

GNOSTICISM

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Notes

Greek *gnosis*, knowledge.

The central problem of religion in the first centuries CE was the relationship of the soul to the stars Rob Hand

The emerging Christian position emphasised transcendence rather than immanence; God was outside the creation by contrast to the Platonic model in which the world emanated out of him – and s he was inside it.

The Jewish Gnostics, unable to explain why their God repeatedly abandoned them to oppression, concluded that their creator, Yahweh, was fundamentally wicked.

St Paul, I Corinthians 6.19

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?

St Paul, I Corinthians 2. 6-7

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are destined to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.

- A system of belief that flourished in the Roman world and middle east in the early Christian era. Came to prominence in early 2nd c; separate branches formed by late 2nd c.
- Strong roots in Hellenised Judaism.
- In Christian terms, best seen as a heavily Platonic/Hermetic/Persian influenced strain of Christianity.
- In the general sense, of direct knowledge of God, 'born again' Christianity, in which direct contact with God is emphasised is Gnostic.
- The rejection of the priesthood by very 'low' Protestants, also has Gnostic associations.
- One explicitly Gnostic religious group survives - the Mandeans in southern Iraq and Iran.
- The Ismaili Muslims also retain much Gnostic theology and cosmology.
- But Gnosticism' as an 'ism' is a modern concept. To the Christians of the Roman world the Gnostics were a particular group, regarded by mainstream Catholics as heretics, with a precise cosmology and dogma.

- Until 1945-6 the Gnostics were known mainly through anti-Gnostic Christian writings. Then over 40 texts were at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Most texts date from c 4th c, but in their original form may have been written in 2nd c or earlier.
- The Nag Hammadi texts are not all Gnostic in character. The collection also includes an extract on the nature and structure of the soul from Plato's *Republic*, bk. 9. and an extract from the Hermetic *Asclepius*.

Contemporary relevance

Gnostic ideas, particularly the spiritual cosmology of the ascent through the planetary spheres, re-entered European thought with the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the 15th c. They then became part of the esoteric tradition until Mme Blavatsky incorporated them in Theosophy. Through Theosophy and the rest of the late 19th/early 20th c esoteric teachings, they entered New Age culture.

It is generally argued that a key feature of New Age thought is its Gnosticism (Hanegraaff 1996: 520): an emphasis on the inner spiritual path and, amongst Christian New Agers (Bailey, Steiner, Rudhyar), an emphasis on the spiritual Christ rather than the human Jesus.

Gnosticism's role as a disturbing feature of the New Age was noted by Groothuis (1986: 42) Miller (1990: 5) and Newport (1998: 20). The revival of the Gnostic emphasis on the inner divine (Quispel 1987: 568) may well be a key to much mainstream Christian antipathy to New Age teaching for, in this respect, New Age essentially represents the resurgence of a Christian heresy. The direct legacy of Renaissance Gnosticism, borrowed from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, can be traced via Christian Kabbalists such as Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), to William Blake (Quispel 1987: 573), while Gnosticism was a profound inspiration for both H.P. Blavatsky (see for example 1877: I. 1-54) and C.G. Jung (see for example, 1959b). Bloom (1996) regards Gnosticism as a consistent part of the western tradition, defining Gnosis as 'an acquaintance with, or knowledge of, the God within'. He further defines four major concerns: angelology, 'a quasi-predictive element in dreams', the 'near-death experience' and the approach of the millennium. Gnosticism he notes, is a consistent feature of Christianity even though it is condemned as heretical by the 'normative' western tradition, which is institutional, historical and dogmatic. He further defines four major concerns: angelology, 'a quasi-predictive element in dreams', the 'near-death experience' and the approach of the millennium. Gnosticism he notes, is a consistent feature of Christianity even though it is condemned as heretical by the 'normative' western tradition, which is institutional, historical and dogmatic. However, he notes that this normative tradition is less prevalent in the USA, linking that fact to the greater millennial concern amongst Christians there. Tumber, in her study of the origins of the New Age, also argues that Gnosticism, even in the diluted in the sense of a general looking inward for inspiration, is fundamental to modern culture (Tumber 2002: 33-8). Lucas has pointed out the striking similarities between New Agers and Pentecostals and evangelicals, including a shared emphasis on millenarianism, prophecy, healing and the direct experience of God (1992: 210). Meanwhile Gilhus has argued that the Gnostic 'myth' opens doors to a 'global religious market' by reconciling the tension between the New Age as a

secularised religion aiming at immanence on the one hand, and dependent on a traditional transcendent on the other (Gilhus 20001: 130).

Jung played a major part in popularising Gnostic thought. In 1952 the Jung Institute acquired five of the Nag Hammadi texts, collectively known as the Jung codex.

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A modern work:

Erik Davis

Techgnosis: myth, magic and religion in the information age.

Christian Gnosticism: Principal teachers

Basilides

2nd c. Gnostic teacher at Alexandria.

Only fragments of his teachings remain.

Marcion

Died. c. 160

Arrived at Rome c. 140, excommunicated 144, organised his followers throughout the Empire.

Christian Gospel entirely a gospel of Love - as opposed to the Law of the OT, which he rejected.

Creator God of OT had nothing in common with God of Love revealed by Jesus in NT.

The 11th commandment: John xiii.34-35: A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All will know you are my disciples if you love one another'. See also John 15.12, Matthew 19.10, 22.39; Mark 12.31.

Only St Paul understood this contrast between Law and Grace; the apostles and evangelists were still tied to their Jewish roots.

Rejected all NT except 10 of Paul's works (not Timothy and Titus) and an edited version of Luke.

Denied existence of inner divine.

Docetic.

Valentinus.

Founded Valentinians.

Born Egypt, lived Rome c. 136- c.165.

The *pleroma* (spiritual world) consists of 30 'aeons' in pairs (syzygies), originally aspects of God, but later maybe distinct deities.

Material visible world created by the Demiurge, the God of the OT, the offspring of Sophia, the youngest of the aeons, Sophia (who had fallen). Redemption possible through Christ, another aeon, who united himself with the man Jesus (either at his conception or baptism) to bring man the saving knowledge (gnosis) of his origin and destiny.

Gnosis only given to the spiritual men or *pneumatics*, i.e., Valentinians, who enter it through the *pleroma*.

Other Christians (*psychics*) can attain only the middle realm of the Demiurge through faith and works.

The rest of humanity is damned.

Core ideas.

1. That a divine spark exists inside every human (and thus that direct knowledge of the divine is possible without priestly mediation.)

The Teachings of Silvanus 93: '...But I say that God is the spiritual one. Man has taken shape from the substance of God. The divine soul shares partly in this One (God); furthermore, it shares partly in the flesh. The base soul is wont to turn from side to side {...} which it imagines is the truth...'

Therefore every human has a 3-fold nature

The Teachings of Silvanus 92:

'But before everything (else), know your birth. Know yourself, that is, from what substance you are, or from what race, or from what species. Understand that you have come into being from three races: from the earth, from the formed and from the created. The body has come into being from the earth with an earthly substance, but the formed, for the sake of the soul, has come into being from the thought of the Divine. The created, however, is the mind, which has come into being in conformity with the image of God. The divine mind has substance from the Divine, but the soul is that which he (God) has formed for their own hearts. For I think that it (the soul) exists as wife of that

which has come into being in conformity with the image, but matter is the substance of the body which has come into being from the earth.

[If] you mix yourself, you will acquire the **93** three parts as you fall from virtue into inferiority. Live according to the mind. Do not think about things belonging to the flesh. Acquire strength, for the mind is strong. If you fall from this other, you have become male-female. And if you cast out the substance of the mind, which is thought, you have cut off the male part and turned yourself to the female part alone.*

*102. Male and reason are 'male names'.

2. Theology - theogony - creation: emanation

As in Platonic theology the universe emanates out of the original, supreme, unknowable divine being. As part of this the 30 'aeons' manifest out of this being. One of the aeons is the Demiurge, the Yahweh of the Old Testament.

'You must suppose, then,' I went on, 'that there are these two powers of which I have spoken, and that one of them is supreme over everything in the intelligible world, the other over everything in the visible world - I won't say in the physical universe or you will think I'm playing with words. At any rate you understand there are these two orders of things, the visible and the intelligible'.(Plato Republic, 509, trans Lee, p. 275.

Corpus Hermeticum: "And God-the-Mind, being male and female both, as Light and Life subsisting, brought forth another Mind to give things form, who, God as he was of Fire and Spirit, formed *Seven Rulers who enclose the cosmos that the sense perceives. Men call their ruling Fate.*"

2a. The God of the Old Testament is wicked.

Sophia, one of the aeons, conceived a thought without permission from the 'Spirit', the supreme creator, and her 'maleness'. Because the thought was so strong something had to come put of her, but because it was born out of a lack of balance between male and female it was imperfect: This being then calls himself God because he is arrogant and ignorant.

In what may be a parallel with Marduk's creation of the physical structure of the cosmos in the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish, God then creates the planetary spheres and the days of the week, and gives them their qualities.

The Apocryphon of John 10.

And when she saw the (consequences of) her desire, it changed into a firm of a lion-faced serpent. And its eyes were like lightning fires which flash. She cast it away from her outside that place, that no one of the immortal ones might see it, for she had created it in ignorance. And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the holy Spirit who is called the mother of the living. And she called his name Yaltabaoth.

This is the first archon who took a great power from his mother. And he removed himself from her and moved away from the places in which he was born. He became strong and created for himself other aeons with a flame of luminous fire which (still) exists now. And he joined with his arrogance

which is in him and begot authorities for himself. The name of the first one is Athoth, whom the generations call [the reaper]. The second one is Harmas, who is [the eye] of envy. The third one is Kalila-Oumbri. The fourth one is Yabel. The fifth one is Adonaiou, who is called Sabaoth. The sixth one is Cain, whom the generations of men call the sun. The seventh is Abel. The eighth is Abrisene. The ninth is Yobel. The tenth is Armoupieel. The eleventh is Melceir-Adonein. The twelfth is Belias, it is he who is over the depth of Hades. And he placed seven kings - each corresponding to the firmaments of heaven - over the seven heavens, and five over the depths of the abyss, that they may reign. And he shared his fire with them, but he did not send forth from the power of the light which he had taken from his mother, for he is ignorant darkness.

And then the light had mixed with the darkness, it caused the darkness to shine. And when the darkness had mixed with the light, it darkened the might and it became neither light nor dark, but it became dim.

Now the archon who is weak has three names. The first name is Yaltabaoth, the second is Saklas, and the third is Samael. And he is impious in his arrogance which is in him. For he said, 'I am God and there is no other God beside me,' for he is ignorant of his strength, the place from which he had come.

And the archons created seven powers* for themselves, and the powers created for themselves six angels for each one until they became 365 angels.

*days

3. Pessimistic view of the material world, which it saw as a prison for the soul created by the junior, malevolent god, identified with the God of the Old testament. The entire cosmos itself was created by the distant, impersonal Platonic God (a 'Great Mind' - The Teachings of Silvanus: 95). The material world is therefore antagonistic to the truly spiritual.

The Teachings of Silvanus 97: Do not trust anyone as a friend, for this whole world has come into being deceitfully, and every [man] is troubled [in vain]. All things [of] **98** the world are not profitable, but they happen in vain. There is no one, not even a brother, (who is trustworthy), since each one is seeking his own advantage

4. Docetism. Christian Gnosticism held a 'docetic' (Greek *dokeo*, appear) view of Christ: that he had only 'assumed' human form and that his supposed crucifixion was merely a deception to fool the evil powers. This stressed Christ's divinity and minimised his human suffering.

2 John 7: For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist'.

(written c. mid 2nd c CE - the book has only 13 verses - the object would therefore seem to have been to explicitly counter Gnosticism)

As the Reachout Trust says,

'From the beginning the church has had to combat error. Paul combated the cult of Gnosticism in his day (Colossians 2: 8,18,19) as did the apostle John (1 John).'

5. Manichaeism.

Conventionally the idea, Zoroastrian in origin, of the primeval struggle between the gods of good/light and evil/darkness.

Mani or Manes (c.216 -c. 276/7), began teaching in Persia c. 240. The material world is an invasion of the realm of light by the powers of darkness. The purpose of religion is to release the particles of light imprisoned in matter assisted by Buddha, the prophets, Jesus and mani himself. Mani was imprisoned by the Zoroastrian hierarchy and died, but his ideas spread west.

St Augustine was originally a Manichean.

Cathars (Greek *kathari*, pure ones). Celibate, pure, ascetic, followed 3rd c Roman bishop, Novatian. Known as Bogomiles in medieval Bulgaria, Albigenses in 13th-14th c France: exterminated in Albigensian crusade. The Mandaean survive in southern Iraq, though suffered under Saddam.

Manichean Cosmology: from Jonas p 233:

The history of the world and of man is a continual process of the freeing of Light, and all the arrangements of the universe like all events of history are considered from this point of view. Instruments of salvation in history are the call of the apostles, the founders of the "churches" (religions), with their effect of awakening, instruction, and sanctification. The universe's instrument of salvation is the cosmic revolution, specially that of the sun, which "circling the heavens collects with its rays the members of God, even out of the sewers" (Augustine). That is, the sun automatically, as a process of nature, purifies Light from the Hyle,* and like a ship transports it to the wheel of the Zodiac, whose rotation brings it to the world of Light. The two instruments of salvation supplement each other: "The liberation, separation and raising up of parts of Light is helped by the praise, the sanctification, the pure word, and the pious works. Thereby the parts of Light [i.e., the souls of the dead] mount up by the pillar of dawn to the sphere of the moon, and the moon receives them incessantly from the first to the middle of the month, so that it waxes and gets full, and then it guides them to the sun until the end of the month, and thus effects its waning in that it is lightened of its burden. And in this manner the ferry is loaded and unloaded again, and the sun transmits the Light to the Light above it in the world of praise, and it goes on in that world until it arrives at the highest and pure Light. The sun does not cease to do this until nothing of the parts of Light is left in this world but a small part so bound that sun and moon cannot detach it [this the final conflagration will free]."[†]

* The material world

[†] Jonas notes that this passage compiled from Shahrastani, En-Nadim and Hegemonius.

Manichaeans were divided into 2 groups:

The Elect or True - led an ascetic, monastic life. After death soul comes to the Paradise of Light.

The Soldiers or Hearers - the mass of ordinary believers. After death are reincarnated to continue battle against darkness until they join the Elect.

Plus

3rd group of humanity - sinners - fall into the power of the Devil - after death go to hell.

'The Horoscope of the Messiah', Dead Sea Scrolls 4Q186:

'His eyes are black and glowing. His beard is...and it is...His voice is gentle. His teeth are fine and well aligned....His spirit consist of eight (parts) [in the House of Light, of] the second Column, and one [in the House of Darkness. And this is] his birthday on which he (is to be/was) born:...And his animal is...'

6. Astrology

Apocryphon of John 14-18.

Adam was created by the seven powers (to include the seven substances) and the 365 angels.

He was therefore a creature of time and space, connected in every detail to the structure of the cosmos.

Jonas, pp. 254-255.

That aspect of the cosmos in which to the Gnostics its character was pre-eminently revealed is the *heimarmene*,* that is, universal fate. This *heimarmene* is dispensed by the planets, or the stars in general, the mythical exponents of the inexorable and hostile law of the universe. The change in the emotional content of the term "cosmos" is nowhere better symbolized than in the depreciation of the formerly most divine part of the visible world, the celestial spheres. The starry sky - which from Plato the Stoics was the purest embodiment of reason in the cosmic hierarchy, the paradigm real, now stared man in the face with the fixed glare of alien power and necessity. Its rule is tyranny, and not providence. Deprived of the venerability with which all sidereal piety up to then had invested it, but still in possession of the prominent and representative position it has acquired, the stellar firmament becomes now the symbol of all that is terrifying to man in the towering factness of the universe. Under this pitiless sky, which no longer inspired worshipful confidence, man becomes conscious of his utter forlornness, of his being no so much a part of, but unaccountably placed in and exposed to, the enveloping system.

Jonas p. 260-1

The inescapable law of cosmic dominion, which even in the mixture of worship and fear characteristic of astrological fatalism had made the stars the highest deities, now provoked the violent revolt of a new consciousness of acosmic freedom, which transferred them in a body to the enemy side. For whatever reasons, the experience of this "order" had turned from a worshipful to a terrifying one. The all-encompassing necessity of its rule became an opprobrium of the powers that exercised it. The new dualism as it were "bracketed" the whole universe with all its gradation of lower and higher levels

and shifted it as a whole to one side of the duality. The spheric architecture as it had been elaborated by traditional cosmology was retained. But whereas it had included the divine, it now became closed against the divine...

...We can imagine with what feelings Gnostic men must have looked up to the starry sky. How evil its brilliance must have looked to them, how alarming its vastness and the rigid mutability of its courses, how cruel its muteness! The music of the spheres was no longer heard, and the admiration for the perfect spherical form gave place to the terror of so much perfection directed at the enslavement of man.

* Heimarmene: Julius Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* (4th c CE), Rhys-Bram translation: 8, 26.

But there are some who agree with us to a certain extent and admit that Fate and Fortune have a certain power, which they call *himarmene*. But they attribute to it a different character which contradicts the law of the necessity of Fate. Thus they appear to maintain which is possible and not possible at the same time.

They claim that this thing which they call *himarmene* is connected to mankind and all living things by a certain relationship...They claim that we are subject to Fate, that is, to Chance, for attaining the end of life. Thus by the law of Fate they claim one end -- that is, dissolution -- destroys us and all living beings. But all the things that pertain to our daily lives they say are in our power. What we do while we are alive belongs to us; only our death belongs to Chance or Fate'.

7. Liberation through Christ

The Teachings of Silvanus 96:

Accept Christ, who is able to set you free, and who has taken on the devices of that one so that through these he might destroy him by deceit. For this is the king whom you have who is forever invincible, against whom no one will be able to fight nor say a word. This is your king and your father, for there is no one like him. The divine teacher is with [you] 97 always. He is a helper, and he meets you because of the good, which is in you.

98 '...Live with Christ, and he will save you. For he is the true light and the sun of life. For just as the sun which is visible and makes light for the eyes of the flesh, so Christ illuminates every mind and the heart...the light of Christ, which is reason...For everything which is visible is a copy of that which is hidden. For as a fire which burns in a place without being confined to it, so it is with the sun which is in the sky, all of whose rays extend to places on the earth. Similarly, Christ has a single being, and he gives light to every place. This is also the way in which he speaks of our mind, as if it were a lamp which burns up the place. (Being) in a part of the soul, it gives light to all the parts.'

8. God not knowable directly

The Teachings of Silvanus 100. 'Now it is not difficult to know the Creator of all creatures, but it is impossible to comprehend the likeness of this One. For it is

difficult not only for men to comprehend God, but it is (also) difficult for every divine being, (both) the angels and the archangels. It is necessary to know God as he is. You cannot know God through anyone except Christ who has the image of the Father, for this image reveals the true likeness in correspondence to that which is revealed. A kind is not usually known apart from an image.'

Further:

101. It is as impossible to look at Christ as to look at the sun

God sees everyone but nobody sees him

Christ is incorruptible, having inherited all from the 'Existent One' (God).

The light of Christ shines on everyone without being corrupted, just as the light of the sun is uncorrupted when it falls on people.

102. Must live in the light to know Christ

Must keep one's mind on the light of heaven, even when it is looking at the earth.

Most not live in darkness.

9. Humanity condemned by lack of knowledge

The Teachings of Silvanus 91.

'But since you cast from yourself God, the holy Father, the true Life, the Spring of Life, therefore you have obtained death as a father and have acquired ignorance as a mother. They have robbed you of the true knowledge.

But return, my son, to your first Father, God, and Wisdom your mother, from whom you came into being from the very first in order that you might fight against all of your enemies, the Powers of the Adversary'.

10. High regard for the feminine.

a) Theology. The Gnostic trinity is not Father, Holy Ghost and Son, but Father, Mother and Son.

The Apocryphon of John 2.

John, John, why do you doubt, or why [are you] afraid? You are not unfamiliar with this image, are you? - that is, do not [be] timid! - I am the one who is [with you (pl).] always. I [am the Father], I am the Mother, I am the Son. I am the undefiled and incorruptible one

b) Apocryphon of John 13-14.

When Sophia sees what she has done in giving birth to God, she weeps and repents.

The Spirit (supreme creator) then moves her to the ninth*, above her son, until she has corrected her deficiency.

*the ninth sphere? - i.e. above the eighth sphere, the stars.

The physical cosmos created by God is therefore presided over by his mother.

c) Position of women in the church. Gospel of Mary: Christ gives a vision to Mary; Mary is criticised by Peter and Andrew but defended by Levi. This seems to be an explicit attempt to assert the rights of women in early Christianity against what appears to have been the subordination of women in Catholic Christianity.

11. Ascent through the Stars

The *Pistis Sophia* describes Christ's struggle as he ascends through the stars as a model for the human ascent.

“Nevertheless I left that place behind me, I came up to the first sphere shining exceedingly, 49 times more than when I gave light within the firmament. Now it happened when I reached the gate of the first sphere, its gates were agitated and they opened of themselves at the same time.

I came into the houses of the spheres shining exceedingly, there being no measure to the light which I had. And all the archons and all those who were in that sphere were agitated together. And they saw the great light which I had.

And they looked upon my garment, they saw the mystery of their name within it. And they were increasingly agitated, and they were in great fear, saying: 'How, has the Lord of the All passed through us without our knowing?' And all their bonds were loosened, and their places and their ranks. And each one abandoned his rank.”¹

The *Pistis Sophia*, discussing Judgement of the righteous and sinners by the Virgin of Light

Pistis Sophia: A Sixth Book: Chapter 147

Pistis Sophia, G.R.S. Mead

"Thereafter they lead it unto the Virgin of Light, and she judgeth it and depositeth it with the little Sabaoth, the Good, him of the Midst, until the sphere turneth itself, and Zeus and Aphrodite come in face of the Virgin of Light, while Kronos and Ares come behind her.

Sophia: A Sixth Book: Chapter 148

Pistis Sophia, G.R.S. Mead

Of the time favourable for the birth of those who shall find the mysteries. Jesus said unto his disciples: "When the sphere turneth itself, and Kronos and Ares come behind the Virgin of Light and Zeus and Aphrodite come in face of the Virgin, they being in their own æons, then

the veils of the Virgin draw themselves aside and she falleth into joy in that hour when she seeth these two light-stars before her. And all the souls which she shall cast at that hour into the circuit of the æons of the sphere, that [390. they may come into the world, will be righteous and good and find at this time the mysteries of the Light; she sendeth them anew that they may find the mysteries of the Light.

Note: Saturn and Mars are behind the Virgin, Jupiter and Venus facing her.

The Gospel of Mary

mid 2nd c, describes Mary Magdalene's vision of the ascent of Christ's soul through the spheres, communicated to her by Christ.

Initially the soul passes through the four powers (probably the four elements), breaking free of each one in turn. After overcoming the third, the soul reached the fourth, which took seven forms:

¹ *Pistis Sophia*, Book one, translation Carl Schmidt and Violet Mcdermott
<http://www.gnosis.org/library/psoph1.htm>

16. The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth of the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the seventh is wrathful wisdom. They ask the soul, 'Whence do you come, slayer of men, or where are you going, conqueror of space?' The soul answered and said, What binds me has been slain, and what surrounds me has been overcome, and my desire has been ended, and ignorance has died. In a [world] I was released 17 from a world, [and] in a type from a heavenly type, and (from the fetter of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of oblivion which is transient. From this time on will I attain to the rest of the time, of the season, of the aeon, in silence.

See also John 3: 12-15

12. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

13. No one who has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man.

14. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up,

15. that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

The Ascent and Descent of the Soul in Greek philosophy

Plato, *Republic*, 2 Vols, trans. Paul Shorey, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1937.

Plato, *Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin 1971 [1955].

Cicero, *Republic*, trans. C.W.Keyes, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, London, 1927.

Sets out the dream of Scipio (Scipio Africanus, a great general involved in the wars against Carthage), in which the hero ascends the planetary spheres to the stars.

Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W.H.Stahl, New York: Columbia University Press 1990 [1952].

Macrobius' work was available and highly regarded in Europe throughout the middle ages.

The Myth of Er

In the Republic Book X, Plato set out the rules by which reincarnation relates to the structure of the universe. The account was given through the words of a man called Er who had been killed in battle but had later revived having been dead for twelve days (614B).

1. The Structure of the Universe.

The whole universe spins on the 'spindle of Necessity' which extends outwards from the earth's poles. The planets are positioned on concentric spheres which enclose the earth and which rotate on the spindle of Necessity (616B-617D).

The earth is stationary at the centre of the solar system although it has been argued that Plato believed it oscillated (Timaeus 40B, p. 35 n 6, Aristotle De Caelo ii 293 b. 30).

2. The Fates

The three Fates, or Moirae, are daughters of Necessity. They sing in unison with the sirens who sing the harmony of the spheres (X.617C). Lachesis sings of the past, Clotho of the present and Atropos of the future.

(It is important to be aware of the etymology of the term moira. Moira was depicted by Homer as an allotted share of anything--meat, booty, land, years of life - that was arbitrarily distributed by Zeus. This concept was personified by Hesiod as the triple goddess Moira, the three Fates as spinners and weavers of human destiny. In fact the very word moira means a portion, part or allocation, as in the division of some whole that is allocated to some thing or some one in particular. Thus it may be argued that the basic core concept of fate in Greek is spatial. In this sense one's fate is not what is going to happen to one so much as it is what place in the scheme of things has been allotted to one. Of course, if we argue that time and space were inseparable then the distinction breaks down. Later on moira was also used to mean a degree of the zodiac.)

3. Reincarnation

Souls waiting to be reincarnated assemble before Lachesis. A 'prophet' then took from Lachesis' lap 'lots and patterns of lives'. These were then thrown on the ground and each of the souls had to pick up a lot. The prophet then revealed the possible patterns of lives, of which there were far more than the souls present. The souls then chose their lives; they were therefore absolutely responsible for the fortune or misfortune they were to encounter in their lives.

Each soul was then sent to Lachesis again to receive the 'genius' or 'daemon', the 'guardian of his life and the fulfiller of his choice' (X.620D-E). This 'divinity' then led the soul to Clotho who ratified the choice of life and finally to Atropos who spun the web of its destiny. The choice was then irreversible and the soul passed first under the throne of Necessity and then to the Plain of Oblivion where it slept by the River of Forgetfulness and drunk its water. In the middle of the night there was a great shaking and each soul wafted upward to its birth 'like a shooting star' (X.621.B). The fact that Er viewed all this from outside the planetary spheres (X.616.B), suggests that the soul passed through the planetary spheres to get to earth.

The Moment of Birth

Plato believed that every action, including birth, had its appropriate moment as measured by the relevant numbers and planetary positions. If birth took place at the appropriate moment society as a whole remained stable. If they took place at the wrong moments society as a whole declined. He did not specify astronomical positions for 'better' or 'worse' births. Instead, the last sentence in the following quote, he referred to the relevant 'number'.

'Not only for plants that grow from the earth but also for animals that live upon it there is a cycle of bearing and barrenness for soul and body as often as the revolutions of their orbs come full circle, in brief courses for the short-

lived and oppositely for the opposite; but the laws of prosperous birth of infertility for your race, the men you have bred to be your rulers will not for all their wisdom ascertain by reasoning combined with sensation, but they will escape them, and there will be a time when they will beget children out of season. Now for divine begettings there is a period comprehended by a perfect number'.(Republic VIII, 546A-B).

Plato then sets out the code for this number, the so-called 'nuptial number'. The earliest extant account of it was given by Proclus (410-485CE). The accepted solution to Plato's code seems to have been 36,000 years, the period commonly given for precession of the equinoxes, though no detailed analysis was given until the 1890s.² The 36,000 year period was understood as the time it took for 'worse' births to dominate and thus destroy society. This was also stood as the Great Year (see below).

Also see the Republic X.618.D for types of birth.

Gnosticism in modern art

Nick Roeg and Donald Cammell, *Performance*.

Mick Jagger and James Fox are the same person. At one point that French girl (I think) says Chas is Turner's 'demon'. At the beginning Harry Flowers (Flowers? Sixties?) arrives in a black rolls and in the end he departs in a white one with the dead/alive Chas/Turner.

So the plot is that Turner is already dead and is in limbo (his house - he never goes out) and can't move on because he has been separated from his demon. The demon meanwhile is out of control. They become reunited, Chas kills Turner, becomes Turner and drives off in the white rolls into the Elysian fields.

Philip Pullman *His Dark Materials*

² Adam, James, *The Nuptial Number of Plato*, London 1891; Adam, James, *The Republic of Plato*, Cambridge 1902.