

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER VII

POST-CHRISTIAN Gnostics

It will be seen, from what has been said in the first volume, that, even at the beginning of the Christian era, there was no lack of *αἵρεσις* or choice of creeds offered to those peoples of the Levant who had outgrown their national religions; and it may be a surprise to many that more notice was not taken by the Christians of the Apostolic age of these early essays at a universal faith. Some writers, indeed, among whom Bishop Lightfoot is perhaps the most notable, have thought that they could detect allusions to them in the Canonical writings, and that by the “worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which man hath not seen, vainly puffed up by the understanding of his flesh¹” which St Paul condemns in the Epistle to the Colossians, must be understood the teachings of Gnostic sects already in existence². Others have gone further, and think that the Fourth Gospel was itself written under Gnostic influence³, and that the Apocalypse attributed to the same author vituperates under the name of the Nicolaitans a Christian sect professing Gnostic tenets⁴. Even if this be so, however, the comparatively late date assigned to all these documents⁵ must prevent their being received as

¹ Col. ii. 18.

² Lightfoot, *St Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, pp. 90 *sqq.*

³ So A. Jülicher in *Encyc. Bibl. s.v.* Gnosis.

⁴ Irenaeus, *op. cit.* Bk i. c. 23, p. 214, Harvey. Salmon in *Dict. of Christian Biog. s.v.* Nicolaitans, thinks this an idea peculiar to Irenaeus alone and not to be found in the older source from which he drew his account of the other Gnostics.

⁵ The Canonical Apocalypse was probably written after the siege of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D., while the first unmistakable mention we have of St John's Gospel is by Theophilus of Antioch a hundred years later. Earlier quotations from it are anonymous, *i.e.* they give the words of the Gospel as in the A.V. but without referring them to any specified author. See Duchesne, *Early Christian Church*, Eng. ed. pp. 102, 192.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Post-Christian Gnostics

[CH.

evidence of what happened in the earliest stage of the Christian Church; and we find no proof that Gnosticism ever seriously competed for popular favour with orthodox Christianity until well into the third century¹. That the first Christians would take little heed either of organized religions like that of the Alexandrian divinities, or of the speculations of the Orphic poets and of such sects as the Simonians is plain, when we consider the way in which their expectation of the Parusia or Second Coming dominated every moment of their lives². They believed with the unquestioning faith of children that their dead Master would presently return to the earth, and that it would then be destroyed to make way for a new state of things in which, while the majority of mankind would be condemned to everlasting fire, His followers should taste all the joys of Paradise. With this before their eyes, they turned, as has been said, their possessions into a common fund³, they bound themselves together in a strict association for mutual help and comfort, and they set to work to sweep their fellows into the Christian fold with an earnestness and an energy that was the fiercer because the time for its exercise was thought to be so short. "The Lord is at hand and His reward," a saying which seems to have been a password among them⁴, was an idea never absent from their minds, and the result was an outburst of proselytism such as the world till then had never seen.

"They saw," says a writer who was under no temptation to exaggerate the charity and zeal of the primitive Church, "their fathers and mothers, their sisters and their dearest friends, hurrying onward to that fearful pit, laughing and singing, lured on by the fiends whom they called the gods. They felt as we should feel were we to see a blind man walking towards a river bank. . . . Who that could hope to save a soul by tears and supplications would remain quiescent

¹ Hegesippus, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* Bk iv. c. 22, says that the Church was untroubled by heresy until the reign of Trajan.

² Hegesippus (see last note) in his account of the martyrdom of "James the Brother of the Lord," *op. cit.* Bk ii. c. 23.

³ See Schmiedel, *Encyc. Bibl. s.v.* Community of Goods. Cf. Lucian, *de Mort. Peregrini*, c. XIII, and Mozley's comments in *Dict. Christian Biog. s.v.* Lucianus.

⁴ *Maran atha.* See *Epistle of Barnabas*, c. XXI.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:

From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

VII]

Post-Christian Gnostics

3

as men do now?...In that age every Christian was a missionary. The soldier sought to win recruits for the heavenly host; the prisoner of war discoursed to his Persian jailer; the slave girl whispered the gospel in the ears of her mistress as she built up the mass of towered hair; there stood men in cloak and beard at street corners who, when the people, according to the manners of the day, invited them to speak, preached, not the doctrines of the Painted Porch, but the words of a new and strange philosophy; the young wife threw her arms round her husband's neck and made him agree to be baptised, that their souls might not be parted after death¹...."

How could people thus preoccupied be expected to concern themselves with theories of the origin of a world about to perish, or with the philosophic belief that all the gods of the nations were but varying forms of one supreme and kindly power?

Before the end of the 1st century, however, this belief in the immediate nearness of the Second Coming had died away². The promise that the second Gospel puts into the mouth of Jesus that some of His hearers should not taste of death until they saw the Son of Man come with power³, had become incapable of fulfilment by the death of the last of those who had listened to Him. Nor were all the converts to the faith which His immediate disciples had left behind them possessed with the same simple faith and mental equipment as themselves⁴. To the poor fishermen and peasants of Judaea had succeeded the slaves and freedmen of great houses—including even Caesar's own,—some of them professionally versed in the philosophy of the time, and all with a greater or less acquaintance with the religious beliefs of the non-Jewish citizens of the great Roman Empire⁵. The preachings and journeys of St Paul and other missionaries had also brought into the Christian Church many believers of other than Jewish blood, together with the foreign

¹ Winwood Reade, *op. cit.* pp. 237 *sqq.*

² Eugène de Faye, "Formation d'une Doctrine de Dieu au II^e Siècle," *R.H.R.* t. LXIII. (1911), p. 9. He quotes Harnack in his support.

³ Mark xi. 1.

⁴ On the ignorance of the first Christian writers, see de Faye, *op. cit.* p. 4.

⁵ Origen, *cont. Celsum*, Bk III. c. 12. Cf. Krüger, *La Grande Encyclopédie*, Paris, *s.v.* Gnosticisme.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

merchants and members of the Jewish communities scattered throughout the Roman world, who were better able than the Jews of Palestine to appreciate the stability and the organized strength of the Roman Empire and to desire an alliance with it. To ask such men, deeply engaged as many of them were in the pursuit of wealth, to join in the temporary communism and other-worldliness practised by the first Christian Church would have been as futile as to expect the great Jewish banking-houses of the present day to sell all that they have and give it to the poor.

Another cause that profoundly altered the views of the early Christian communities must have been the catastrophe and final dispersion of the Jewish nation. Up to the time of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem under Titus, the Christians not only regarded themselves as Jews¹, but were looked upon by such of the other subjects of Rome as had happened to have heard of them, as merely one sect the more of a race always factious and given to internal dissensions. Yet even in St Paul's time, the Christians were exposed to a bitter persecution at the hands of those orthodox Jews who seemed to the Gentile world to be their co-religionists², and it is probable that in the outbreak of fanaticism attending the first Jewish war, they suffered severely at the hands of both combatants³. The burning of the Temple must also have been a crushing blow to all who looked for a literal and immediate fulfilment of the

¹ "Those which say they are Jews, but are not"; Rev. ii. 9; *ibid.* iii. 9. The *Clementine Homilies*, though of much later date, never speak of the Christians otherwise than as Jews. Cf. Duchesne, *Early Christian Church*, p. 12.

² Acts viii. 1.

³ Renan (*L'Antéchrist*, p. 511, and note 1) gives a passage, which he thinks is from Tacitus, showing that Titus aimed at the suppression of the Christians as well as the Jews. Doubtless many Christians perished in the punitive measures taken in the 1st century against the Jews in Antioch and elsewhere. Cf. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Bk VII. c. 3; Eusebius, *H. E.* Bk III. cc. 12, 17, 19, 20. It was the persecution by the fanatical Jews that compelled the flight of the Christians to Pella shortly before the siege. See Eusebius, Bk III. c. 5; Epiph. *Haer.* xxix. c. 7, p. 239, Oehler. The episode of the "Woman clothed with the Sun" of the Canonical Apocalypse is supposed by some to refer to this.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

VII]

Post-Christian Gnostics

5

Messianic hope, and its result was to further accentuate the difference between the Christians and the Jews¹. Moreover, the hatred and scorn felt by these last for all other members of the human race had now been recognized by the Gentiles², and the repeated insurrections attempted by the Jews between the time of Titus and the final war of extermination under Hadrian showed that these feelings were shared by the Jewish communities outside Palestine³. It was therefore not at all the time which worldly-wise and prudent men, as many of the later Christian converts were, would choose for identifying themselves with a race which not only repudiated the relationship in the most practical way, but had lately exposed themselves on other grounds to the deserved execration of the civilized world.

It is, then, by no means surprising that some of the new converts should have begun to look about them for some compromise between their recently acquired convictions and the religious beliefs of the Graeco-Roman world in which they had been brought up, and they found this ready to their hand in the pre-Christian sects which we have ventured above to class together under the generic name of Gnostic. In the Orphic poems, they found the doctrine of successive ages of the world, each with its different characteristics, which coincided well enough with the repeated declaration of the Christians that the old world was passing away,—as was indeed the fact

¹ So that the members of the little Church of Pella who retained the name of Jews gradually ceased to be regarded as orthodox by the other Christian communities and were called Ebionites. See Renan, *L'Antéchrist*, p. 548. Cf. Fuller in *Dict. Christian Biog. s.v.* Ebionites for authorities. The connection that Fuller would find between the Essenes and the Ebionites seems to rest on little proof.

² Thus Mgr Duchesne, *op. cit.* p. 14, says that "St Paul was a Jew by birth, imbued with the exclusiveness and disdainful spirit which inspired his race and influenced all their dealings with other nations."

³ Many of the Sicarii and other fanatics managed to escape before the catastrophe of the First Jewish War to Egypt and the Cyrenaica, where they continued to commit outrages and make rebellion until they brought on themselves and their co-religionists the wrath of the Romans. See Josephus, *Wars*, Bk VII. cc. 10, 11. Cf. Renan, *L'Antéchrist*, p. 539 ; *id.*, *Les Évangiles*, p. 369.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

since the conquests of Alexander¹. They found, too, both in the Orphic poems and in the mixed religions like that of the Alexandrian divinities which had sprung from the doctrines taught by these poems, the legend of a god dying and rising again for the salvation of mankind told in a way which had many analogies with the Gospel narratives of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus². Among the Essenes, too, who may have owed, as has been said above, some of their doctrines to Orphic inspiration, they found all the modest virtues of sobriety, chastity, and mutual help which had already distinguished the Christian Church above all the other religious associations of the time. And among both the Orphics and the Essenes was to be noticed the strained and fanciful system of interpretation by allegory and figure which enabled them to put their own construction upon the words not only of the books of the Jewish Canon, but of those writings which had begun to circulate among the scattered Christian communities as containing the authentic teaching of Jesus and His immediate disciples³. Add to this that the Simonians, and no doubt other pre-Christian Gnostic sects of which we have lost all trace, had already shown the mixed populations of the Levant how to reconcile the innovations of a teacher of impressive and commanding personality with their own ancestral traditions⁴, and that the many mysteries then diffused throughout the ancient world

¹ Abel's *Orphica*, Frgs. 243–248, especially the quotation from Nigidius.

² See Chapter II, *supra*.

³ So Renan, *L'Antéchrist*, p. 300, says that the Synoptic Gospels probably first took shape in the Church at Pella. Thus he explains the so-called "little Apocalypse" of Matthew xxiv., Mark xiii., and Luke xxi. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 296 and note. For the symbolic construction placed upon them by the Gnostics, see Hatch, *H. L.*, p. 75.

⁴ Hegesippus, who probably wrote about 150 A.D., speaks of Thebuthis, Dositheus, and others as leaders of early sects. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* Bk iv. c. 22, and Origen (*cont. Cels.* Bk vi. c. 11) make this last a contemporary of Simon Magus. The *Clementine Homilies* (Bk II. c. 24), from whom both authors may have derived their information, have a long story about Dositheus being with Simon a follower of John the Baptist, and disputing with Simon the headship of the sect. From presumably other sources, Hegesippus speaks of the Essenes, the Masbothoceans and the Hemero-baptists, for which last see Chapter XIII, *infra*, as pre-Christian sects.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:

From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

VII]

Post-Christian Gnostics

7

offered a ready means of propagating new doctrines under cover of secrecy ; and it will be seen that most of the sources from which the founders of the great post-Christian sects afterwards drew their systems were then lying open and ready to hand.

The prize which awaited success was, moreover, no mean one. It is sometimes said that the only distinction that awaited a leader of the Church at this time was the distinction of being burned alive¹. Yet the fear of impeachment to be followed by a still more horrible death never prevented English statesmen in the xviith century from struggling with each other for place and power ; while the State had not as yet made any serious attempt to suppress the propagation of Christianity by force. On the other hand, a Christian bishop, even at this early date, occupied a position which was really superior to that of most functionaries of the secular State. Gifted with almost complete power over his flock in temporal as well as in spiritual matters, he was at once their judge and their adviser ; and, so long as there were Pagan emperors on the throne, the faithful were forbidden to come to any tribunal but his². His judgments, too, had a greater sanction than those of any temporal judge ; for while he could not indeed lawfully condemn any of his hearers to death, he had in the sentence of excommunication which he alone could pronounce, the power of cutting them off from eternal life. The adoration with which he was regarded by them also surpassed the respect paid to proconsul or legate³ ; and the literature of the time is full of allusions to the way in which, when brought before the temporal rulers, he was attended

¹ Winwood Reade, *op. cit.* p. 244. Probably this is what is meant by Gibbon when he says (*Decline and Fall*, Bury's ed. iii. p. 153, n. 54) that no future bishop of Avila is likely to imitate Priscillian by turning heretic, because the income of the see is 20,000 ducats a year.

² *Apostolical Constitutions*, Bk ii. cc. 45, 46, 47. Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, Eng. ed. ii. p. 98 n. 1, gives the date of this work as "middle of the 2nd century." Duchesne, *op. cit.* p. 109, thinks it is derived from the *Didache* which he puts not later than Trajan.

³ *Apost. Const.* Bk ii. c. 26 : "He (i.e. the bishop) is your ruler and governor ; he is your king and potentate ; he is next after God, your earthly divinity, who has a right to be honoured by you."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by weeping multitudes who crowded round him even in prison, imploring his blessing and kissing his fetters¹. Hence it is not to be wondered at that such a position was eagerly sought after, that envy of the episcopate was the principal sin against which the Christian writers of the sub-Apostolic age warned their readers², and that it is to the disappointment at failing to attain the highest places in the orthodox Church that they ascribe the foundation of all the principal post-Christian sects³. Without taking this accusation as literally correct, it is plain that the chance of irresponsible power over those whom they could convince must have proved a most alluring bait to religious-minded persons who were also ambitious and intellectual men of the world⁴.

Thus it came about that during the IInd and IIIrd centuries, there arose more than one teacher who set himself to construct a system which should enable its votaries to retain the Hellenistic culture which Alexander's conquests had spread throughout the whole civilized world with the religious and moral ideas which the enthusiasm and energy of the first Christians had begun to diffuse among the lower classes of citizens⁵. Alexandria, the natural meeting-place between the East and West, was no

¹ Lucian, *Proteus Peregrinus*, *passim*; *Acts of Paul and Thekla*; *Acts of Peter of Alexandria*.

² Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, c. 44.

³ So Irenaeus, *op. cit.* Bk I. c. 26, pp. 219, 220, Harvey, says it was the desire to become a *διδάσκαλος* or teacher that drove Tatian, once a hearer of Justin Martyr's, into heresy. Hegesippus, *ubi cit. supra*, says that Thebuthis first corrupted the Church, on account of his not being made a bishop. For the same accusation in the cases of Valentinus and Marcion, see Chapters IX and XI, *infra*.

⁴ Celsus *apud* Origen (*op. cit.* Bk III. cc. 10, 11) says: "Christians at first were few in number, and all held like opinions, but when they increased to a great multitude, they were divided and separated, each wishing to have his own individual party; for this was their object from the beginning"—a contention which Origen rebuts.

⁵ Thus in Egypt it was almost exclusively the lower classes which embraced Christianity at the outset. See Amélineau, "Les Actes Coptes du martyre de St Polycarpe" in *P.S.B.A.* vol. x. (1888), p. 392. Julian (*Cyr.* VI. p. 206) says that under Tiberius and Claudius there were no converts of rank.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

VII]

Post-Christian Gnostics

9

doubt the scene of the first of these attempts, and the writings of Philo, fortunately still extant, had already shown the way in which the allegorical system of interpretation could be used to this end. That many of the founders of post-Christian Gnostic sects were Alexandrian Jews is the constant tradition of the Christian Church, and is antecedently probable enough¹. But other Gnostic leaders were certainly not Alexandrians and came from centres sufficiently distant from Egypt to show that the phenomenon was very widely spread, and that the same causes produced the same results in the most distant places and entirely outside the Jewish community. Marcion, the founder of the Marcionite Church, was a native of Pontus. Saturnilus or Saturninus—the name is spelt differently by Irenaeus and Hippolytus—came from Antioch, Theodotus from Byzantium, others, such as Cerdo, and probably Prepon the Syrian, began teaching in Rome, while we hear of a certain Monoimus, who is said to have been an Arab². Most of these are to us merely names, only very brief summaries of the different systems founded or professed by them having been preserved in the heresiologies compiled by the Fathers of the Church both before and immediately after the alliance of the Christian Church with the Roman State under Constantine.

¹ Thus Cerinthus, who is made by tradition the opponent of St John, is said to have been a Jew and to have been trained in the doctrines of Philo at Alexandria (Theodoret, *Haer. Fab.* Bk II. § 3). Cf. Neander, *Ch. Hist.* (Eng. ed.) vol. II. pp. 42–47. Neander says the same thing about Basilides (*op. cit.* p. 47 and note) and Valentinus (p. 71), although it is difficult to discover any authority for the statement other than the Jewish features in their doctrines. There is more evidence for the statement regarding Marcus, the heresiarch and magician whom Irenaeus (*op. cit.* Bk I. c. 7) accuses of the seduction of Christian women, apparently in his own time, since the words of Marcus' ritual, which the Bishop of Lyons quotes, are in much corrupted Hebrew, and the Jewish Cabala was used by him. Renan's view (*Marc Aurèle*, pp. 139 *sqq.*) that Christianity in Egypt never passed through the Judaeo-Christian stage may in part account for the desire of Jewish converts there to set up schools of their own.

² For Marcion, see Chapter XI, *infra*. Summary accounts of the doctrines of other Gnostics mentioned are given by Irenaeus and Hippolytus in the works quoted. See also the *Dict. of Christian Biog.*, under their respective names.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-45092-9 - Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity: Being Studies in Religious History:
From 330 B.C. to 330 A.D.: In Two Volumes: Vol. II

F. Legge

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Of these treatises, the two, which, up to about sixty years ago, formed our main sources of information with regard to the Gnostics of the sub-Apostolic age¹, are the writings of St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons about the year 177 A.D., and of Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia in Cyprus, who tells us he wrote in the seventh year of Gratian or 374 A.D. The first of these is considerably later in date than the heresiarchs in refutation of whose doctrines he wrote his five books "against Heresies"; and although he is most probably honest in his account of their tenets, it is evident that Irenaeus was incapable of distinguishing between the opinions of the founders of the sects which he controverts and those of their followers and successors. Epiphanius, on the other hand, wrote when the Catholic Church was already triumphant, and his principal object seems to have been to blacken the memory of those competitors whom she had already outdistanced in the race for popularity and power. Hence he spares no pains to rake together every story which theological hatred and unclean imagination had ever invented against her opponents and rivals; while his contempt for consistency and the rules of evidence show the intellectual depths to which the war which orthodox Christianity had from the first waged against Hellenistic culture had reduced the learning of the age. The language in which he and the other Catholic writers on heresy describe the Gnostics is, indeed, the first and most salient instance of that intolerance for any other opinions than their own, which a recent writer of great authority declares the Apostles and their successors derived from their Jewish nationality². "The first-born of Satan," "seducers of women," "savage beasts," "scorpions," "ravening wolves," "demoniacs," "sorcerers," and "atheists" were the mildest terms in

¹ The lesser heresiologists, such as Philaster of Brescia, St Augustine, the writer who is known as Praedestinatus, the author of the tract *Adversus omnes Haereses* wrongly ascribed to Tertullian, and the other writers included in the first volume of Oehler's *Corpus Haereseologicum*, Berlin, 1856, as well as writers like Eusebius, all copy from one or other of these sources. The *Excerpta Theodoti* appended to the works of Clement of Alexandria are on a different footing, but their effect at the time spoken of in the text was not appreciated. Cf. Salmon in *Dict. Christian Biog. s.v. Valentinus*.

² Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Intolérance Religieuse et Politique*, Paris, 1912, p. 140.