

Recent writings by some writers like Dan Brown, have given a false idea of Christian belief. They have tried to make a mockery of Christ and the history by pretending to be writing fiction, based on certain literature that was prevalent at the time, when Gnostics were an important part of the North African landscape. To better understand the period, one can read what follows, and read more at [New Advent.org](http://NewAdvent.org) in the article on [Gnosticism](#)

The doctrine of [salvation](#) by [knowledge](#). This definition, based on the etymology of the word (*gnosis* "knowledge", *gnostikos*, "good at knowing"), is correct as far as it goes, but it gives only one, though perhaps the predominant, characteristic of Gnostic systems of thought. Whereas

[Judaism](#)

and

[Christianity](#)

, and almost all

[pagan](#)

systems, hold that the

[soul](#)

attains its proper end by obedience of

[mind](#)

and will to the Supreme Power, i.e. by

[faith](#)

and

[works](#)

, it is markedly peculiar to Gnosticism that it places the

[salvation](#)

of the

[soul](#)

merely in the possession of a quasi-intuitive

[knowledge](#)

of the

[mysteries](#)

of the

[universe](#)

and of magic formulae indicative of that

[knowledge](#)

. Gnostics were "people who

[knew](#)

", and their

[knowledge](#)

at once constituted them a superior class of beings, whose present and future status was essentially different from that of those who, for whatever reason, did not

[know](#)

. A more complete and historical definition of Gnosticism would be:

A collective name for a large number of greatly-varying and [pantheistic](#) - [idealistic](#) [sects](#), which flourished from some [time](#) before the [Christian Era](#) down to the fifth century, and which, while borrowing the phraseology and some of the tenets of the chief [religions](#) of the day, and especially of [Christianity](#), held [matter](#) to be a deterioration of [spirit](#), and the whole [universe](#) a depravation of the [Deity](#), and taught the ultimate end of all being to be the overcoming of the grossness of [matter](#) and the return to the Parent-Spirit, which return they held to be inaugurated and facilitated by the appearance of some God-sent Saviour.

However unsatisfactory this definition may be, the obscurity, multiplicity, and wild confusion of Gnostic systems will hardly allow of another. Many scholars, moreover, would hold that every attempt to give a generic description of Gnostic [sects](#) is labour lost.

Origin

The beginnings of Gnosticism have long been a matter of controversy and are still largely a subject of research. The more these origins are studied, the farther they seem to recede in the past.

Whereas formerly Gnosticism was considered mostly a corruption of [Christianity](#), it now

seems clear that the first traces of Gnostic systems can be discerned some centuries before the [Christian Era](#). Its [Eastern](#) origin was already maintained by Gieseler and Neander; F. Ch. Bauer (1831) and Lassen (1858) sought to [prove](#) its relation to the [religions](#) of [India](#); [Lipsius](#) (1860) pointed to [Syria](#) and [Phoenicia](#) as its home, and Hilgenfeld (1884) thought it was connected with later Mazdeism. Joel (1880), [Weingarten](#) (1881), Koffmane (1881), Anrich (1894), and Wobbermin (1896) sought to account for the rise of Gnosticism by the influence of Greek [Platonic philosophy](#) and the Greek mysteries, while Harnack described it as "acute Hellenization of [Christianity](#)".

For the past twenty-five years, however, the trend of scholarship has steadily moved towards [proving](#) the pre-Christian Oriental origins of Gnosticism. At the Fifth Congress of Orientalists (Berlin, 1882) Kessler brought out the connection between Gnosis and the [Babylonian](#) religion. By this latter name, however, he meant not the original religion of [Babylonia](#), but the [syncretistic](#) religion which arose after the conquest of Cyrus. The same [idea](#) is brought out in his "Mani" seven years later. In the same year F.W. Brandt published his "Mandiäische Religion". This [Mandaean](#) religion is so unmistakably a form of Gnosticism that it seems beyond

[doubt](#)

that Gnosticism existed independent of, and anterior to, [Christianity](#)

.

In more recent years (1897) Wilhelm Anz pointed out the close similarity between [Babylonian](#)

[astrology](#)

and the Gnostic theories of the Hebdomad and Ogdoad. Though in many instances speculations on the

[Babylonian](#)

Astrallehre

have gone beyond all sober scholarship, yet in this particular instance the inferences made by Anz seem sound and reliable. Researches in the same direction were continued and instituted on a wider scale by W. Bousset, in 1907, and led to carefully ascertained results. In 1898 the attempt was made by M. Friedländer to trace Gnosticism in pre-Christian

[Judaism](#)

. His opinion that the

[Rabbinic](#)

term

Minnim

designated not

[Christians](#)

, as was commonly

[believed](#)

, but

[Antinomian](#)

Gnostics, has not found universal acceptance. In fact, E. Schürer brought sufficient [proof](#)

to show that

Minnim

is the exact Armaean dialectic equivalent for

ethne

. Nevertheless Friedländer's essay retains its value in tracing strong

[antinomian](#)

tendencies with Gnostic colouring on

[Jewish](#)

soil.

Not a few scholars have laboured to find the source of Gnostic theories on Hellenistic and, specifically, Alexandrian soil. In 1880 Joel sought to [prove](#) that the germ of all Gnostic theories was to be found in [Plato](#).

Though this may be dismissed as an exaggeration, some Greek influence on the birth, but especially on the growth, of Gnosticism cannot be denied. In Trismegistic literature, as pointed out by Reitzenstein (Poimandres, 1904), we find much that is strangely akin to Gnosticism. Its

[Egyptian](#)

origin was defended by E. Amélineau, in 1887, and illustrated by A. Dietrich, in 1891 (Abraxas Studien) and 1903 (Mithrasliturgie). The relation of Plotinus's

[philosophy](#)

to Gnosticism was brought out by C. Schmidt in 1901. That Alexandrian thought had some share at least in the development of

[Christian](#)

Gnosticism is clear from the fact that the bulk of Gnostic literature which we possess comes to us from

[Egyptian](#)

(Coptic) sources. That this share was not a predominant one is, however, acknowledged by O. Gruppe in his "Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte" (1902). It is

[true](#)

that the Greek mysteries, as G. Anrich pointed out in 1894, had much in common with esoteric Gnosticism; but there remains the further question, in how far these Greek mysteries, as they are

[known](#)

to us, were the genuine product of Greek thought, and not much rather due to the overpowering influence of Orientalism.

Although the origins of Gnosticism are still largely enveloped in obscurity, so much light has been shed on the problem by the combined labours of many scholars that it is possible to give the following tentative solution: Although Gnosticism may at first sight appear a mere thoughtless [syncretism](#) of well nigh all religious systems in antiquity, it has in reality one deep root-principle, which assimilated in every soil what is needed for its life and growth; this principle is [philosophical](#) and religious [pessimism](#).

The Gnostics, it is [true](#), borrowed their terminology almost entirely from existing [religions](#), but they only used it to illustrate their great

[idea](#)

of the essential

[evil](#)

of this present

[existence](#)

and the

[duty](#)

to escape it by the help of magic spells and a superhuman Saviour. Whatever they borrowed, this

[pessimism](#)

they did not borrow — not from Greek thought, which was a

[joyous](#)

acknowledgment of and homage to the beautiful and noble in this world, with a studied disregard of the element of sorrow; not from

[Egyptian](#)

thought, which did not allow its elaborate speculations on retribution and judgment in the netherworld to cast a gloom on this present

[existence](#)

, but considered the

[universe](#)

[created](#)

or evolved under the presiding wisdom of Thoth; not from Iranian thought, which held to the absolute supremacy of

[Ahura Mazda](#)

and only allowed

[Ahriman](#)

a subordinate share in the

[creation](#)

, or rather counter-creation, of the world; not from Indian

[Brahminic](#)

thought, which was

[Pantheism](#)

pure and simple, or

[God](#)

dwelling in, nay identified with, the

[universe](#)

, rather than the Universe existing as the contradictory of

[God](#)

; not, lastly, from

[Semitic](#)

thought, for

[Semitic](#)

[religions](#)

were strangely reticent as to the

[fate](#)

of the

[soul](#)

after death, and saw all practical wisdom in the worship of

[Baal](#)

, or Marduk, or Assur, or Hadad, that they might live long on this earth.

Gnosticism

Written by W.J.Pais

This utter [pessimism](#) , bemoaning the [existence](#) of the whole [universe](#) as a corruption and a calamity, with a feverish craving to be freed from the body of this death and a mad hope that, if we only [kne](#)

[w](#)

we could by some

[mystic](#)

words undo the

[cursed](#)

spell of this

[existence](#)

— this is the foundation of all Gnostic thought. It has the same parent-soil as

[Buddhism](#)

; but

[Buddhism](#)

is

[ethical](#)

, it endeavours to obtain its end by the extinction of all desire; Gnosticism is pseudo-intellectual, and trusts exclusively to magical

[knowledge](#)

. Moreover, Gnosticism, placed in other historical surroundings, developed from the first on other lines than

[Buddhism](#)

.

When Cyrus entered Babylon in 539 B.C., two great worlds of thought met, and [syncretism](#) in religion, as far as we

[know](#)

it, began. Iranian thought began to mix with the ancient civilization of Babylon. The

[idea](#)

of the

[great struggle](#)

between

[evil](#)

and

[good](#)

, ever continuing in this

[universe](#)

, is the parent

[idea](#)

of Mazdeism, or Iranian

[dualism](#)

. This, and the

[imagined](#)

[existence](#)

of numberless intermediate

[spirits](#)

,
[angels](#)

and devas, are the conviction which overcame the contentedness of

[Semitism](#)

.

On the other hand, the unshakable trust in [astrology](#), the persuasion that the planetary system had a [fatalistic](#) influence on this world's affairs, stood its ground on the soil of Chaldea. The greatness of the Seven — the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, the Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn — the sacred Hebdomad, symbolized for millenniums by the staged towers of

[Babylonia](#)

, remained undiminished. They ceased, indeed, to be worshipped as deities, but they remained

archontes

and

dynameis

, rules and powers whose almost irresistible force was dreaded by

[man](#)

. Practically, they were changed from gods to devas, or

[evil spirits](#)

. The

[religions](#)

of the invaders and of the invaded effected a compromise: the astral

[faith](#)

of Babylon was

[true](#)

, but beyond the Hebdomad was the

[infinite](#)

light in the Ogdoad, and every

[human](#)

[soul](#)

had to pass the adverse influence of the god or gods of the Hebdomad before it could ascend to the only

[good](#)

[God](#)

beyond. This ascent of the

[soul](#)

through the planetary spheres to the

[heaven](#)

beyond (an

[idea](#)

not unknown even to ancient

[Babylonian](#)

speculations) began to be conceived as a struggle with adverse powers, and became the first and predominant

[idea](#)

in Gnosticism.

The second great component of Gnostic thought is magic, properly so called, i.e. the power *ex opere operato*

of weird names, sounds, gestures, and actions, as also the mixture of elements to produce effects totally disproportionate to the

[cause](#)

. These magic formulae, which caused laughter and disgust to outsiders, are not a later and [accidental](#)

corruption, but an

[essential](#)

part of Gnosticism, for they are found in all forms of

[Christian](#)

Gnosticism and likewise in Mandaeism. No Gnosis was essentially complete without the [knowledge](#)

of the formulae, which, once pronounced, were the undoing of the higher hostile powers.

Magic is the original sin of Gnosticism, nor is it difficult to guess whence it is inherited. To a certain extent it formed part of every

[pagan](#)

religion, especially the ancient mysteries, yet the thousands of magic tablets unearthed is

[Assyria](#)

and

[Babylonia](#)

show us where the rankest growth of magic was to be found. Moreover, the terms and names of earliest of Gnosticism bear an unmistakable similarity to

[Semitic](#)

sounds and words.

Gnosticism came early into contact with [Judaism](#), and it betrays a [knowledge](#) of the [Old Testament](#)

, if only to reject it or borrow a few names from it. Considering the strong, well-organized, and highly-cultured

[Jewish](#)

colonies in the Euphrates valley, this early contact with

[Judaism](#)

is perfectly natural. Perhaps the Gnostic
[idea](#)
of a Redeemer is not unconnected with
[Jewish](#)
[Messianic](#)
hopes. But from the first the Gnostic conception of a Saviour is more superhuman than that of
popular
[Judaism](#)
; their
Manda d'Haye
, or
Soter
, is some immediate manifestation of the
[Deity](#)
, a Light-King, an
[Æon](#)
(
Aion
) , and an
[emanation](#)
of the
[good](#)
[God](#)
.

When Gnosticism came in touch with [Christianity](#) , which must have happened almost
immediately on its appearance, Gnosticism threw herself with strange rapidity into
[Christian](#)
forms of thought, borrowed its nomenclature, acknowledged
[Jesus](#)
as Saviour of the world, simulated its
[sacraments](#)
, pretended to be an esoteric
[revelation](#)
of
[Christ](#)
and His
[Apostles](#)
, flooded the world with
[apocryphal](#)
Gospels, and Acts, and Apocalypses, to substantiate its claim. As
[Christianity](#)
grew within and without the Roman Empire, Gnosticism spread as a fungus at its root, and
claimed to be the only

[true](#)

form of

[Christianity](#)

, unfit, indeed, for the vulgar crowd, but set apart for the gifted and the

[elect](#)

. So rank was its poisonous growth that there seemed danger of its stifling

[Christianity](#)

altogether, and the earliest Fathers devoted their energies to uprooting it. Though in reality the spirit of Gnosticism is utterly alien to that of

[Christianity](#)

, it then seemed to the unwary merely a modification or refinement thereof. When domiciled on

[Greek](#)

soil, Gnosticism, slightly changing its barbarous and Seminitic terminology and giving its "emanatons" and "syzygies" Greek names, sounded somewhat like

[neo-Platonism](#)

, thought it was strongly repudiated by Plotinus. In

[Egypt](#)

the national worship left its mark more on Gnostic practice than on its theories.

In dealing with the origins of Gnosticism, one might be tempted to mention [Manichaeism](#), as a number of Gnostic

[ideas](#)

seem to be borrowed from

[Manichaeism](#)

, where they are obviously at home. This, however, would hardly be correct.

[Manichaeism](#)

, as historically connected with Mani, its founder, could not have arisen much earlier than A.D. 250, when Gnosticism was already in rapid decline.

[Manichaeism](#)

, however, in many of its elements

[dates](#)

back far beyond its commonly accepted founder; but then it is a parallel development with the Gnosis, rather than one of its sources. Sometimes

[Manichaeism](#)

is even classed as a form of Gnosticism and styled Parsee Gnosis, as distinguished from

[Syrian](#)

and

[Egyptian](#)

Gnosis. This classification, however, ignores the fact that the two systems, though they have the

[doctrine](#)

of the

[evil](#)

Gnosticism

Written by W.J.Pais

of
[matter](#)
in common, start from different principles,
[Manichaeism](#)
from
[dualism](#)
, while Gnosticism, as an
[idealistic](#)

[Pantheism](#)
, proceeds from the conception of
[matter](#)
as a gradual deterioration of the
[Godhead](#)
.