

CHAPTER I

Gnosis and gnostic religion

Around 100 CE a Christian who posed as the apostle Paul wrote: ‘Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith’ (1 Tim. 6:20–21). It is impossible today to find out what exactly these people taught. Apparently they advocated a view of Christianity centred on the possession of a special kind of knowledge, though the author believes that they have thus strayed from the traditional faith. The word ‘knowledge’ is represented here by the Greek word *gnōsis*.

Pseudo-Paul’s opinion gathered a following, for towards the end of the second century Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote a work in five parts entitled *On the Detection and Overthrow of What Is Falsely Called Gnosis*. He thus targeted an influential movement in contemporary Christianity which taught that not the faith of the Church but gnosis, spiritual knowledge, was necessary for salvation. Irenaeus saw this as a dangerous heresy requiring refutation. Partly thanks to his influence, the view of the Christian faith which he defended and a corresponding deprecation of gnosis became dominant in the Christian Church.

This book mainly gives a voice to the supporters of gnosis, the gnostics. In 1945 in Egypt a Coptic library of the fourth century was discovered containing a large number of works from their circles. Though a few such books were found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the great diversity of the Nag Hammadi discovery made it extremely important. It finally ended the situation that our knowledge of ancient gnosis depended almost entirely on its adversaries. But these original sources also revealed something else: the views of the gnostics turned out to be much more varied than the reports of their opponents suggested. It is typical that none of the new writings fits snugly into the gnostic schools and systems described by the gnostics’ opponents. This raised a question still paramount in research today: how reliable are the reports of the anti-gnostic

authors? This question will be addressed in the fourth chapter of this book. Another question to arise was: given the great diversity of gnostic views, can the phenomenon of gnosis still be clearly defined? Anyone who writes about the Nag Hammadi finds should therefore explain what he means by 'gnosis' and what is usually called 'Gnosticism'.

The Greek word *gnōsis* means 'investigation, knowledge, insight', and the corresponding verb is *gignōskein* or (later form) *ginōskein*, 'to come to know, to know'. Initially, in the Greek world, this concerned only rational knowledge, as a product of mind (*nous*) and reason (*logos*), in combination with sensation and experience, knowledge which leads to truth. But in the centuries around the beginning of the Christian Era the concept of *gnōsis* was considerably broadened. In certain religious circles it took on the meaning of 'knowledge of the divine world and the true nature of things'; this knowledge was no longer seen as the product of correct rational argumentation, but of a divine revelation, an inner enlightenment.¹ It is this knowledge to which the apostle Paul refers when he says that God has shone in our hearts 'to give the light of the knowledge [*gnōsis*] of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor. 4:6). Paul here speaks religious language which was understood by many of his contemporaries, but this does not make him a gnostic. More is needed for that.

The concept of *gnōsis* that pervaded a great deal of the religious experience and reflection in the Graeco-Roman world of the first centuries CE is characterized by some common features. These are:

- the conviction that the essential core of the human being comes from the divine world of light and peace and must return to it, but is held captive in the material world in which it has become entrapped;
- this insight into humankind's origin, present situation and destination means at once the human being's liberation from the stranglehold of material existence and his return to the divine world, in principle now and certainly after death;
- self-knowledge and knowledge of God are therefore two sides of the same coin;

¹ The main difference between classical usage and that of the later period is shown by a comparison of the lemmata *gi(g)nōskō* and *gnōsis* in H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, new edn rev. and augmented throughout by H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), pp. 350 and 355, with G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 315 and 318–20. Still instructive is R. Bultmann, 'ginōskō, gnōsis, etc.', in G. Kittel et al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 688–719 (= *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 1, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1933, pp. 688–719).

- however, this knowledge does not result from rational argumentation, but from inner enlightenment, which is based on a revelation from the divine world;
- this spiritual insight, gnosis, is not accessible to everyone, but only to those who are worthy, and so its core at least needs to be kept secret.

When the term ‘gnosis’ is used in this book, it is in an entirely neutral sense, taking it to mean an esoteric, that is partly secret, spiritual knowledge of God and of the divine origin and destination of the essential core of the human being which is based on revelation and inner enlightenment, the possession of which involves a liberation from the material world which holds humans captive. A gnostic is someone whose religious outlook is determined by this understanding of gnosis, which, however, does not necessarily exclude his association with a religious or philosophical group that as such does not share his particular views.

Clearly these definitions apply to many spiritual movements from Antiquity to this very day. The gnosis of these movements almost always has an esoteric and an exoteric side, that is certain aspects are intended only for the initiated and others are also open to outsiders. The form of this gnosis in an elaborated system or a myth may differ vastly case by case, but the central outlook mentioned above is always clearly recognizable.²

In the Graeco-Roman world of the first centuries of our era, there were two religious currents in which gnosis in the indicated sense played a predominant role. Scholars are used to calling them ‘Hermetism’ and ‘Gnosticism’, though both of these names are problematic, for reasons that will be explained. It is preferable to speak of ‘hermetic religion’ and ‘gnostic religion’ (not ‘*the* hermetic/gnostic religion’). In hermetic religion the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus was the central figure. He is on the one hand a teacher of religious wisdom with a strong philosophical colouring, but on the other hand he also acts as initiator in the hermetic mystery of ascent. According to some scholars these two aspects represent successive stages on the ‘Way of Hermes’; others are less certain about this point. In academic research the term ‘Hermetism’ has become the usual term to indicate the whole complex of hermetic ideas and practices, but like all other ‘isms’ it suggests a coherence and uniformity which did not exist in reality.³

² An encyclopedic survey of Western gnostic and esoteric movements can be found in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. W. J. Hanegraaff in collaboration with A. Faivre, R. van den Broek and J.-P. Brach, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2005; reprinted in one vol. 2006, same pagination).

³ See G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, rev. paperback edn (Princeton University Press, 1993); R. van den Broek, ‘Hermes Trismegistus I: Antiquity’,

The other religious current in which gnosis was the dominant factor can best be called ‘gnostic religion’, for the much-used term ‘Gnosticism’ has become so problematic that most scholars prefer to avoid it. Although there is a distinct relationship between hermetic and gnostic religion (e.g. with respect to the origin and ascent of the soul), there are also considerable differences (e.g. regarding the origin of the world). The Nag Hammadi library was composed by people of the gnostic persuasion, and that these ‘gnostics’ were also interested in the writings of the ‘hermetists’ is shown by the fact that the library has preserved three hermetic works, of which the very important *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* was previously completely unknown.⁴ In academic research, it has become customary to deal with hermetic and gnostic religion separately, because of the difference between their respective sources and the skills that are needed for an adequate study of them. This is an understandable, but nevertheless deplorable development, because serious mistakes could have been avoided if students of one of these types of religion had had a more than superficial knowledge of the other type. In this book hermetic religious views and practices will be referred to if necessary, but as a whole the traditional separation between hermetic and gnostic studies will be retained.

Before entering into a discussion of the present state of gnostic studies, attention must be drawn to two other independent gnostic religions in Antiquity, which originated outside the Graeco-Roman world, though one of them became also influential inside it: the Mandaean and Manichaean religions. The Mandaeans were a baptist community which has been able to hold its own in southern Iraq (and nowadays in Europe, the United States and Australia as well) from the beginning of the Christian era to the present. Their name, *mandayī*, derives from the word *manda*, which means ‘knowledge, gnosis’; so they referred to themselves as Gnostics.⁵

‘Hermetic Literature I: Antiquity’ and ‘Hermetism’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis*, pp. 474–8, 487–99 and 558–70, respectively. Translations of Hermetic literature in B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); *The Way of Hermes: The Corpus Hermeticum*, trans. C. Salaman, D. van Oyen and W. D. Wharton; *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, trans. J.-P. Mahé (London: Duckworth, 1999).

⁴ See p. 35. The gnostic Codex Tchacos also seems to have contained a hermetic text, see p. 24.

⁵ Nowadays the term ‘Mandaeans’ refers to the ordinary believers, the laity, in contrast to the priests; see K. Rudolph, ‘Mandaeans’, in *Dictionary of Gnosis*, pp. 751–6. In the first half of the twentieth century, before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, scholars generally counted hermetists and Mandaeans among the ancient gnostics; modern scholars who hold the same view are, inter alios, W. Barnstone and M. Meyer (eds.), *The Gnostic Bible*, rev. edn (Boston and

The religion of the Manichaeans was founded by Mani (216–77), a charismatic visionary from southern Mesopotamia who developed a gnostic system with a very complicated mythology, characterized by the opposition between the world of Light and the world of Darkness, which had originally existed side by side but had become intermixed. Mani and his disciples undertook many missionary journeys which brought this new gnostic religion as far as China in the East and the Latin Roman world in the West (where Augustine became its most renowned follower and, later, opponent). The study of Manichaeism has become a research area of its own, with several subdisciplines, because of the required knowledge of the many Eastern languages in which the authentic sources have been transmitted and the syncretistic mixture of all kinds of religious traditions contained in them.⁶ Unlike the hermetic and gnostic movements, Mandaeanism and Manichaeism were well-organized religions of their own, each with specific doctrines, rituals and a clergy. Their historical sources are later than almost all the authentic hermetic and gnostic documents. For this reason and because of the specific research problems mentioned above, Mandaean and Manichaean traditions will only occasionally be mentioned here.

The study of the gnostic movement of the first centuries has long been dominated by the perspective of Irenaeus and other anti-gnostic writers, who described it as a Christian heresy which undermined the original unity and orthodoxy of the Church. This view seems almost ineradicable among church historians, but it also resonates strongly in the research of the more ‘neutral’ historians of religion.⁷ The modern term ‘Gnosticism’ itself originated within the context of anti-heretical polemics. It was

London: Shambhala, 2009), pp. 517–85 (texts), and B. A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism. Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 273–91, 314–32.

⁶ The literature on Manichaeism is abundant, see for example M. Tardieu, *Manichaeism*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise, Introduction by P. Mirecki (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009); J. van Oort, ‘Mani’ and ‘Manichaeism’, *Dictionary of Gnosis*, pp. 756–7 and 757–65, respectively; Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 292–313; selections of texts in, inter alia, I. Gardner and S. N. C. Lieu (eds.), *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), and Barnstone and Meyer, *The Gnostic Bible*, pp. 589–674.

⁷ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), shows how great this influence was on modern gnostic research, too. The view of gnosis as Christian heresy also explains why the only early Christian author who constantly talks about gnosis and the ‘true gnostic’, Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 CE), is always carefully distinguished from the ‘heretical’ gnostics. In contrast to most gnostics, Clement in fact considered simple faith to be sufficient for the salvation of a Christian, but he leaves no doubt that the Christian who possesses gnosis (which in Clement, too, implies esoteric knowledge) far surpasses the simple believer; see S. R. C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria. A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 142–89.

coined in 1669 by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, in a commentary on the seven letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 of the Revelation of John.⁸ He employed the term to typify the teaching of a prophetess in Tyatira, who tempted her followers to commit illicit sexual acts and eat sacrificial meat and initiated them into ‘what some call “the deep things of Satan”’ (Rev. 2:20–25). This negative connotation subsequently remained attached to the word ‘Gnosticism’ in ecclesiastical circles, in church history too. In recent studies there is a tendency to get rid of the heresiological opposition between Church and heresy by substituting the term ‘mainstream Christianity’ for ‘the Church’ and ‘sect’ or ‘cult’ or ‘splinter group’ for ‘heresy’. It has been doubted whether this really makes things better,⁹ but it should be noted that even strong opponents of Christianity such as the philosopher Celsus (c. 180) distinguished between minor Christian groups and ‘those of the Great Church’, also called ‘those of the multitude’, that is mainstream Christians.¹⁰

Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, the academic study of Gnosticism was dominated by the ideas of the German History of Religions school, which laid much emphasis on Hellenistic syncretism as the cradle of gnostic mythology and preferentially traced its basic mythologoumena back to religions that flourished east of the Mediterranean.¹¹ The apparent inadequacy of this interpretative model and the discovery of many original sources demanded a new approach to the study of Gnosticism and, as a corollary, a widely accepted definition of the terms ‘Gnosis’ and ‘Gnosticism’. The first international colloquium on Gnosticism (Messina, Italy; 1966) produced a ‘Final Document’, which aimed to provide such a definition.¹² It reserved the term ‘Gnosticism’ predominantly for ‘a certain group of systems of the Second Century A.D., which everyone agrees are to be designated with this term’, although ‘the

⁸ Henry More, *An Exposition of the Seven Epistles to the Seven Churches; Together with a Brief Discourse of Idolatry; with Application to the Church of Rome* (London: James Flesher, 1669), Exposition, p. 99.

⁹ See I. Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 19–20: ‘the distinction between “mainstream” and “sectarian” forms of early Christianity is none other than the old discourse of orthodoxy and heresy in a new disguise’. He observes, inter alia, that it is not ‘easy to say which Christian current was the mainstream in second-century Rome’.

¹⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* v, 59 (*apo megalēs ekklesiās*) and 61 (*apo tou plēthous*).

¹¹ For a devastating criticism of these views, see C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus*, FRLANT 78 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961).

¹² U. Bianchi (ed.), *Le origini dello gnosticismo / The Origins of Gnosticism. Colloquium of Messina 13–18 April 1966*, SHR 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), pp. xxvi–xxix (English version).

question of a *Weltgeschichte* of Gnosticism' is said to seem 'quite legitimate'. The term 'gnosis' is considered the more overarching concept, defined as 'knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an élite'. Whereas the Messina description of the characteristics of second-century Gnosticism is still broadly accepted, albeit with qualifications,¹³ its definition of 'gnosis' has generally been criticized as much too vague, and its idea of bringing all kinds of movements from various times and places (e.g. the Upanishads, Orphism, Catharism) under the common denominator of 'Gnosticism' has quite rightly not found a following. But there is one aspect of the Messina proposal that deserves to be retained and indeed forms one of the premises of this book: the distinction between the general concept of 'gnosis' and its specific expression in the great mythological systems of the second century CE.

The Messina document failed to impose generally accepted definitions of 'gnosis' and 'Gnosticism'; on the contrary, it triggered endless and fruitless discussions. As the publication and analysis of the Nag Hammadi writings progressed, it became increasingly clear that the differences between the views and writings usually referred to as 'gnostic' are so marked that an adequate definition of 'Gnosticism' is virtually impossible. From this state of affairs the American scholar Michael A. Williams has drawn the radical conclusion that the terms 'gnosis', 'Gnosticism' and 'gnostic' are so vague that they have lost any specific meaning and, therefore, are best not used at all.¹⁴ Though Williams's book is most certainly worth reading and offers a sound antidote to many popular views on Gnosticism, few have followed his radical outlook. This is because avoidance of the terms 'gnosis' and 'gnostic' does not contribute to a better understanding of the spiritual movement usually characterized by these words. Some critics have objected that these terms have become too tainted by association with the 'gnostic heresy' of the first centuries. But the gnostic worldview

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xxv: "The Gnosticism of the second century sects involves a coherent series of characteristics that can be summarized in the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated." See also the definitions of M. Meyer and A. Marjanen quoted in notes 25 and 26 below.

¹⁴ M. A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton University Press, 1996); also King, *What is Gnosticism?* The title of Dunderberg's book, *Beyond Gnosticism*, reflects the thesis defended by Williams and King. This thesis also dominates the recent book by H. Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth. Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul*, NHMS 73 (Brill: Leiden, 2010) in which it is suggested time and again that employing the terms 'gnostic' or 'Valentinian' implies that they are taken in the sense of 'heretical' and 'in opposition to true Christianity'.

is not confined to the first centuries and Christianity, and moreover the term ‘heresy’ is a religious and not a historical category. The historian does not recognize heresies; he can merely observe that a religious community rejects certain divergent ideas as heresy. He has no opinion on the correctness of this religious belief, because it lies outside his historical competence. So there is no reason to put a negative complexion on the terms ‘gnosis’ and ‘gnostic’ or to bring the truth question into discussion, as theologians sometimes do.¹⁵

Gnostic religion in the first centuries CE was an early representative of the esoteric current in Western culture. What distinguished it from later movements was a specific and highly variegated mythology, which gave expression to the basic gnostic ideas. The gnostic myths are for the greater part artificial, sometimes even carefully constructed.¹⁶ The gnostics of Antiquity were gifted mythmakers, who were able to adapt their myths to various contexts. They were not adherents of a clearly discernible gnostic religion, characterized by a coherent set of ideas and rituals and practised in an identifiable social group, but they were people with a distinct gnostic mentality, a gnostic frame of mind, which could manifest itself in various religious contexts. Gnostic religion, and hermetic religion as well, is characterized by the fact that it can easily attach itself to already existing religious or philosophical systems. Our sources abundantly testify to the existence of a gnostic current in early Christianity.

In recent research, however, there is a strong tendency to consider the gnostic movement of the first centuries an exclusively Christian phenomenon, one of the various competing inner Christian movements that were designed to make Christianity more acceptable to more or less educated people, Christians and non-Christians alike.¹⁷ This idea is often combined with another recent trend in gnostic studies, namely to reserve the term ‘gnostics’ for a special group of Christians who are supposed to have designated themselves as ‘the Gnostics’. This view is based on the observation that Irenaeus most probably indicated the people whose ideas he describes

¹⁵ See below, p. 220n. 31.

¹⁶ See, for instance, pp. 160–2, on the construction of the divine Pleroma in the *Apocryphon of John*.

¹⁷ An influential advocate of this view is the German church historian Christoph Marksches, who sees gnostic mythography as a form of Christian philosophy of religion. See for instance the revised version of a 1999 article, ‘Christliche Religionsphilosophie oder vorchristliche antike Religion: Was ist Gnosis?’, in his *Gnosis und Christentum* (Berlin University Press, 2009), pp. 23–52, which contains a vehement attack on the almost forgotten Messina definitions, concluded by the wish that nobody should subscribe any longer to the ‘both methodically and historically highly problematic’ view of Gnosticism as a pre-Christian religion and that finally ‘the re-contextualization of this phenomenon within the history and theology of the Christian Church be generally accepted’. See also below, p. 220.

in *Adversus haereses* (hereafter *AH*) 1, 29–30, as ‘the Gnostics’.¹⁸ Because Irenaeus in *AH* 1, 29, shows himself to have been acquainted with at least an early version of the *Apocryphon of John*, this gnostic writing has become the basic source for the ideas and mythology of ‘the Gnostics’, to which scholars have added an increasing number of other gnostic texts in which similar or related ideas are expressed.¹⁹ Other gnostic groups who used the term ‘Gnostic’ as a self-designation are taken to belong to ‘the Gnostics’ of Irenaeus.²⁰ The result is a neatly arranged picture of early Christianity: among the rival inner Christian movements there were (a) non-gnostic ‘mainstream’ Christians, (b) ‘the Gnostics’, (c) the more Church-orientated Valentinians, who, however, should not be called ‘gnostics’, and (4) other groups which were mostly named after their founder and sometimes were referred to as ‘gnostics’ by their opponents.

However, with respect to these recent views, some caution seems desirable. To mention only a few dubious points: there is no conclusive evidence that the gnostic current was an exclusively Christian phenomenon; gnostic texts without any trace of Christian influence are unsatisfactorily accounted for; the data used to construct the ideas and practices of ‘the Gnostics’ are taken from direct and indirect sources that come from entirely different backgrounds; and, finally, there is no satisfactory explanation for the obvious fact that ‘the Gnostics’ are never indicated by that name in the authentic sources ascribed to them.²¹ It should be noted that these recent developments in gnostic studies reflect the perspective and

¹⁸ This attribution is only possible after a correction of the Latin text (elimination of the word ‘Barbelo’), for which indeed there are strong arguments; see the edition by Rousseau and Doutreleau, *Irénee de Lyon. Contre les Hérésies, Livre 1*, SC 263 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 296–9. It also implies that the views expressed in *AH* 1, 30 were taught by a faction of the same ‘Gnostics’, even though these views differ almost irreconcilably from those of *AH* 1, 29 (later ecclesiastical writers identified them with the Ophites).

¹⁹ B. Layton, ‘Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism’, in L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough (eds.), *The Social World of the First Christians. Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 334–50. In his *The Gnostic Scriptures. A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 5–22, Layton had already made a clear distinction between ‘the Gnostics’, that is the adherents of the ‘Gnostic school of thought’, or ‘Classic Gnosticism’ (which other scholars like to call ‘Sethianism’; see below, pp. 28–9), and another early Christian group, the ‘school of Valentinus’.

²⁰ In a concentrated and learned argument, A. H. B. Logan, *The Gnostics. Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006), has tried to determine the doctrinal and cultic characteristics of ‘the Gnostics’ by basing his work on a wide range of authentic and secondary sources, in fact an extension of the material assembled by Layton; see also, following the lead of Layton and Logan, D. Brakke, *The Gnostics. Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²¹ Layton, ‘Prolegomena’, p. 344, has made an unconvincing attempt to explain away this problem: the term ‘*Gnōstikoi*’ was only used as a proper name, indicating to which ‘school’ these people belonged, meant ‘not to say what they were but who they were’.

the interest of church historians, not those of historians of religion in general. Of course, the gnostic interpretation of the Christian faith belongs to the history of early Christianity, but it also belongs to the history of religions of the Graeco-Roman world, as well as to the new and rapidly growing academic discipline of the history of Western esotericism.²²

Is there, besides the terms 'gnosis' and 'gnostic', any need for the term 'Gnosticism'? Not really. The term is still used in modern scholarship, even after Michael Williams's criticism, but now in a neutral sense and often as an equivalent of 'the Gnostic religion'.²³ Closer scrutiny of what 'Gnosticism' or 'the Gnostic religion' is actually taken to mean shows that it mainly involves the radical form of gnosis expressed in the great gnostic myths of the second century, especially those contained in the texts that many scholars call 'Sethian' and others designate as 'Gnostic', in the restricted sense of 'belonging to the sect of "the Gnostics"'.²⁴ Characteristic features of this radical form of gnosis are: (1) a distinction is made between the highest, unknown God and the imperfect or plainly evil creator-god, who is often identified with the God of the Bible; (2) this is often connected with an extensive description of the divine world (Pleroma), from which the essential core of human beings derives, and of a disastrous 'fall' of a divine being (Sophia, 'Wisdom') in this upper world; (3) as a result, humankind has become trapped in the earthly condition of oblivion and death, from which it is saved by the revelation of gnosis by one or more heavenly messengers; (4) salvation is often actualized and celebrated in rituals that are performed within the gnostic community.²⁵

²² See W. J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²³ See the discussions in B. A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 201–23 ('Gnosticism as a Religion'); Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 8–15; and M. Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries. The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), pp. 38–43. A quite different, but rather senseless definition of 'Gnosticism' is given by A. Mastrocinque, *From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism*, STAC 24 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 4–5: 'In this work, the word *Gnosticism* will be used as a synonym for the heresies addressed by Irenaeus and related heresies of a similar nature' (Mastrocinque's italics); see also Mastrocinque, *From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism*, p. 6: 'We will gladly leave the difficult task of defining more precisely what Gnosticism was or was not to the scholars who are good at discussing nomenclature rather than substance; the accounts of the ancients of sects defined as "gnostic" and the few things they had in common are enough for us to go by.' For Mastrocinque's views, see also below, pp. 13n. 1, 173n. 67, 213n. 13, 218n. 16.

²⁴ On the 'Sethians', see pp. 28–9.

²⁵ Cf. the Messina definition of Gnosticism, quoted in note 13 above, and Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, p. 42: 'Gnostic Religion is a religious tradition that emphasizes the primary place of gnosis, or mystical knowledge, understood through aspects of wisdom, often personified wisdom, presented in creation stories, particularly stories based on the Genesis accounts, and interpreted by means of a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, including Platonism, in