)
Test. Tru. – The *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX.3)
Tri. Prot. – The *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII)
Tri. Trac. – The *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I.5; XIII.1)
Val. – Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians*
Val. Exp. – A Valentinian Exposition (NHC XI.2)
VFrA-H – Valentinus, Fragments A-H [in B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures* (1987), pp.229-245]

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> But, once realise what the true object is in life – that it is not pleasure, not knowledge, not even fame itself, 'that last infirmity of noble minds' – but that it is the development of character, the rising to a higher, nobler, purer standard, the building-up of the perfect Man – and then, so long as we feel that this is going on, and will (we trust) go on for evermore, death has for us no terror; it is not a shadow, but a light; not an end, but a beginning!
>
> Lewis Carroll, Preface to *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889)