



OUT OF EGYPT III:

Emergence of Gnosticism

THROUGHOUT THE EARLY PERIOD of Judaism (1200-586 BCE), the wilderness Tabernacle and the subsequent Temple built by King Solomon represented *God himself and his promise to become human*.¹ The Temple was a metaphor for an androgynous God who was reclining and preparing to give birth.

However, after the Persian exile the original Temple metaphor was reinterpreted and its meaning reversed. Now humanity, particularly the high priest, was represented as entering the inner chamber of the Temple to achieve divinity.² Thus, instead of representing

God himself and his promise to become human, the original Temple metaphor was reinterpreted to represent *humanity's achievement of divinity*. It should be noted that there is a striking correlation between this reinterpretation and the emergence of Gnosticism.

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Human Divinity and Gnostic Apocalyptic

Meanwhile, the concept of the "apocalypse" emerged. The term *apocalypse* is derived from the Greek word *apokaluptein*, which means "to uncover," "to reveal," "to disclose." As this term was adopted by early Hebrew writers, it was used to mean the revelation of ultimate end-times (e.g., Daniel and Revelation).³

In traditional Judaism and, later, in Christianity, apocalyptic was employed to portray the end of the old, fallen Creation and the emergence of a new, transformed Creation, assured for all eternity. On the other hand, Gnosticism

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used apocalyptic to foreshadow the escape of the divine “Christ” at Calvary from imprisonment in the terrestrial body of Jesus. Beyond this, Gnosticism used apocalyptic to ultimately foreshadow the obliteration of all Creation and the consequent return of the imprisoned god(s)/qualified human selves from confinement in fallen Creation to an eternal celestial abode.

Records of Gnostic Beliefs

Similar Gnostic beliefs preceded the Christ event but are portrayed later in such ancient documents as the Apocalypse of Adam, the Apocalypse of Paul, the First Apocalypse of James, the Second Apocalypse of James, and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter. These documents, along with a number of others, were fortuitously discovered in 1945. In December of that year an Arab peasant, Muhammad ‘Ali al-Samman, and his brother, who lived in the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi, were digging for soft soil around a massive boulder near the river Nile. While digging, “they hit a red earthenware jar, almost a meter high. Muhammad ‘Ali hesitated to break the jar, considering that a jinn, or spirit, might live inside. But realizing that it might also contain gold, he raised his mattock, smashed the jar, and discovered inside thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather.”⁴ Upon returning home, the men dumped the books and loose papyrus leaves on the floor. Some weeks later they sold the manuscripts to antiquities dealers in Cairo. Years later, scholars investigating the Nag Hammadi finds traced the original documents back to the early second century (100-200 CE) of this Common Era.

Existing evidence thus suggests that the Gnostics believed a fallen god was responsible for Creation and that this god imprisoned the true god in fallen bodies. Only the exercise of hidden inner knowledge (*gnosis*) could effect the liberation of the true god from Creation. These Gnostic beliefs actually originated in apocalyptic times before they were recorded early in the Common Era (CE).

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Endnotes

1. See “The First Temple: United Monarchical Period,” *Outlook* (November 2001).
2. “. . . [A] transformation took place in the holy of holies: those who entered heaven [the holy of holies] became divine. . . . Those who shed the earthly garments, on the other side of the veil, were robed in garments of glory. In other words, they became divine.” — Margaret Barker, “Beyond the Veil of the Temple: The High Priestly Origin of the Apocalypses,” at www.marquette.edu/maqom/veil.html.
3. “*The holy of holies was also beyond time. To enter was to enter eternity.*” — Ibid, p. 4.
4. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979,) p. xiii. Although the Nag Hammadi documents were written in Coptic [Afro-Asian language of the Copts] ca. 140 CE, they reflect beliefs that undoubtedly originated in Egypt some generations earlier.