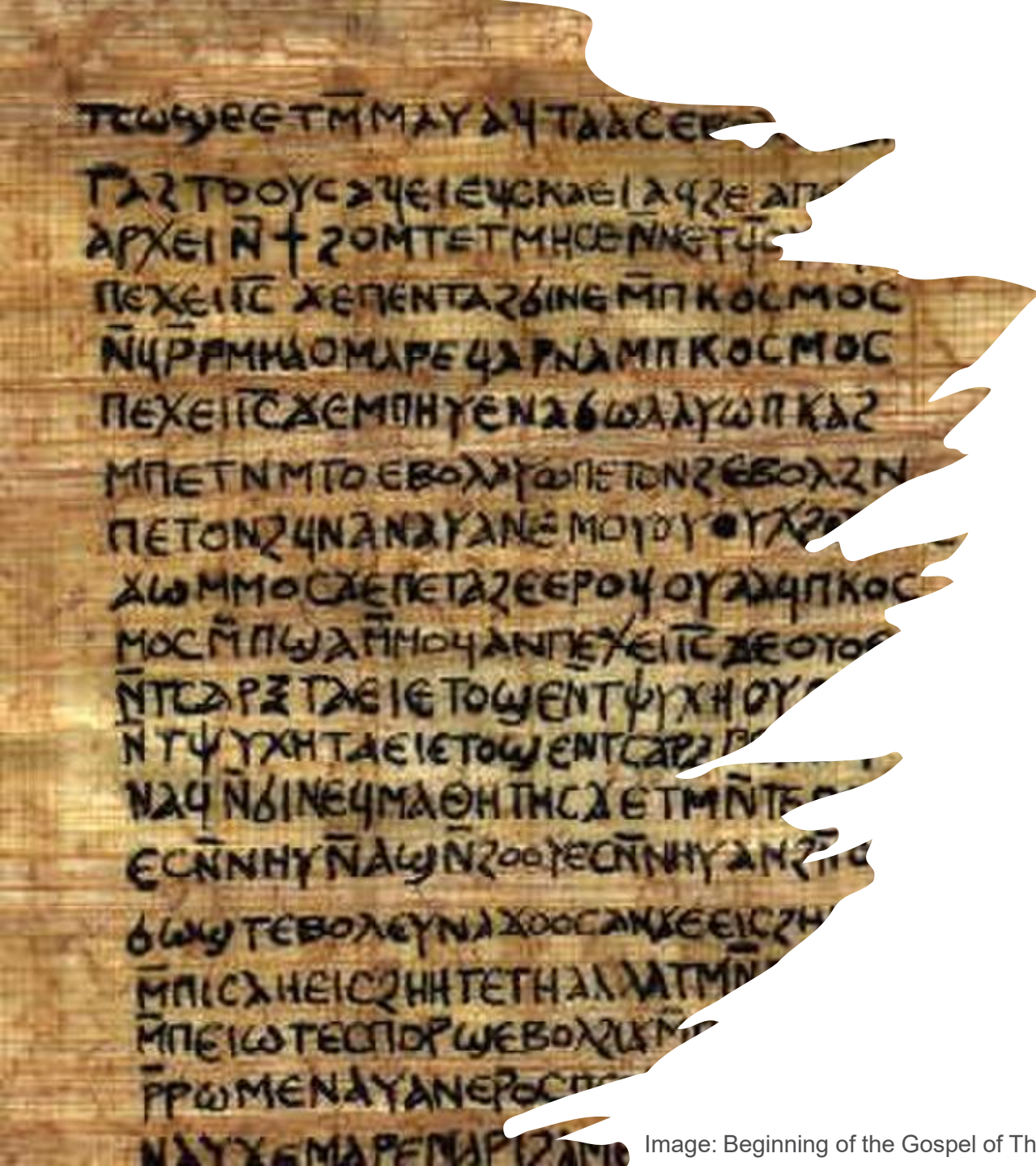


# The Gnostic Cosmology

Dr. Frances Clynes



# Terminology

## Gnosis

Knowledge of the self which is  
knowledge of God

Knowledge of the ultimate reality

Knowledge through observation and  
experience

Insight

## Gnostic

Someone who claims to have this  
knowledge

Only a few of the groups called  
themselves Gnostics

# Gnosticism

‘A complex of religious movements, including Hermeticism which developed between 100 BCE and 100 CE with roots in pagan, Platonic and Jewish thought. It also claimed to be based in the conventional mainstream Christianity.’

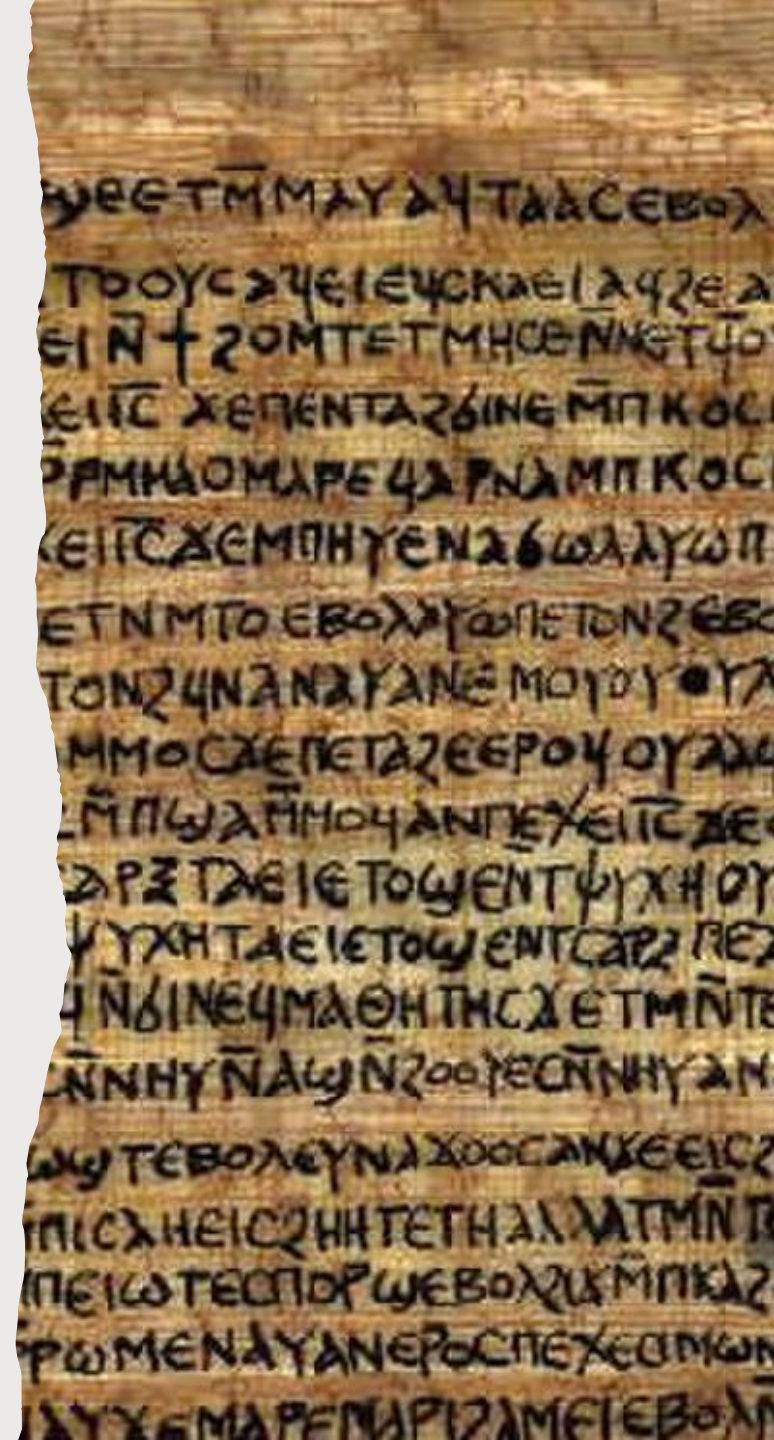
Nicholas Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology*, p. 274



# Gnosticism

‘Does not such teaching – the identity of the divine and human, the concern with illusion and enlightenment, the founder who is presented not as Lord, but as spiritual guide – sound more Eastern than Western? Some scholars have suggested that if the names were changed, the ‘living Buddha’ appropriately could say what the *Gospel of Thomas* attributes to the living Jesus. Could Hindu or Buddhist tradition have influenced gnosticism?

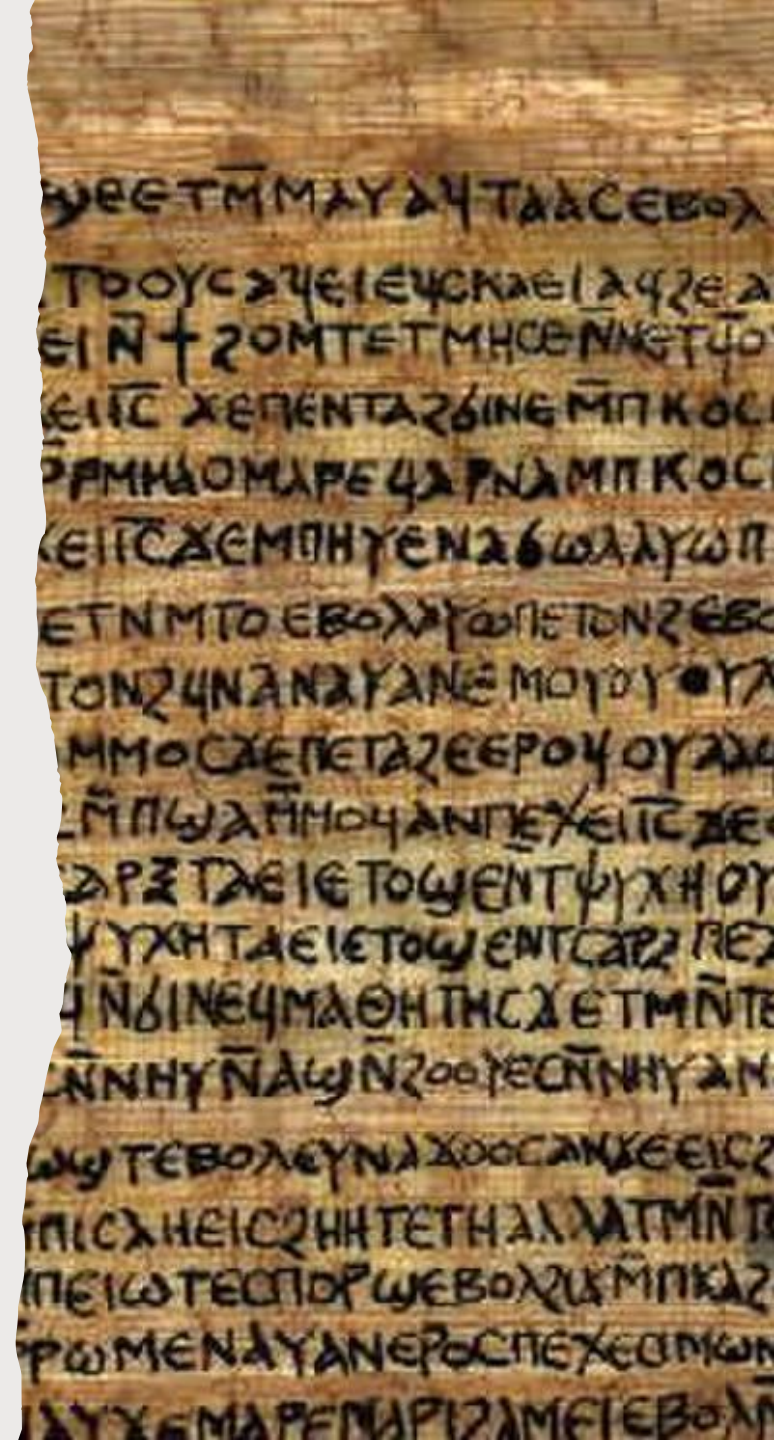
Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 13



# Gnosticism

‘The ‘living Jesus’ of these texts speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance, like the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. But when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as his spiritual master: the two have become equal – even identical.’

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 13



# Gnosticism

The common features of the numerous sects that had sprung up in the first centuries of the Christian era

A product of syncretism

An emphasis on knowledge, or gnosis, as the means for the attainment of salvation, or even as the form of salvation itself

Knowledge of God brings about salvation by transforming the individual and uniting them with the divine

Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 32

Originally published 1958





# Gnosticism

‘All these currents have in some way to do with **salvation**: **the general religion of the period is a religion of salvation**. Third, all of them exhibit **an exceedingly transcendent (i.e., transmundane) conception of God** and in connection with it an equally transcendent and other-worldly idea of the goal of salvation. Finally, they maintain **a radical dualism of realms of being**—God and the world, spirit and matter, soul and body, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death—and consequently an extreme polarization of existence affecting not only man but reality as a whole: the general religion of the period is **a dualistic transcendent religion of salvation**.’

Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 32.

# Orthodox Reaction

Denounced as heresy by the early church fathers – Irenaeus, Hippolytus

Confined their refutations to groups who sprouted from Christianity (Valentinians), or who had added and adapted the figure of Christ into teaching

4<sup>th</sup> century – possession of the books was a criminal offence

After the Council of Nicaea in there was only one way and it must be catholic (universal)

Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, the only knowledge of the gnostic tradition was through the orthodox attacks on them

‘Introduction’, Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*

Image: Irenaeus



A saint in the Catholic and Orthodox churches

Repeatedly preached against *The Apocryphon of John*

Identified these Gnostics as 'Barbeloites'

Some of the gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi are mentioned by name by Irenaeus – *Gospel of Truth*, *Gospel of Judas*

*Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Knowledge*

Begins with his promise to

“set forth the views of those who are now teaching heresy . . . to show how absurd and inconsistent with the truth are their statements . . . I do this so that . . . you may urge all those with whom you are connected to avoid such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ.”

Irenaeus, *AH Praefatio*.

# Irenaeus

(c. 130 – c. 202 AD)

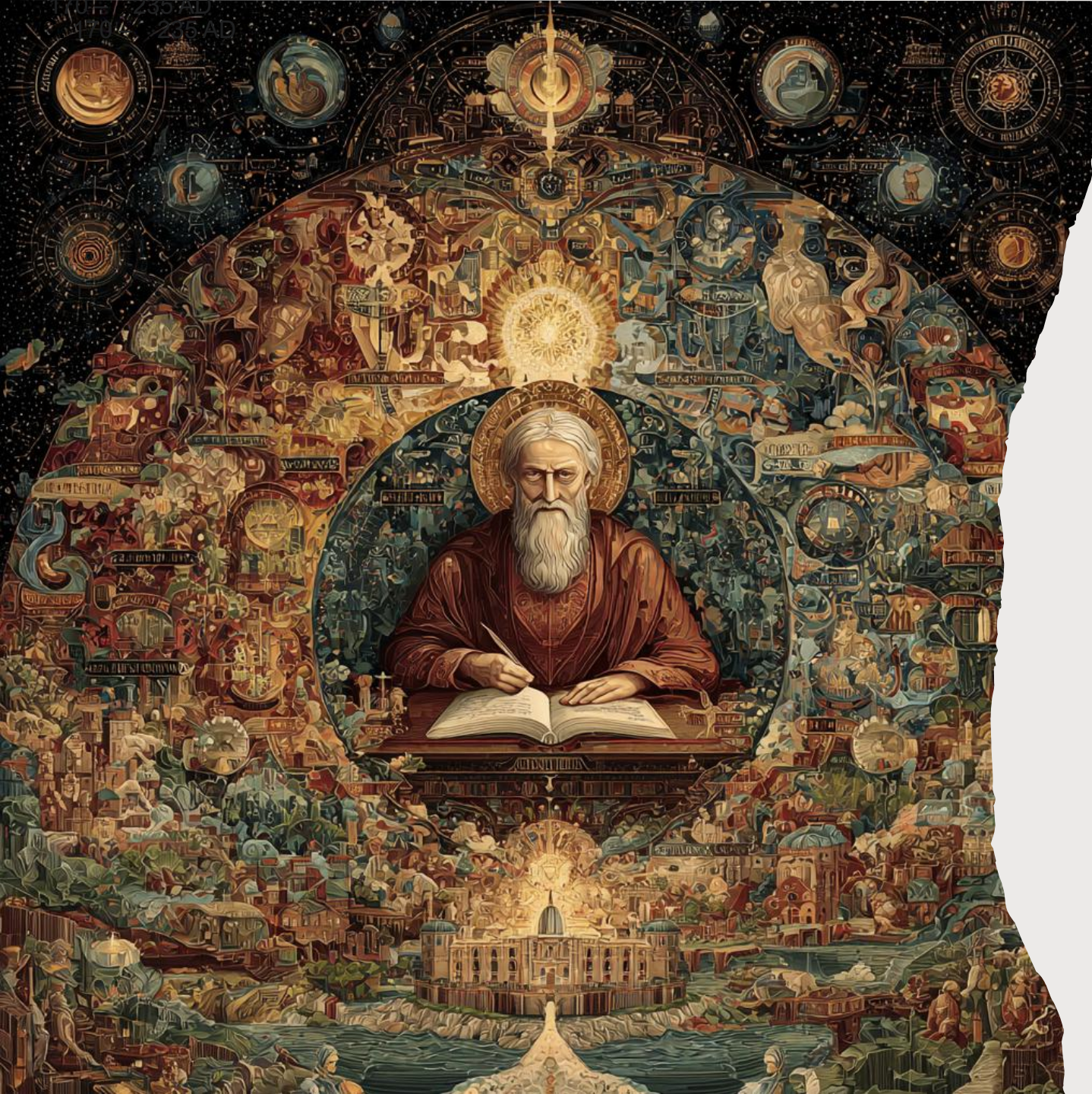




# Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170-c.235 CE)

*Refutation of All Heresies*  
to 'expose and refute  
the wicked  
blasphemy of the  
heretics'.

Hippolytus,  
*Refutationis Omnium  
Haeresium*).



4<sup>th</sup> Century – Christianity the official religion

Books branded as heresy

Possession made a criminal offence

Books burned or destroyed

In Egypt, banned books were hidden in a jar to protect them from destruction

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels* (p. 11).

In 367, Athanasius, the orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, wrote an Easter letter to be read in all the monasteries of Egypt, calling upon them to eliminate from their libraries apocryphal writings.

Meyer, Marvin W.; Robinson, James M.. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (Kindle Locations 182-183).



# Texts

## *Pistis Sophia*

Discovered in 1773

Translated in 1895

## Berlin Codex

Bought by a German scholar  
from a dealer in Egypt in 1896

Not fully translated until 1955

Included a shorter redaction  
of *The Apocryphon of St.  
John* and *The Gospel of Mary*



1945 - Discovery of 13 papyrus books (codices) in leather by Muḥammad 'Alī al-Samman in a cave near Nag Hammadi

52 surviving texts - all are now in the public domain

Coptic translations made around 350-400 CE of more ancient Greek manuscripts

Contain the same characters as the orthodox gospels

Different from the Christian tradition

Hidden knowledge of Jesus

Previously known only from the preaching of early church fathers



Image: *The Apocryphon of St. John*

1952 – Giles Quispel from University of Utrecht bought a manuscript that had been smuggled out of Egypt on behalf of the Jung Foundation in Zurich – The Jung Codex (Codex 1)  
1955 – A hardback copy went on sale

Contained:

*The Prayer of the Apostle Paul*

*The Secret Book of James (also known as The Apocryphon of James)*

*The Gospel of Truth*

*The Treatise on the Resurrection*

*The Tripartite Tractate*

Marvin W. Meyer and James M. Robinson,  
*The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, p. 5



Image: The Apocryphon of St. John

1952 – a small number of academics were allowed access to the manuscripts in the Coptic museum but access was jealously guarded

Unesco intervened

1972 – the first volume of the photographic edition appeared  
Between 1972 and 1977 nine other volumes were published



1970s

Codex Tchacos – discovered in Egypt in the late 1970s

Damaged by careless storage

Parts of it are now missing

Contained:

*The Letter of Peter to Philip*

*The First Apocalypse of James*

*The Gospel of Judas*

An untitled text, possibly *Allogenes*

Spring 2006 – *The Gospel of Judas* published

Marvin W. Meyer and James M. Robinson,  
*The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, p. 5

## Transforming understanding of early Christianity

‘Suddenly, however, the unexpected discovery of over fifty ancient texts, most of them Christian, has demonstrated what the church fathers long had indicated: that these familiar gospels are only a small selection from among many more traditions—and gospels—that, from the early generations of the Christian movement, circulated among groups throughout the known world.’

Marvin W. Meyer and James M. Robinson,  
*The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, p.



# Modified Platonic Cosmos

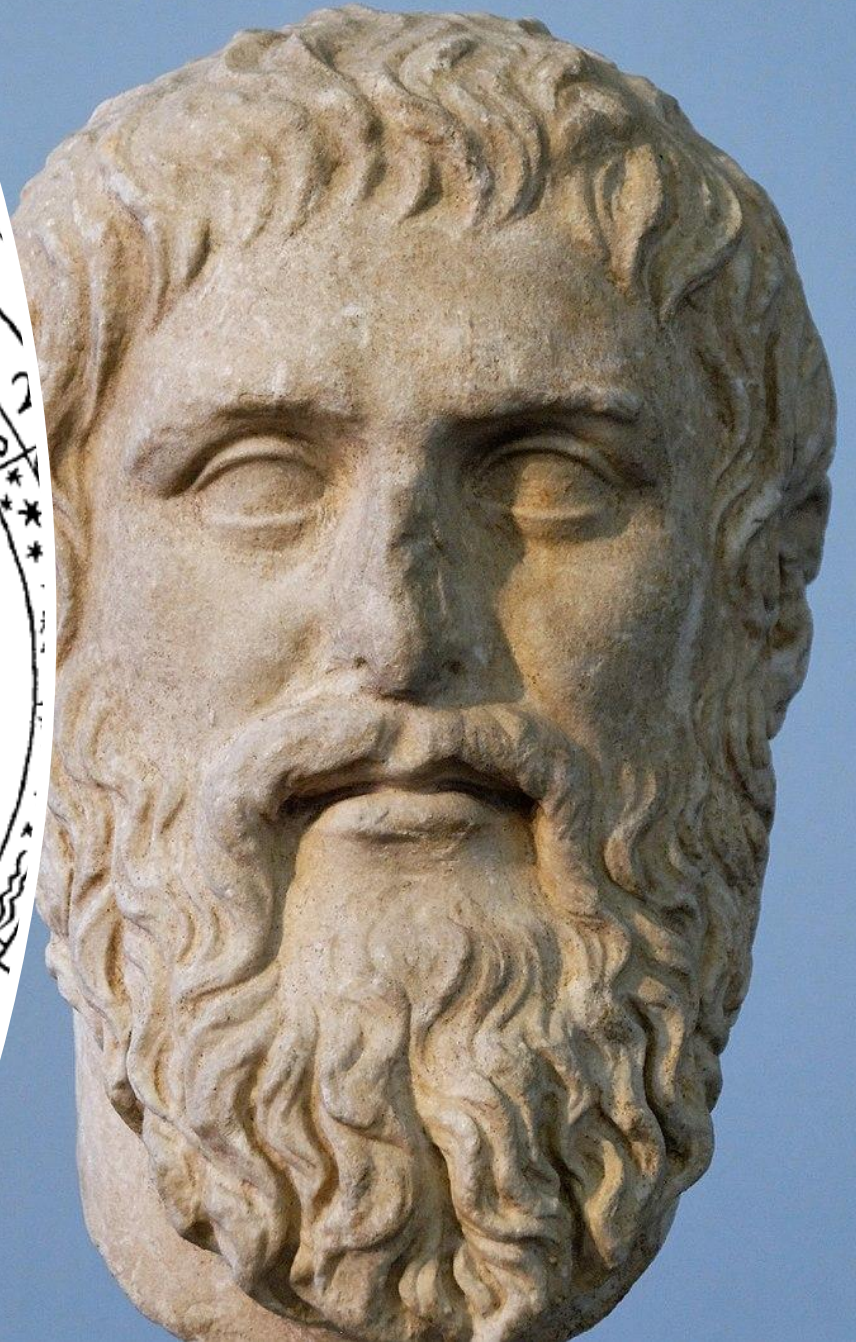
## Distinct Domains

The sublunary realm,  
with the Earth in its  
center

The heavenly domain  
of the seven planetary  
spheres with the  
enclosing eighth sphere  
of the fixed stars all of  
them ruled by the  
cosmic soul

The intelligible realm  
of aeons, with their  
transcendent supreme  
god – the One

Schema huius præmissæ diuisionis Sphærarum .



Schema huius præmissæ diuisionis Sphærarum.

EMPIREVM

Decimum Cœlum

Primum Mobile

HABITABILIS

Crystallinum

Firmamentum

COELVM

SATVRNI

IOVIS

MARTIS

SOLIS

VENERIS

MERCVRII

LVNA

ELECTORVM

# Modified Platonic Cosmos

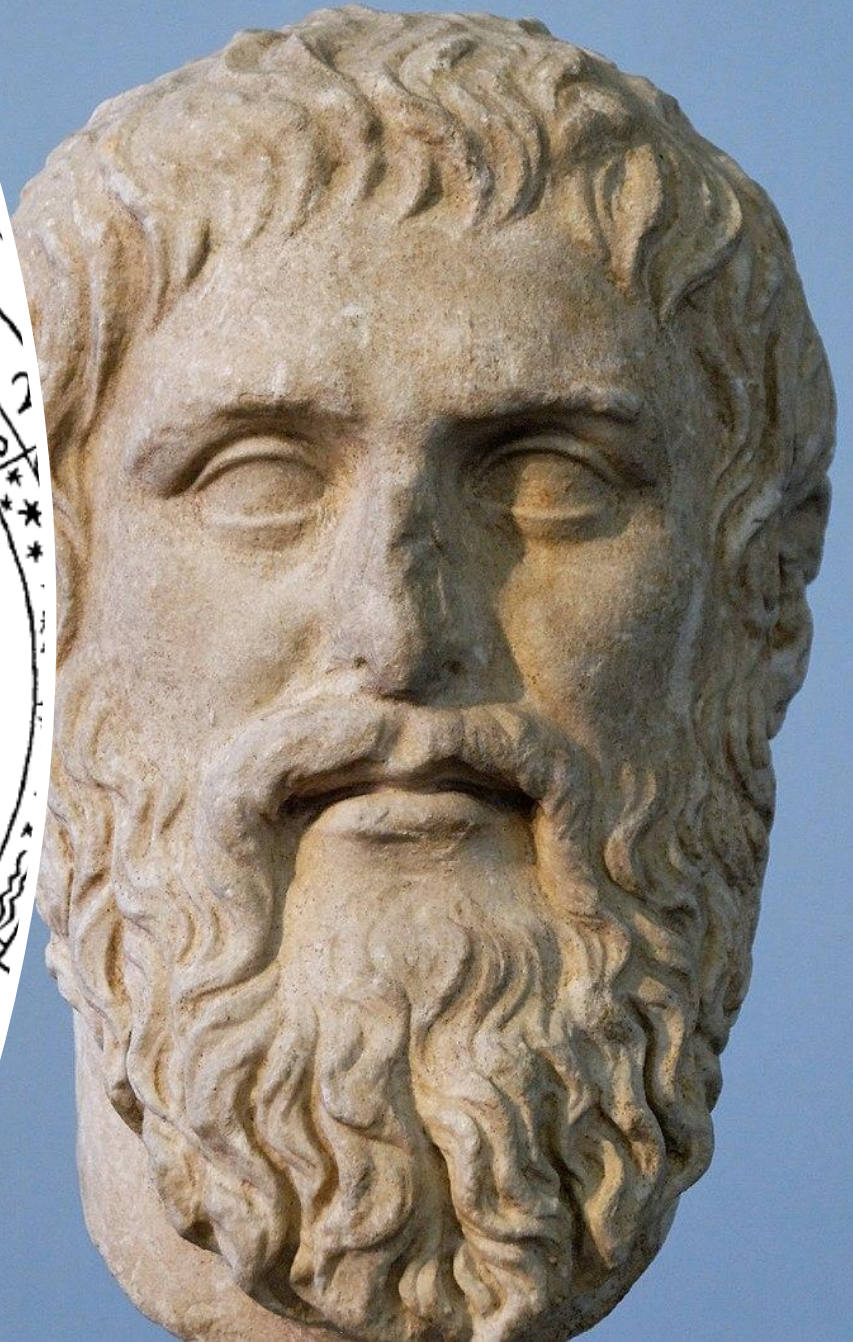
# Platonic Salvation

# Mastering the appetites

# Taking care of the soul

# Gnostic Salvation

# Divine revelation



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# Gnosis

## Knowledge of the Self

‘But gnosis is not primarily rational knowledge... As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as ‘insight’, for gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny.’

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels* (pp. 11-12).

‘who we were, and what we have become; where we were . . . whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.’

Theodotus, cited in Clemens Alexandrinus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2.

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# Gnosis

**Self-knowledge is knowledge of God;  
the self and the divine are identical.**

‘Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, ‘My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.’ Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him in yourself.’

Monoimus, cited in Hippolytus, REF 8.15.1–2.

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# Gnosis

**Through gnosis humanity can reach the divine**

‘Gnosis meant pre-eminently knowledge of God, and from what we have said about the radical transcendence of the deity it follows that “knowledge of God” is the knowledge of something naturally unknowable and therefore itself not a natural condition.’

Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, loc 1077

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# A Priori Knowledge

It is returning to a state that was lost at birth

Gnosis is recognition, a regaining or relearning of knowledge once known but subsequently forgotten or repressed in the prison house of the flesh

‘It is knowledge of the self in its universal aspect, its origin and essence, its plight and purpose’

Robert Galbreath, 'Problematic Gnosis: Hesse, Singer, Lessing, and the Limitations of Modern Gnosticism, p.

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# Salvation Through Knowledge of God

‘Now it is fitting that the soul regenerates herself and becomes again as she formerly was. The soul then moves of her own accord. And she received the divine nature from the father for her rejuvenation, so that she might be restored to the place where originally she had been. This is the resurrection that is from the dead. This is the ransom from captivity. This is the upward journey of ascent to heaven. This is the way of ascent to the father.’

*The Exegesis on the Soul*, Translated by William C. Robinson Jr, The Nag Hammadi Library (The Gnostic Society Library), <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/exe.html>

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# Gnosis

‘Being concerned with the secrets of salvation, “knowledge” is not just theoretical information about certain things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about of salvation.’

‘The ultimate “object” of gnosis is God: its event in the soul transforms the knower himself by making him a partaker in the divine existence’

Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, loc 1077

# The Cosmos

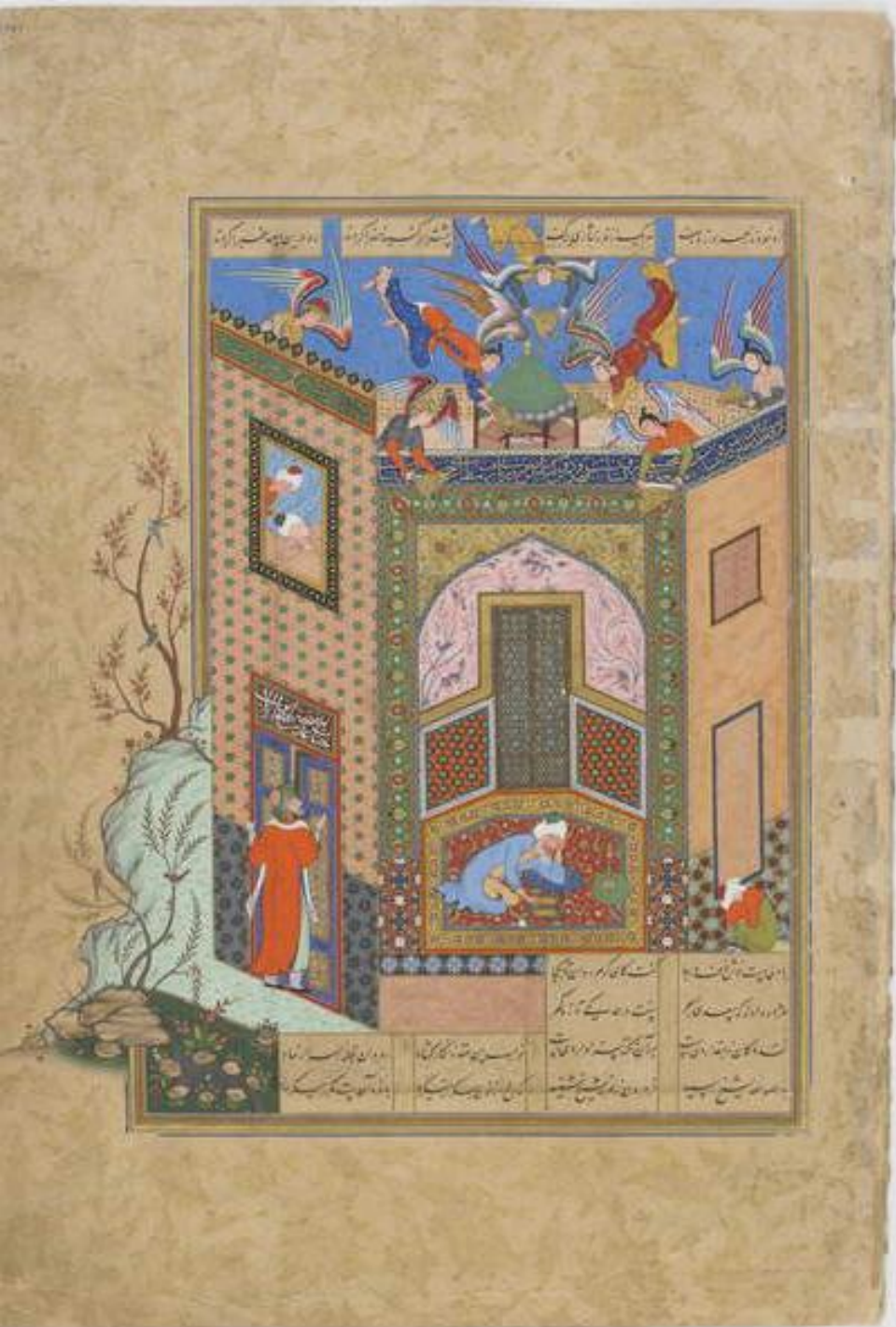
A prison where humanity is trapped

The material world is evil in comparison to the world of the deity

Around and above it the cosmic spheres are ranged like concentric enclosing shells.

These are the seven spheres of the planets surrounded by the eighth, that of the fixed stars.

*On the Origin of the World*



# The Cosmos

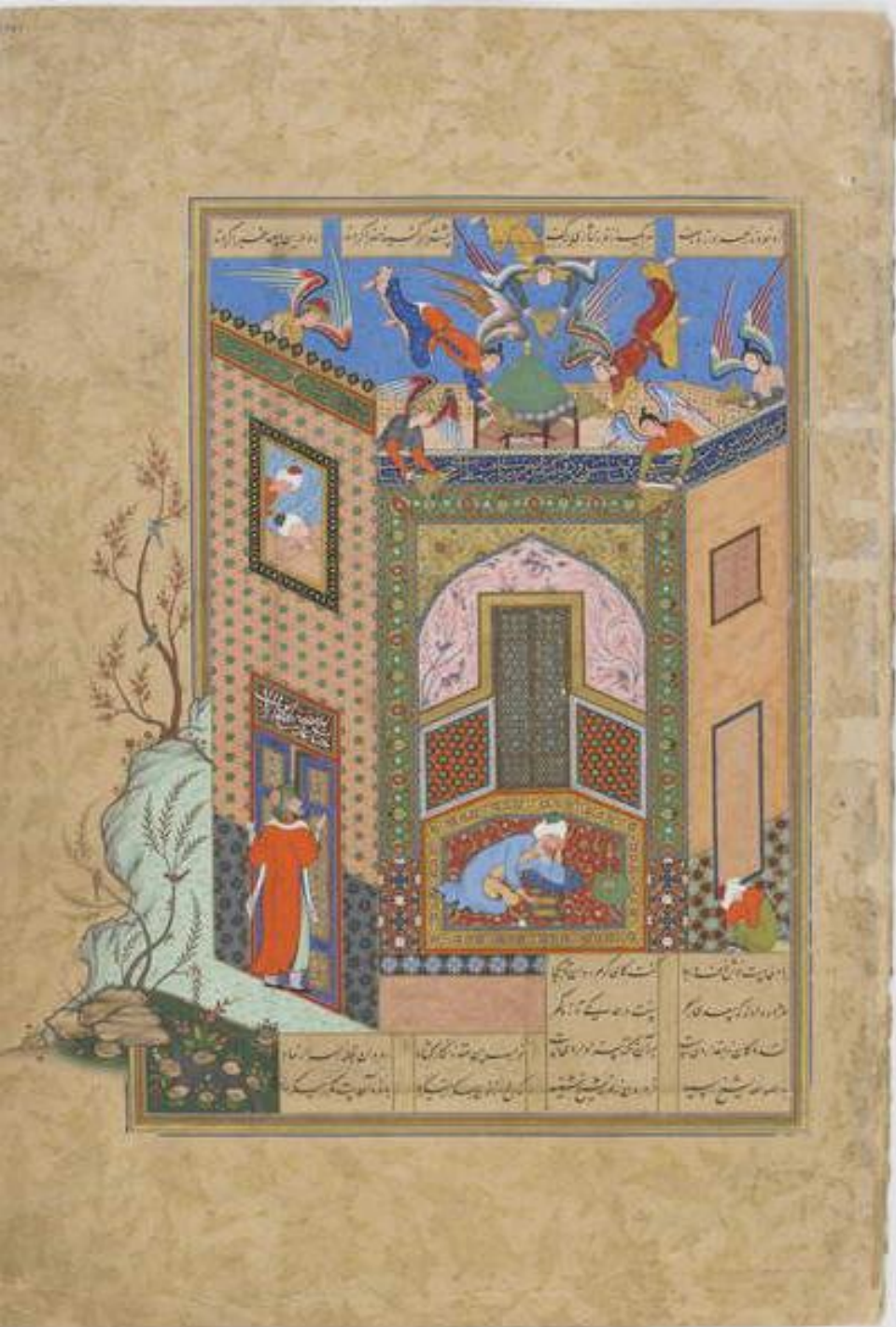
The cosmos is the domain of the planetary demons known as Archons

The collective rulers of the world

The planetary spheres are the seats of the Archons with each sphere having own Archon

The Archons seek to prevent the spirits of humans from passing up through its spheres to the divine realm beyond

*On the Origin of the World*



# The Cosmos

The whole purpose of the spheres is to separate humanity from God

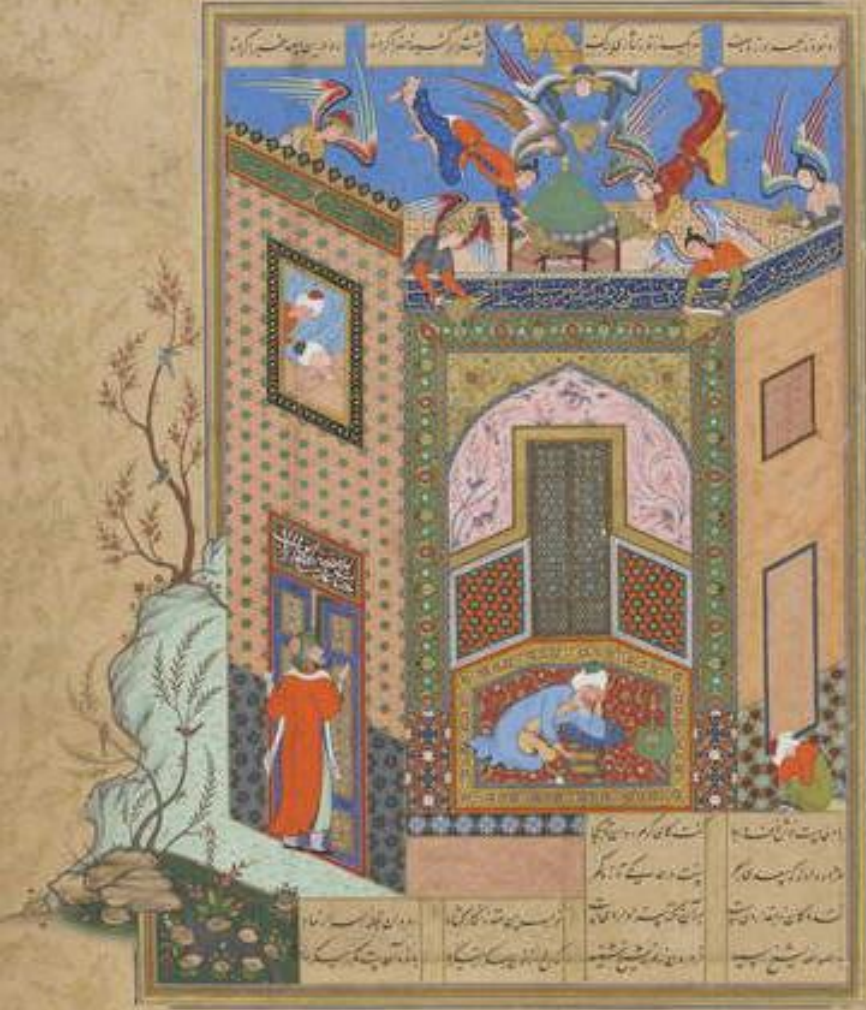
Each sphere has its own appetites and passions which are passed on to humans by the Archons

After death, the spirit travels upwards, leaving behind at each sphere the appetites and passions associated with it, until it reaches the divine realm and becomes reunited with God

- *On the Origin of the World*

The Archons are rulers of the world except when this role is played by their leader, Yaldaboath

- *The Apocryphon of John*



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# Gnosis

‘Through his body and his soul man is a part of the world and subjected to the *heimarmene*. Enclosed in the soul is the spirit, or “pneuma” (called also the “spark”), a portion of the divine substance from beyond which has fallen into the world; and the Archons created man for the express purpose of keeping it captive there. Thus, as in the macrocosm, man is enclosed by the seven spheres, so in the human microcosm again the pneuma is enclosed by the seven soul-vestments originating from them’.

Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Loc. 1241

# Sethianism

A Gnostic group from the early Christian era who claimed to possess secret knowledge concerning union with the Divine

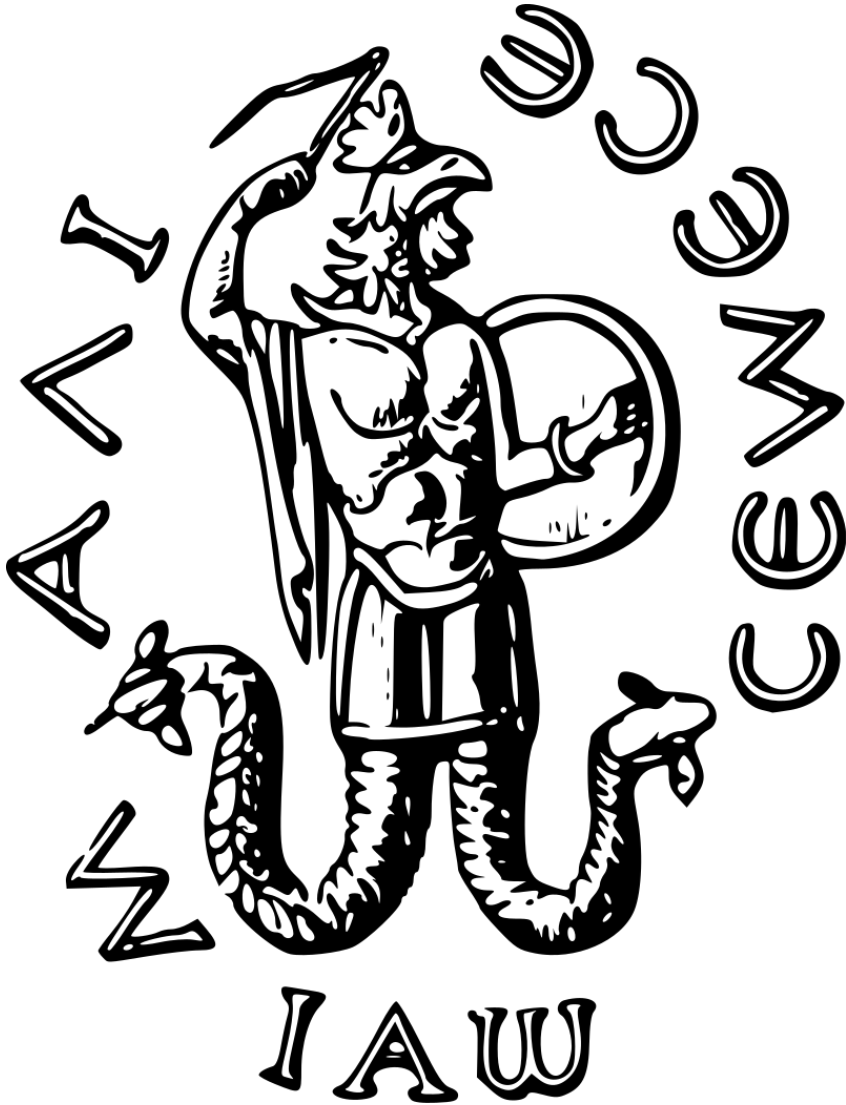
Influenced by Judaism and Platonism

Derived its name from the third son of Adam and Eve who is seen as a divine Incarnation

A different interpretation of *Genesis*

*The Apocryphon of John* contains the full Sethian cosmogony myth

Sethian Texts





# *The Apocryphon of John*

The *Secret Book of John* – no original Greek version exists

Several versions in Coptic language, three of which were in the Nag Hammadi books and one in the Berlin Codex

Secret teachings revealed by the risen Jesus to his disciple John son of Zebedee

Longer versions have added material from the *Book of Zoroaster*



# *The Apocryphon of John*

## **Secret Knowledge**

‘Look, now I shall ascend to the perfect realm. I have finished everything for you in your hearing. I have told you everything for you to record and communicate secretly to your spiritual friends. This is the mystery of the unshakable generation. The Savior communicated this to John for him to record and safeguard. He said to him, “Cursed be anyone who will trade these things for a gift, for food, drink, clothes, or anything like this.” These things were communicated to him in a mystery, and at once the Savior disappeared. Then John went to the other disciples and reported what the Savior had told him.’

*The Secret Book of John, p. 132*

# *The Apocryphon of John*

Jesus is now Father, Mother and Son – the supreme deity

There is an upper God of pure goodness and an evil lower God

There is a divine realm - the Pleroma of light organized into Four Luminaries, Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithai, and Eleleth

The cosmos came into being through the fall of Sophia/ Wisdom and the creation of a lower world at the hands of her ill-begotten son, Yaldabaoth, and his demonic underlings

It is now dominated by the inferior powers that now control it.

*The Secret Book of John*, p. 105



# Cosmogony

The first emanation from the mind of the father is Barbelo, the divine mother, 'the Forethought of the All'

'These are the five aeons of the Father. They are: the first human, the image of the Invisible Spirit, that is, Forethought, which is Barbelo, and Thought, along with Foreknowledge, Incorruptibility, Life Eternal and Truth.'

Barbelo conceives

Twelve aeons of which Sophia is one. By herself without a partner, she gives birth to Yaldabaoth

'He took control and created for himself other aeons with luminous fire, which still exists. He mated with the mindlessness in him and produced authorities for himself'

He produces 12 Archons

*The Secret Book of John*, pp. 110-115





# *The Apocryphon of John*

The order of the Pleroma is overturned when Sophia chooses to give birth to Yaldaboath without a partner

Yaldaboath fabricates his own fiery realm and the physical world in it

The rest of the story is a series of attempts to recover the stolen power on the part of the victimized heroine Sophia

These attempts are only partly successful, each bringing about a temporary recovery of the spiritual power, but only until another setback is dealt by Yaldabaoth and his minions

*The Secret Book of John*



# Yaldabaoth – the Demiurge

‘This gloomy archon has three names: the first name is Yaldabaoth, the second is Sakla, the third is Samael. He is wicked in the mindlessness within him. He said, “I am God and there is no other god beside me,” since he did not know from where his own strength had come.’

- *The Secret Book of John*, p. 116



# Yaldaboath – the Demiurge

Creates the world following *Timaeus*

Forms the four elements

Arranges them in concentric spherical layers which constitutes the world body

Fits them into celestial circles or the world soul

Then makes the fixed stars and the earth

He ‘fabricates for himself an aeon burning with a luminous fire’ which he fills up with the zodiacal band, the planets, and other stars of the sky

*The Secret History of John*

# Yaldaboath – the Demiurge

## Zodiacal Authorities

‘The name of the first is Athoth, whom generations call the [reaper]. The second is Harmas, who is the jealous eye. The third is Kalila-Oumbri. The fourth is Yabel. The fifth is Adonaios, who is called Sabaoth. The sixth is Cain, whom generations of people call the sun. The seventh is Abel. The eighth is Abrisene. The ninth is Yobel. The tenth is Armoupieel. The eleventh is Melcheir-Adonein. The twelfth is Belias, who is over the depth of the underworld.’

*The Secret History of John*, pp. 114-115.



Lion-faced Deity (Yaldaboath) By  
Unknown Desconocido; reproducido  
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# Yaldaboath – the Demiurge

## The Seven Planetary Archons

‘The first is Athoth, and has the face of a sheep. The second is Eloaios, and has the face of a donkey. The third is Astaphaios, and has the face of a hyena. The fourth is Yao, and has the face of a snake with seven heads. The fifth is Sabaoth, and has the face of a snake. The sixth is Adonin, and has the face of an ape. The seventh is Sabbataios, and has a face of flaming fire.’

*The Secret History of John*, p. 116





# Yaldaboath – the Demiurge

## Assigns the Archons:

‘In his thought he united the seven powers with the authorities that were with him. When he spoke, it was done. He named each of the powers, beginning with the highest: First is goodness, with the first power, Athoth. Second is forethought, with the second power, Eloaios. Third is divinity, with the third power, Astaphaios. Fourth is lordship, with the fourth power, Yao. Fifth is kingdom, with the fifth power, Sabaoth. Sixth is jealousy, with the sixth power, Adonin. Seventh is understanding, with the seventh power, Sabbataios.

*The Secret History of John*, p. 117



# Yaldabaoth – the Demiurge

Twelve zodiacal authorities

Seven planetary rulers

Thirty-six decans

Seventy-two pentads

The angels controlling individual degrees of the zodiacal band

All of these came to existence through Yaldabaoth's madness

‘The rulers each created seven powers for themselves, and the powers each created six angels, until there were 365 angels’

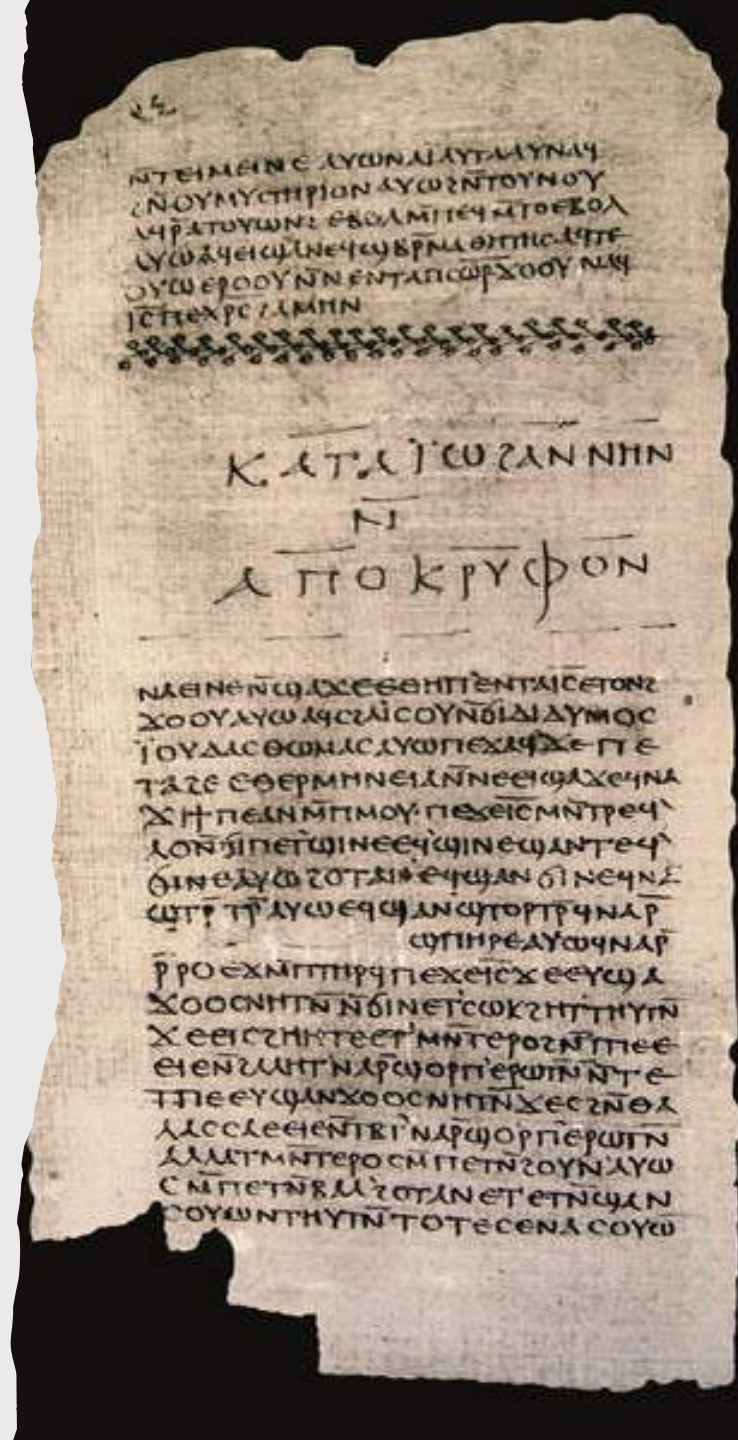
*The Secret Book of John*, p. 116



## Astrology in the Gnostic Texts

‘Beneath the creator, the spiritual world (pleroma) contained 30 ‘aeons’ or power of time, corresponding to the 30 years of Christ’s life after baptism, the 30 days of the lunar month and the degrees of one zodiac sign. Eighteen of these aeons correspond to the 18 months between resurrection and ascension while the remaining 12 related to Christ’s age when he was discovered by the doctors of law in the temple, the apostles, the 12 months of his ministry, the months of the year and the signs of the zodiac.’

Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology*, p. 275



# Gnostic Dualism



Image: Mani, Bridgeman Library

## Anthropological Dualism

Body and soul

## Cosmological Dualism

The cosmos and a divine realm beyond the celestial spheres

## Differs from Platonic Dualism

Identification of matter with evil

Anti-cosmic

‘An unequivocally negative evaluation of the visible world together with its creator; it ranks as a kingdom of evil and of darkness’

Cosmos populated by demons, who act as obstacles between man and God

Kurt Rudolph and Robert McLachlan Wilson, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of*, p. 61.



# Dualism

‘Gnosticism has been the most radical embodiment of dualism ever to have appeared on the stage of history, and its exploration provides a case study of all that is implicated in it. It is a split between self and world, man’s alienation from nature, the metaphysical devaluation of nature, the cosmic solitude of the spirit and the nihilism of mundane norms; and in its general extremist style it shows what radicalism really is.’

Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*. Kindle Edition, Loc 399

# Dualism



‘Gnosticism is renowned for its severe delineations of good and evil deities, and its casting of the material world as evil. This dualism, which characterizes the spiritual (in the form of a transcendent God) as good and the material (the physical world) as evil, is a special feature of Gnosticism’

Greenbaum, p. 162

# Anthropological Dualism



Image: Mani, Bridgeman Library

People are composed, on the one hand, of an earthly body and soul, which the Archons have afflicted with their own appetites and passions, corresponding to one of the planetary spheres and, on the other hand, of a divine spirit.

*Apocryphon of John.*

The spirit, which is an actual piece of god, is a divine spark that is trapped in the human soul.

*The Teachings of Silvanus.*

The Archons created humanity to purposely keep this divine spark in the world. Thus, as the world is enclosed by the planetary spheres, the spirit is enclosed by the appetites and passions originating from them

*Apocryphon of John.*

# Dualism



‘When the first editors of Thomas’s gospel found in it virtually no evidence for dualism, nihilism, philosophical speculation, or weird mythology, most assumed that this just goes to show how devious heretics are: they do not say what they really mean. Many scholars decided that even if they could not find these elements in Thomas explicitly, they must be there implicitly; consequently, some decided just to read them into their understanding of the Gospel of Thomas. Most of the first publications did this; some still do even now.’

*The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, p. 8

‘The discoveries at Nag Hammadi also disclose that Valentinian Gnosticism – the most influential and sophisticated form of gnostic teaching, and by far the most threatening to the church – differs essentially from dualism. The theme of the oneness of God dominates the opening section of the *Tripartite Tractate*, a Valentinian treatise from Nag Hammadi which describes the origin of all being.’

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 56

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# Tripartite Tractate

‘The Father is singular while being many. For he is first and he is unique, though without being solitary. How else could he be a father? For from the word “father” it follows that there is a “son.” That singular one who is the only Father is in fact like a tree that has a trunk, branches, and fruit.’

*The Tripartite Tractate, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures, p. 62*

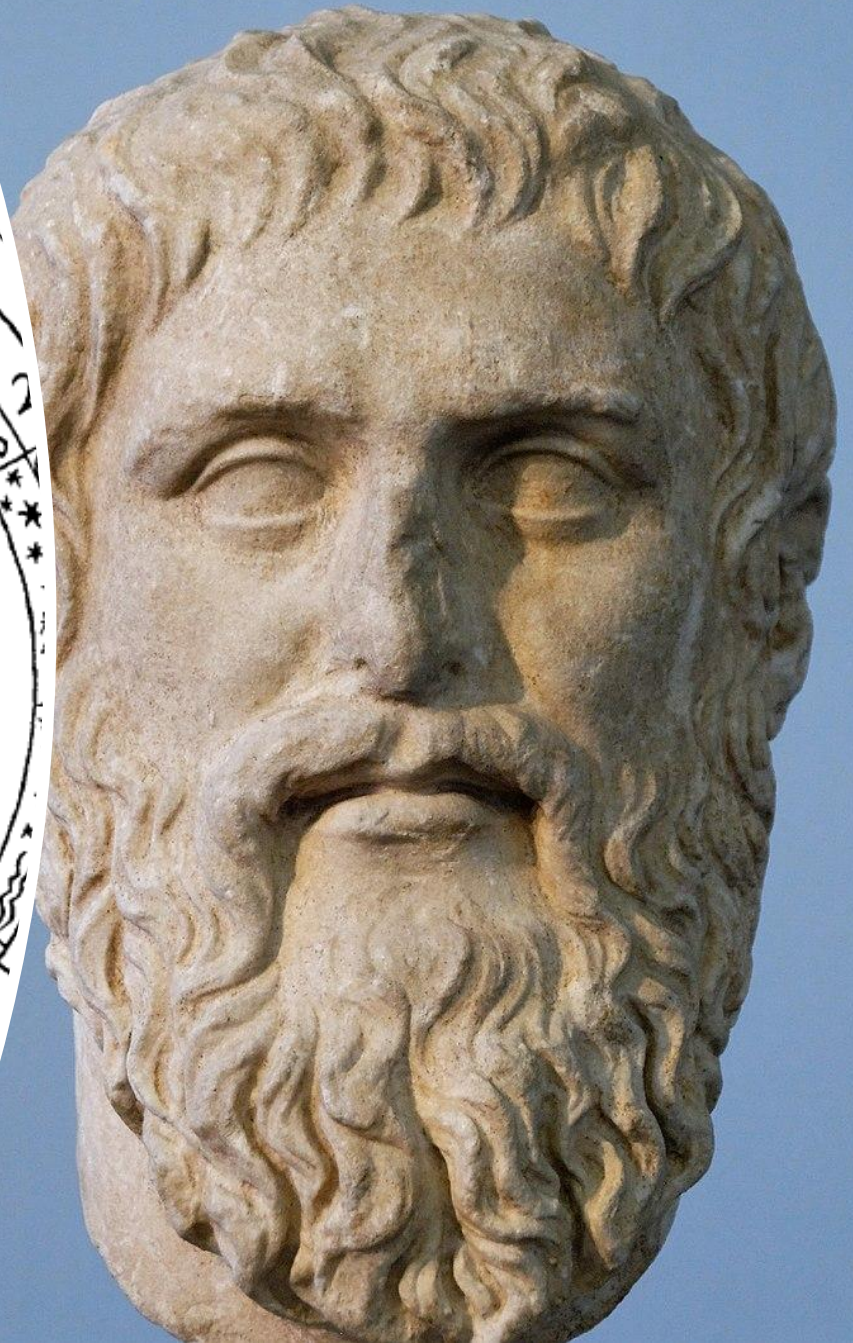
# Modified Platonic Cosmos

Did Plato contribute to Gnostic dualism?

‘He (Plato) had helped to introduce serious doubts as to the possibility of human existence not at odds with the laws of the cosmos, with his doctrine of a radical opposition between the essential world of ideas and the transient, corruptible world of appearance. These doubts were translated, then, into a concept of the human body as, if not a prison, certainly an obstacle to the free development of the life of the spirit.’

Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, p. 54

Schema huius præmissæ diuisionis Sphærarum.



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# Images

'Beginning of the Gospel of Thomas', Nag Hammadi Codex II, c.350 AD (ink on papyrus), Wikimedia commons

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