

Dr. Hermann Detering

***The Gnostic Meaning of
the Exodus and the Beginning of
the Joshua/Jesus Cult***

(2018)

Review and Commentary

by **René Salm**

This extensive series of posts explores literary, religious, and historical links between Buddhism and Christian origins.

It argues that Christianity emerged from a gnostic substratum, and that the figure Jesus of Nazareth and the New Testament gospels are second century CE developments.

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H. Detering,
The Gnostic Meaning of the Exodus

A Commentary
by Rene Salm



Dr. Hermann Detering

Part 1

Book reviews, Buddhism, Christian origins, Gnosticism, Detering

The prevailing picture of Christian origins does need to be revised... All New Testament scholars are aware of textual material and historical data that cannot easily be reconciled... Some scholars are also aware that the literary and historical bases for the traditional reconstruction are very, very shaky. The picture itself has not yet budged, however, and will not budge until alternative explanations for the (sometimes very curious) data available are taken up for forthright discussion and evaluation.¹

Some background

The above words of Burton Mack are as applicable today as when he wrote them almost thirty years ago. We do need a thorough revision of Christian origins, for the traditional reconstruction is “very, very shaky.” Perhaps the picture of Christian origins is now finally budging. Who can say? The establishment (academic and religious) will obviously not “budge” until it is forced. Facts are ignored, tomes are ignored, even entire libraries of scholarship are ignored by a Bible Belt that is more and more involved in a culture war, in ‘scoring points’ with the masses. But facts do matter. The time must eventually come when the drip, drip, drip of uncongenial information finally wears through the ancient, rotten shell of Christian dogma, now almost two thousand years old.

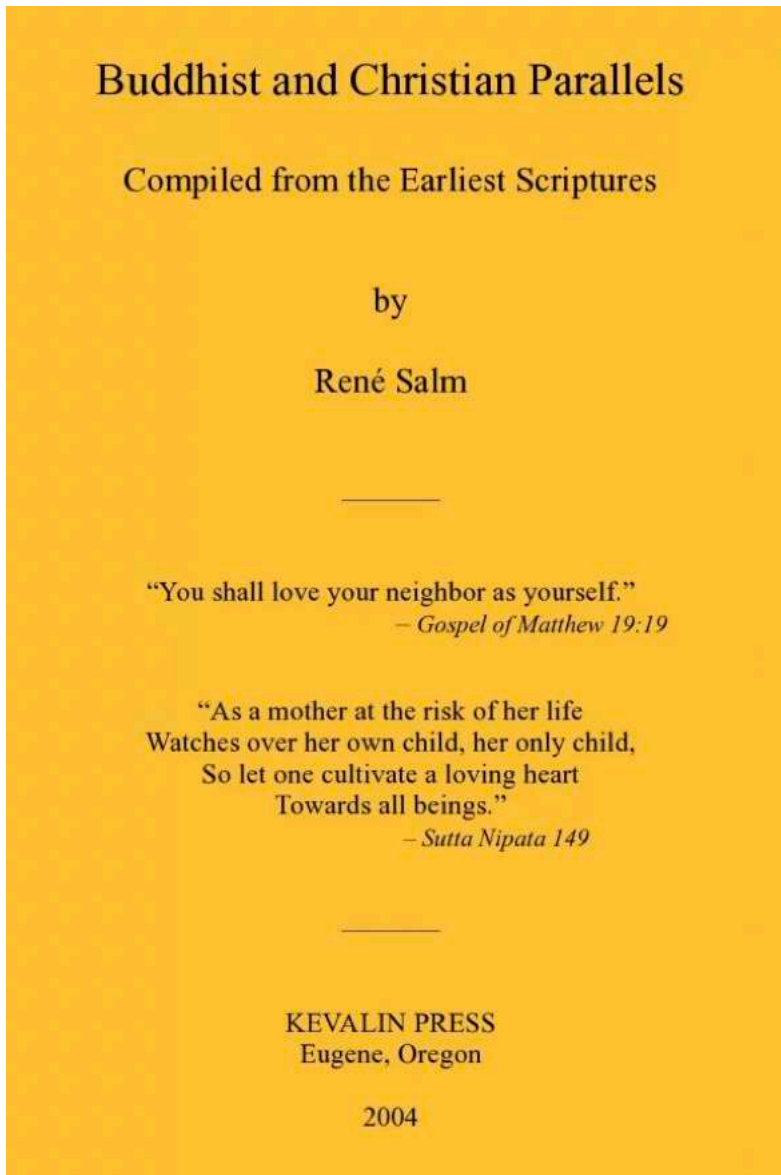
¹ Burton Mack, *All the Extra Jesuses* (*Semeia* 49 [1990], pp. 169-70.)

One of those uncongenial drips—actually, it’s more like a fire-hose—is Dr. Hermann Detering’s recent 70-page article, “The Gnostic Meaning of the Exodus and the Beginning of the Joshua/Jesus Cult” (German: *Die gnostische Deutung des Exodus and die Anfänge des Josua/ Jesus-Kultes*), which Hermann graciously emailed me some months ago. I immediately perceived its significance, but put the article aside until more time became available. At 70 pages, the piece is more a small book than an ‘article.’ Six months have now passed, and in that interim I’ve sketched out no less than 25 posts of analysis and commentary—far more than I’ve ever devoted to any single piece of writing. (Now you know why this blog has been so quiet of late.) This series of posts has the following goals:

- (a) presenting Dr. Detering’s recent work to a wider and interested readership;
- (b) assimilating this ground-breaking work and helping it onwards ‘to the next level’; and
- (c) communicating to readers my observations, comments, and reactions.

Detering is best known as a Pauline specialist. In the last decade, however, his thought has moved more and more into nontraditional areas. In 2013 he suggested the existence of not merely anti-gnostic, but also gnostic elements in the Pauline literature (“*Jesus versus Jaldabaoth: Gnostische Elemente in den Paulusbriefen*,” privately circulated). Over the last couple of years I’ve watched with increasing interest as Hermann’s thought has broadened to include proto-gnostic influences from the East. In the Spring of 2016 he emailed me a new article (in German on his website [here](#)) proposing that the gnostic **Basilides** was the author of the Odes of Solomon. Basilides lived in Alexandria and has long been suspected of ‘Buddhistic’ tendencies (e.g., see [here](#) pp. 384 ff). Basilides also taught the doctrine of rebirth (see Clem.Alex, Strom. iv.12.90). As Detering has pointed out, the

Odes of Solomon have motifs remarkably evocative of India—including an all-powerful “wheel” (Ode 23:11, 13)—echoing the Wheel of Becoming/**Samsara**; and the enigmatic description of the Savior as “He who gathers what is in the Middle” (Ode 22:2, Charlesworth translation)—reminiscent of the Buddhist **‘Middle Way’** to liberation.



As readers may know, I’ve argued in favor of a Buddhist-Christian connection for a long time (see [here](#) and [here](#)). My eBook **Buddhist**

and Christian Parallels presents the many similarities in teachings and ethics between the two religions. But I've also long suspected a historical connection between Buddhism and Christianity. The details of that contact are elusive, but surely they involve Egypt. King Ashoka **sent Buddhist missionaries to Egypt** and other countries about 250 BCE. I believe that seminal event was colossally important for the West and has been greatly underestimated.

I maintain that the scenario set forth at the end of my book NazarethGate offers Jesus mythicism a viable path forward. In the book's final chapter—extending to seventy pages—I argue that the turncoat Pharisee Yeshu ha-Notsri spent many years in Alexandria, was very well educated and groomed for a position on the Sanhedrin, repudiated his Jewish religion while in Egypt, become enamored of Buddhism, returned to his native land, preached with great success, and was stoned to death by the Jewish authorities—after which his body was hung up on a beam or cross for all to see. Significant parallels with the Jesus of the gospels are inescapable. I argue that Christianity in fact goes back to Yeshu (as opposed to the invented figure, Jesus of Nazareth), who lived in the early part of the first century BCE. I also contend that Buddhism played a large role in Yeshu's thinking and teaching.

Detering has not indicated that he ascribes to my theories regarding Yeshu. Nevertheless, his 'Exodus' article adds compelling arguments that substantiate a Buddhist-Christian connection. One should keep in mind that the differences between Buddhism and Christianity are supremely exaggerated by *late* developments, developments that most scholars falsely view as normative and *early*. However, when one probes into the earliest strata of these two great religions—before the Christian church councils on the one hand and the various Buddhist councils on the other—then striking resonances in ethics and teaching emerge. One doesn't even have to study the texts to appreciate this.

Fundamental similarities jump out—as, for example, that the putative founders of these two great religions were both homeless wanderers. Both even taught the *excellence* of that radically antisocial mode of life.

The field of comparative religion is old and broad. Until now, however, its investigators have (by definition) *not* been New Testament specialists. Many come from ‘the other side’—Indic specialists, Sanskritists, and Buddhologists. However—as Detering’s article will show—we are now seriously considering the influence of Buddhism on Christianity *in the historical context of the West*. I believe this is something new and is a significant step forward. Detering’s discoveries (particularly those involving the Therapeutae) may represent a turning point.

Structure of the article

The Gnostic Meaning of the Exodus and the Beginning of the Joshua/Jesus Cult

1. The gnostic view of the Exodus
2. “To the other side”—Buddhism and the Upanishads
3. Therapeutae, Buddhism, and gnosis
 - 3.1 Review
4. Joshua, the Jordan, and the baptism of Jesus
 - 4.1 Jesus, Joshua ben Nun, Dositheus, and ... the “true prophets”
 - 4.2 Ichthus—The meaning of the fish symbol in early Christianity
 - 4.3 “...who will make the sun stand still” [Sib 5:258]
 - 4.4 Jesus/Joshua as bringer of the vine—the Didache
 - 4.5 Jesus/Joshua in the Epistle of Jude
 - 4.6 The transfiguration of Jesus according to Mark
 - 4.7 “Going forth to the other side”
 - 4.8 The Church Fathers and the Old Testament
 - 4.9 Miriam-Mary

5. Conclusion

The most significant points of Detering's argument:

1. Transcendence is foundational to both Buddhism and Christianity
2. In both religions, transcendence is expressed through an identical metaphor: reaching "the other shore"
3. Buddhism and Christianity intersect—both historically and religiously—in the Therapeutae described by Philo Judaeus
4. The central mystery of the Therapeutae was held at night and celebrated the Exodus event, as a transformation of transcendence to "the other shore"
5. The great figures who led Israel to the other shore were Moses (among the Therapeutae) and Joshua/Jesus (among Christian gnostics)
6. The fictional Jesus of Nazareth was hypostatized in the second century of our era out of the Old Testament Joshua (= Jesus = Savior), the great hero of transformation/transcendence among early Christian Gnostics.

If the above six points are correct, they arguably represent the greatest single contribution to the study of early Christianity yet to appear in this millennium.

Detering reaches additional conclusions, and those will also become evident in the twenty-four posts to follow. While I agree with the six points listed above, I must admit in advance that I am not in complete agreement with Dr. Detering on all his conclusions.

In the posts that follow, the reader will encounter a liberal dose of my own commentary interspersed with excerpts (translated by myself into English) from Detering's article. These posts essentially present *my* views, using those of Dr. Detering as a springboard. I understand his article has been [translated into English](#).

I plan on uploading 1-2 posts per week. Thus, the 24 posts (they have already been drafted) should take 3-6 months to upload. In addition

to a little bolding and underlining, there will be some color-coding:
Detering's material in brown, and particularly significant points in red.

One more thing: I don't think your view of Christian origins will be the same after reading this series of posts, which is cumulative. For those who persevere to the end, your eyes will be opened.

Okay, let's get started...

–RS

Part 2

Buddhism, Christian origins, The first century

The later (Jesus mythicist) chronology

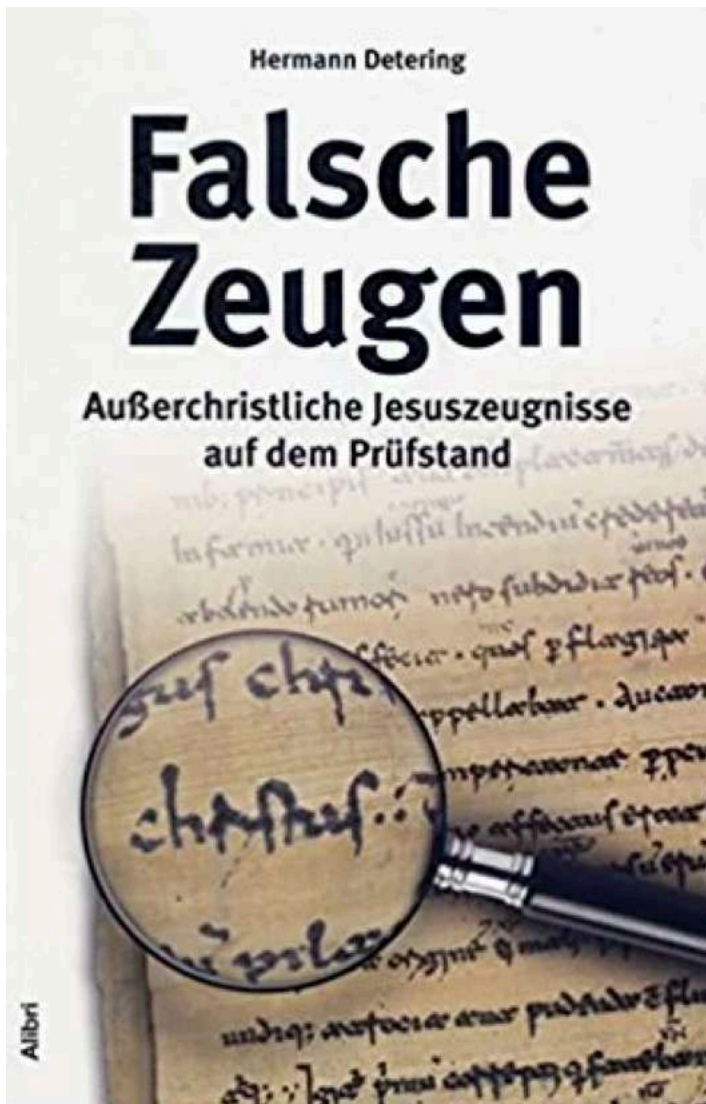
In these posts we are immersed in developments during the first century CE. This is a different world. Apparently there are “venerators of Joshua/Jesus” (a Semitic name roughly meaning “Y[ahweh] is Salvation,” BDB 221)—as Dr. Detering will claim later in his article. However, there were not yet “Christians” in the accepted sense of that word (see below). Both Detering and myself agree that in I CE there was no knowledge yet of Jesus of Nazareth (on this, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

If one accepts that Jesus of Nazareth was invented in the first half of II CE, then one wonders: who is meant by the use of “Christ/Messiah” before that time? We know, of course, that “Christ” is used literally hundreds of times in the Pauline epistles—that they certainly predate the gospels, as scholars universally agree.² Therefore, without Jesus of Nazareth, to whom does the “Christ” of the epistles refer? Later on in this series (see [here](#)) I will suggest a rather surprising candidate.

And here we come to the redefinition of terms that must eventually challenge those who investigate Christian origins. “Jesus,” too, must be redefined. For, *without the god-man from Nazareth*, the suspicion

² NOTE: Four years after this post was written [I radically alter my position](#) and conclude that “the Pauline epistles as well as Acts were composed in the second half of II CE, after the appearance of the canonical gospels.”-R.S.

grows that Jesus was a spiritual entity—"the Jesus," and that *it* was no man at all—precisely as the ancient docetists claimed.



The word "Christ" (from which "Christian") transliterates the Greek *Xristos*, which literally means "anointed one." This, in turn, translates the Hebrew *Meshiach* ("Messiah")—again, "anointed one." Now, the Hebrew term is old, predating Christianity. It could refer to a human being (a king, a prophet, an exemplary figure) or, uniquely, to the eschatological Davidic messiah, who will come as judge at the end of

time. One could also be anointed with oil for fairly banal occasions—the more casual usage of the term.

While *Meshiach* was already an old term at the turn of the era, the Greek *Xristos* was entirely new. It is specifically 'Christian' and comes encumbered with doctrinal baggage that is emphatically non-Jewish: the Christian "Christ" was *God made man*. The difference between *Meshiach* and *Xristos* encapsulates the fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity: the former maintains strict separation between God and man, but the latter breaks down that barrier.

We also note, from this brief investigation of terms, that Christianity emerged *as it left the Jewish sphere*. It is no coincidence that the New Testament is in Greek—yet the vast majority of protagonists and venues are Israelite. In a fundamental sense, Jesus of Nazareth is a Hellenistic figure who moves among Jewish props. He is a divine man (*theios anér*) in an essentially foreign scene—Palestine. The evangelists use Jewish institutions, venues, and ideosyncrasies (as much as they know them in II CE) as accoutrements. The essential is the *kerygma*: the "proclamation" of the Son of God born of a virgin, who redeemed us through his death on the cross, and who arose from the grave to sit eternally at the right hand of God. That proclamation is entirely non-Jewish and very Greek. It is the heart of the *euaggelion*, the "good news"—another Greek term.

Acts 11:26 informs us that the disciples were first called "Christians" at Antioch. That renaming is conventionally dated to the middle of the first century CE. But a 'mythicist chronology' moves everything *later*—the invention of Jesus of Nazareth (early-mid II CE), the canonical gospels (probably 140-50 CE, in quick succession), and also the first use of the term "Christians" (early II CE?). The traditionalist will object that there exist several non-Christian textual witnesses to "Christ" and

“Christian” stemming from the first and early second centuries CE. But Detering has written an entire book ([Falsche Zeugen](#), 2011) examining the six ancient authors at issue, and he has shown all the pertinent passages to be bogus—later interpolations into the works of Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, etc. The upshot is that the term “Christian” probably arose about the same time as the Greek *Xristos*, and about the same time as the penning of the canonical gospels: early II CE.

‘Paul’ also is no obstacle to the mythicist chronology. His letters mention “Christ,” and “Jesus Christ” repeatedly. But “Paul” (his existence is *also* in doubt!) must likewise move to the second century: the mythicist consensus (Price, Detering, myself, some others) is that the Pauline epistles were first penned by Marcion’s school (cf. the *Apostolikon*), then ‘adapted’ by the Catholic Church. In summary, then, **basically the entire New Testament must be dated to the second century CE.** Surprisingly, the *Revelation of John* may be the earliest New Testament writing!

[For more on the new chronology, see → [here](#).]

The early “Jesus” believers

Like Acts, Epiphanius reports in the critical chapter 29 of his *Panarion*, “Against Nazoraeans,” that the first Jesus followers were not called “Christians.” But he furnishes more details. Epiphanius writes: “At that time all Christians were called Nazoraeans... They also came to be called ‘Jessaean’ for a short while, before the disciples began to be called Christians at Antioch” (Pan. 29.1.2). If we delete “at Antioch” and replace that with “c. 125 CE” we are closer to the truth. With that later date in mind, we see that Epiphanius reports two names for pre-Christian believers: Nazoraeans and Jessaeans. The former, of course, suggests the evangelist Mark’s favorite moniker for Jesus: “the

Nazarene" (usually mistranslated "of Nazareth" in our Bibles). The latter name, "Jessaean," suggests the *Essaioi* (Essenes). And now we come to something very interesting—**Epiphanius identifies these pre-Christian Jessaeans with Philo's Therapeutae, and the Therapeutae with early Christians:**

If you enjoy study and have read about them in Philo's historical writings, in his book [sic] entitled "Jessaean," you may discover that, in his account of their way of life and hymns, and his description of their monasteries in the vicinity of the Marean marsh, Philo described none other than Christians... But Philo wrote all this of the faith and regimen of the Christians. (Pan. 29.5.1.)

All this is most revealing, and we will consider Detering's lengthy examination of the Therapeutae in subsequent posts. (The highly provocative Essene angle, however—with possible links to early Christianity—must be left for another time.) If the foregoing were not surprising enough, Epiphanius then writes something absolutely astounding about these Nazoraeans—something that has been uniformly and assiduously ignored by scholarship: **these Jewish pre-Christians "set themselves ablaze!"** The passage from Epiphanius reads:

I mean the Nazoraeans, whom I am presenting here. They were Jewish, were attached to the Law, and had circumcision. But it was as though people had seen fire under a misapprehension. Not understanding why, or for [what] use, the ones who had kindled this fire were doing it—either to cook their rations with the fire, or burn some dead trees and brush, which are ordinarily destroyed by fire—they kindled fire too, in imitation, and set themselves ablaze. (Pan. 29.5.4–5, Williams translation.)

It is a very strange passage. Epiphanius obviously does not understand why some Nazoraeans "set themselves ablaze." (One cannot really blame him!) In his desperate search for an explanation, he lamely supposes that they did so *unintentionally*—they simply did not know the proper use of fire (as if he were speaking of three-year

old children). If he is writing allegorically (they “had seen fire under a misapprehension”), this may reveal a link to ‘fire worshippers,’ namely, Zoroastrians, whose priests were known as magi. This line of thought may not be entirely unfounded, for Simon Magus, according to the Pseudo Clementine literature, was an early disciple of John the Baptist –as was Jesus himself.



But Epiphanius does not seem to be writing allegorically, nor is he using the term “fire” symbolically. He writes “cook their rations” and “burn some dead trees and brush.” This shows that he is treating “fire” as the combustible, destructive, sensible force we all know. In that very real context, he then writes about Nazoraeans *setting themselves ablaze!*

Epiphanius' passage immediately brings to mind a famous incident of the Indian monk who set himself on fire in the Athenian agora c. 20 BCE. Strabo (d. 24 CE) writes about the self-immolator in two places. In one, he identifies his name, "**Zarmanochegas**" (Geographia xv.1.73). From Strabo we also learn that Zarmanochegas was a gymnosophist. Gymnosophist" means "naked sage" in Greek, and the term referred specifically to ascetics from India.

In the other passage, Strabo writes: "From one place in India, and from one king, namely, Pandion, or, according to others, Porus, presents and embassies were sent to Augustus Caesar. With the ambassadors came the Indian gymnosophist, who committed himself to the flames at Athens, like Calanus, who exhibited the same spectacle in the presence of Alexander" (Geographia xv.i.4). **Calanus** was another famous gymnosophist, one of Alexander the Great's many teachers who, while yet in Alexander's retinue, immolated himself at Susa in 323 BCE.

Porphyry (late III CE) divided the gymnosophists into two groups: Brahmins (Vedic priests) and *Samanaioi*. The latter term signals Buddhist monks. In Pâli (the language of the earliest Buddhist texts), the masculine singular is *Samano*. To my ear, this is suspiciously similar to "Zarmano."

In any case, when we connect the dots (as we will do periodically), the conclusion is inescapable: Epiphanius is clearly indicating (unintentionally, of course) that the 'pre-Christian' Nazoraeans were in some way related to Indian monks!

As if industriously digging his own grave, Epiphanius dilates further:

But besides, as I indicated, everyone called the Christians Nazoraeans, as they say in accusing the apostle Paul, "We have found this man a pestilent fellow and a perverter of the people, a ring-leader of the sect of the Nazoraeans" [Acts 24:5].

And the holy apostle did not disclaim the name—not to profess the Nazoraean sect, but he was glad to own the name his adversaries’ malice had applied to him for Christ’s sake. For he says in court, “They neither found me in the temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, nor have I done any of these things whereof they accuse me. But this I confess to you, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I, believing all things in the Law and the prophets” [Acts 24:12-14].

And no wonder the apostle admitted to being a Nazoraean! In those days everyone called Christians this because of the city of Nazareth—there was no other usage of the name then. People thus gave the name of [“Nazoraean”] to believers in Christ, of whom it is written, “He shall be called a Nazoraean” [Mt 2:23] (Pan 29.6.2-5).

Here, then, Epiphanius derives the term “Nazoraean” from the settlement of Nazareth. (*Ahem.*) Putting aside the issue of Nazareth’s non-existence at the turn of the era, however, other than Epiphanius we have no record of residents of that august settlement setting themselves ablaze! Which is to say: Epiphanius has not furnished posterity with the best explanation for the derivation of “Nazoraean.” For *that*, we will have to look elsewhere.

Epiphanius soon returns to his original point: the early Christians had association neither with “Nazareth” nor “Nazoraean.” They were purely followers of Jesus: “Thus Christ’s holy disciples called themselves ‘disciples of Jesus’ then, as indeed they were. But they were not rude when others called them Nazoraean...” (Pan. 29.6.7). This tells us that “Nazoraean” was a heretical appellation, one attached to the “holy disciples” by others and merely tolerated. Eventually it stuck because “our Lord Jesus was called ‘the Nazoraean’ himself” (Pan. 29.6.7). It does not incommode Epiphanius in the least that “our Lord Jesus” was known by a *heretical* name! In any case, we note once again that the earliest Christians were not disciples of Jesus “of Nazareth,” of Jesus

“the Nazarene,” or even of Jesus “the Nazoraean.” They were simply disciples of *Jesus*.

The question now arises: What did “Jesus” mean to those pre-Antiochene Christians? We will venture an answer in subsequent posts, for Dr. Detering will address this important question in his article.

Highlights of this post:

- the New Testament must be dated to the second century CE
- Epiphanius identifies the pre-Christian Jessaeans with Philo’s Therapeutae, and the Therapeutae with early Christians
- According to Epiphanius, some Jewish pre-Christians “set themselves ablaze”
- Epiphanius shows that the Nazoraeanes were in some way related to Indian monks

Part 3

B.C.E. times, water, Jordan

Water, water everywhere

A commentary on Dr. Hermann Detering's

"The Gnostic meaning of the Exodus and the beginning of the Joshua/Jesus Cult" (2017)

Abstract by Dr. Detering of the entire article:

In a gnostic interpretation, the Exodus motif has strong affinities with Buddhist-Indian conceptions. An investigation of where and when the thought systems of East and West converge—in this case, Hebrew scripture and Jewish tradition on the one hand, Buddhist and Indian spirituality on the other—leads to the Therapeutae, described by Philo of Alexandria in his *De Vita Contemplativa*. The Therapeutae were, in all probability, Jewish Buddhists/Buddhist Jews. Their central mysterium consisted of a nocturnal celebration of the Exodus, which they regarded as a passing over from the sensual-material realm (= Egypt) to the rational-spiritual realm (= the wilderness/Holy Land). Strongly rooted in Jewish tradition, the Therapeutae venerated Moses above all, while closely related gnostic Christian groups such as the Peratae and Naasenes perpetuated traditions centered on Moses' successor, Joshua. For these latter groups, Joshua/Jesus was the counterpart of Moses. The old cult of Moses was superseded and surpassed by the new, gnostic-Christian cult of Joshua-Jesus.

1a. The Gnostic interpretation of the Exodus: the Therapeutae

[Detering writes, p. 1] The departure of the Israelite people out of Egypt, described in the Book of Exodus (13:17-14:31), is an oft-repeated and central motif in the Old Testament (Deut 26:5ff,

Ps 114:1ff, Isa 14:16, et multi)... Within Israelite orthodoxy, the Exodus was viewed as an explicitly historical event. Nevertheless, an allegorical interpretation first appeared in Alexandria and quite outside Jewish orthodoxy. According to Philo, the first century C.E. Jewish religious philosopher, Egypt is “the body,” the place of “passions which excite the body,” and of vice. Similarly, the Jordan is for Philo a symbol for tribulation. As regards Jacob’s statement, “For in my staff did I pass over this Jordan” (Gen 32:10)

Philo explains:

Jordan means descent. And of the lower, and earthly, and perishable nature, vice and passion are component parts; and the mind of the ascetic passes over them in the course of its education. For it is too low a notion to explain his saying literally; as if it meant that he crossed the river, holding his staff in his hand.

[Legum II.89; Scholer translation.]

For all this, Philo delineates only the general contrast between the sensual-material sphere (= Egypt/Jordan) and the mental-spiritual sphere (= wilderness).

COMMENTARY – (R. Salm)

We will take a brief hiatus from the exciting Buddhist-Christian connections signaled in the preceding post, including that of early Christian Nazoraeans “setting themselves ablaze.” Dr. Detering engages with Buddhism in his article, and we will return to that critical issue by and by. In this post, however, I begin a systematic response to Detering’s article.

The opening paragraphs above cover a lot of territory, and I’ll devote this and the next post to commenting on them. At the outset, let’s be clear that Detering is discussing *allegory* as used around the turn of the era, particularly in Alexandria, Egypt. Thus, he writes above: “an allegorical interpretation first appeared in Alexandria and quite outside Jewish orthodoxy.” An interesting thing about allegory is that common terms have associations that are, in fact, not common at all.

So, Philo writes above: Egypt is “the body” and “Jordan means descent.” (In fact, “Jordan” in Hebrew *does* literally mean “descent”—more on this below.) In other words, we are dealing with a sort of code, and without any accompanying explanation, allegorical writing can be quite cryptic (cf. *The Revelation of John*). Philo famously indulged in allegory, but he usually ‘explains’ the code as he goes along for the benefit of his readers. Origen and many Church Fathers do the same. But the gnostics often did *not* explain their terms. They prided themselves in ‘knowing the code,’ in being apart—hence the intentionally cryptic nature of so many of their texts, which are truly “esoteric” (requiring special or privy knowledge).

In this article Detering focusses on the Exodus, and ‘getting to the other side’ plays a crucial, central role in the discussion. After all, the Exodus is a passage across (or through) water: the Israelites were successful in passing from one side to the other side of a body of flowing water, while the Egyptians were not. As discussed in Pt. 1 of this series, ‘reaching the other shore’ is common in both Buddhism and Christianity. It figuratively describes transcendence—ultimately, the *transcendence* of ‘death.’

For the gnostic, ignorance is death. It is no coincidence that the word “ignorance” occurs over and over in the *Philosophumena’s* (one of our main sources of information on gnostic sects) discussion of the Peratae, whose name loosely means “Those Who Belong to the Other Side.” Detering will discuss this sect later in his article. In relation to the Exodus, then, those Egyptians who died in the water died in ‘ignorance.’ This is part of the allegorical schema used by the Peratae. If we go one step further, then water = ‘ignorance.’

So, Philo views the “Jordan” as a place of tribulation, while the Peratae view water as “ignorance.” Detering discusses the views of both in his article, and also of an aspect of Buddhism where the metaphorical

river is a place of disaster 'to be crossed.' All of these negative views of water are consistent with the allegory of crossing over, of transcendence.

Nevertheless, another tradition exists in Buddhism, as also in Gnosticism, where water is metaphorically good. The positive view, indeed, leads directly to the Christian sacrament of baptism, and it is critical that we understand it. The positive view is able to exist side-by-side with the negative view because they express the same thing in slightly different ways. In the scenario of crossing the river, the other shore is the goal (gnosis) and the river itself (water) is an impediment (variously: life, materiality, carnality, desire, ignorance). However, the conceptual background of baptism derives from a different scenario, one in which **water is itself symbolic of gnosis**. In this scenario, the metaphorical goal is to dip into or immerse in water. What I am getting at is that both scenarios are found in the ancient texts, and both are correct.

In this article, Dr. Detering focusses on the negative view of 'water.' He begins with Philo, above, and will proceed to consider the Peratae, Buddhism, and so on. This is all correct as far as it goes, but I believe it is insufficient. In this commentary I will be adding a contrasting view of water—one that is fundamental to understanding Christian origins.



Two kneeling, naked, and shaven priests of Elam engage in a holy water ceremony in a temple, dated to XII BCE. One priest offers water to the other. Note the great vessel of water to the right. Such vessels were widespread in Bronze and Iron Age temples throughout the Levant (cf. the 'brazen sea' in Solomon's temple, 1 Kgs 7:23-26).

It may come as a surprise to the reader that something as benign as the allegorical interpretation of 'water' could have any real importance. However, when we recognize that Jesus begins his ministry at his baptism (Mk 1:9 ff), then we must acknowledge the importance of *immersion in water* for the evangelists and for the early Jesus-followers. All the various Christian traditions—orthodox and heterodox—agree that baptism marks an end to the old and the beginning of something wonderful and new. It is a spiritual rebirth. Normative Christianity will define that rebirth (being "born again") as having "faith" in Jesus, the Son of God. For the Gnostics however, the surviving texts reveal that baptism is something very different: the passage from ignorance to gnosis. That is the *gnostic* rebirth. From a

gnostic viewpoint, then, dipping into water = being reborn = finding gnosis.

One inference from the above—if we take it seriously—is that **the canonical gospels rest on a previously-existing gnostic substratum.**

The Gnostic view of baptism is also evident in surviving snippets of Jewish-Christian gospel tradition. For example, a bright light (a universal symbol of wisdom) attends Jesus' baptism in the *Gospel of the Ebionites* and in the *Diatessaron*. Gnostic texts sometimes contrast the 'man of darkness' (= before baptism) with the 'man of light' (= post-baptism). Thomas 24 contrasts the enlightened person (= who has 'light') with one who is ignorant (= lives in darkness). It reads: "There is light within a man of light, and it lights up the whole world. If it does not shine, it is darkness." In the hardly known *Two Books of Jeu* (discovered in Upper Egypt), Jesus is equated with light and illuminating gnosis: "Lord Jesus, you living one, whose goodness is spread abroad on those who have found his wisdom [*sophia*] and his form in which he shines—O Light, that is in the light that has illumined our heart until we received the light of life—O true Word [*logos*], which through gnosis teaches us the hidden knowledge of the Lord Jesus, the living one" (see NTA 1991.I:371-72).

The Gospel of John makes much use of 'light' imagery. There, we read: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (GJn 8:12). The Fourth Gospel effectively hijacks the entire gnostic concept of enlightenment by redefining the spiritual 'Jesus' as the god-man from Nazareth.

Materialism vs. Gnosticism

The Christian sacrament of baptism did not appear full blown around the turn of the era. The sacred view of water has a long prehistory

going back even to the dawn of civilization. That prehistory, however, is more or less in esoteric/minority traditions, for the dominant priesthoods of every age were rarely gnostic. Indeed, they repudiated gnosticism. Thus we find, again and again, a metaphorical disparagement of not only water, but of the related gnostic symbols. In the Old Testament, Leviathan (the great water 'dragon') fights (and ever fails) against Yahweh. In Ugaritic literature, the deity Yam ("Sea") fights (and fails) against Baal. And in Mesopotamia, the water god Enki was replaced by his son, the sky god Marduk.

The negative depiction of water/water deities ultimately signals the repudiation of gnosticism. This is why we encounter opposing views of 'water' from one ancient religious text to another. A few texts were pro-gnostic, while many more texts were anti-gnostic. In a sense, 'water' is at the heart of an ancient religious culture war, one between gnosticism and materiality, between peaceable water gods (espousing the way of gnosis) and sky/thunder gods (espousing the way of manifest power). We can trace this religious warfare though just about every century from the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity.



Oannes, the fish-man. Note the streams of water at left.

For the positive evaluation of water, one need only recall the long lost figure of **Oannes** ("John"), the half-man/half-fish who emerges out of the water to teach the arts and sciences to early Mesopotamia. Then, too, **Enki**—the divine friend of mankind—was a water god. His 'home' was the **Abzu** (literally: "deep/lower water"), imagined as the underworld ocean. From the earliest times—even before history—wisdom resided below (cf. the Paleolithic cave paintings), and to gain wisdom involved a descent *to water*. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for "Jordan" derives from the root YRD, "descend" (more on this significant datum in a later post). Enki's underworld and watery home was symbolized in Bronze and Iron Age temples by means of a great metal cauldron holding sacred water—also known as the "Apsu/Abzu." According to the OT, one such cauldron was even in the Temple of Solomon. All this validates an old and enduring religious tradition centered on the sacredness of water, a theme that long predates Judaism.



A reconstruction of the brazen sea (Abzu) in Solomon's Temple.

It is my contention that gnosticism is as old as religion itself. It is opposed, ultimately, by *materialism*. Of the two traditions, the gnostic seems to always come first—and is invariably defeated at the hands of one or another 'majority' religion with an organized priesthood, creator god(s), and state power. History bears this out time and time again.

In my view, the greatest religious teachers of the past (among whom I include Zoroaster, Buddha, and Yeshu ha-Notsri) were gnostic figures. Nevertheless, the 'churches' that derived from their teachings are priesthods whose aim is to make themselves indispensable. So, the

original teaching of “seek and find” becomes “follow us, believe what we tell you.” The metamorphosis from seeking to believing is a universal stage in religion. Christianity may be a textbook case of one religion moving away from gnosis and to ‘belief’ *at the same time* that a priesthood was forming: the second century CE. It is a necessary betrayal, for otherwise priesthoods would have no success among the masses. After all, the way of gnosticism is simply too difficult for ordinary people and hardly a message to insure success in ‘the world.’ The gnostic way is even odious, for it demands breaking attachments to things physical, calming desires, and (by and large) repudiating pleasure itself. Most people would object: All this is in return for *what*? The gnostic will reply simply: It is in return for *understanding*.

And He said, “The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a fine large fish. He threw all the small fish back into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Gospel of Thomas 8; par. Mt 13:47-50; 45-46.)

So, dipping into water, or reaching the other shore—both metaphors signal transcendence of ‘death’ and, in a gnostic context, the acquisition of hidden gnosis. Philo was clearly outside this gnostic tradition, as the citation above of Dr. Detering reveals. Philo belonged to the normative Jewish tradition that he intensively allegorized. It appears, however, that the *Therapeutae* may have belonged to the *other* tradition—the ‘gnostic.’ We will examine Detering’s views on the enigmatic *Therapeutae*—and their possible link to Buddhism—in subsequent posts.

Highlights of this post:

- both positive and negative views of water coexisted and opposed each other in pre-Christian mythology

- in many (proto-)gnostic traditions, water was a symbol of gnosis
- the negative depiction of water and water deities marks the repudiation of gnosticism
- the canonical gospels rest on a previously-existing gnostic substratum.

Part 4

Sacred water and hidden meaning *below* the surface

Much of the information below is from my essay, "Pre-Rational Religion," Kevalin Press: 2010, privately circulated.–RS

In his treatment of the Exodus theme, Dr. Detering's argument centers on the element of water and its allegorical interpretation. As noted in the preceding post, already in the third millennium BCE Elam had a sacred water ritual, and the Mesopotamian divinity **Enki** was Lord of water, of wisdom, and of creation. We may ask: Why was water used as a sacred symbol from such very early times?

One answer that immediately comes to mind is the emergence of agriculture. With the onset of farming in the Neolithic Period (c. 10,000–c. 3,000 BCE) water redoubled in importance. It was *life* not only for people but now also for crops.

That is certainly true. But even in Paleolithic times people necessarily lived close to water. Also, if they traveled any great distance they learned (or they learned from *their* neighbors, who learned from their neighbors) that progress would eventually be blocked by a vast and supremely impassable body of water—what we call a sea or an ocean. To Stone Age man lacking maps or globe, it really seemed like the earth is entirely surrounded by water. And indeed it is, for all the land masses *are* surrounded by water.

The watery ocean encompassing all man's activities impacted more than mythical geography. When, in the Neolithic Period, people began to take more than passing notice of the sun, moon, and planets, they supposed those great celestial bodies rose each morning out of the great ocean beyond the eastern horizon. Then, in the evening, the

celestial divinities descended back into the ocean, now in the west. This meant one thing: the home of the gods was the great, encompassing, ocean. Furthermore, because the gods emerged from *below* the eastern horizon and re-entered below the western horizon, our remote ancestors concluded that **the ocean under our terrestrial earth was the home of the gods and the place of ultimate truth.**

The above conception continued even into late antiquity, with the proviso that the sun more or less supplanted the moon in importance. Here are the words of Melito, Bishop of Sardis, writing c. 175 CE:

If you wish to observe the heavenly bodies being baptized, make haste now to the Ocean, and there I will show you a strange sight: outspread sea, and boundless main, and infinite deep, and immeasurable Ocean, and pure water; and sun's swimming pool, and the stars' brightening place, and the moon's bath. And how they symbolically bathe, learn faithfully from me:

When the sun has with fiery chariotry fulfilled the day's course, having in the whirling of his course become like fire and flared up like a torch, and when he has blazed through his course's meridian, then as though reluctant, if he should appear close by, to burn up the land with ten radiant lightning shafts, he sinks into the Ocean.

Just as a ball of bronze, full of fire within, flashing with much light, is bathed in cold water, making a loud noise, and in the polishing process stops glowing; yet the fire within is not quenched but flares up again when roused: just so also the sun, inflamed like lightning, wholly undying bathes in cold water, but keeps his fire unsleeping; and when he has bathed in symbolic baptism, he exults greatly, taking the water as food. Though one and the same, he rises for men as a new sun, tempered from the deep, purified from the bath; he has driven off the nocturnal darkness, and has begotten bright day. Along his course, both the movement of the stars and the appearance of the moon operate... (Fragment 8b, in S. Hall, Melito of Sardis on Pascha, 1979:73.)

Belief in an encircling cosmic ocean was more or less universal until the scientific advances of the Renaissance. We still see it in an eleventh century Christian work:

God planted the Garden [of Eden] on the third day to the east of the land—at the easternmost limit of the earth beyond which nothing more is found except the water surrounding the whole world, beyond whose extremity begin the heavens. (The Struggle of Adam and Eve, Ethiopic version, beginning. See OT Pseudepigrapha, vol. 2, 1985:250; German text: A. Dillmann, Das Christliche Adambuch des Morgenlandes, Forgotten Books, 1853:13.)

The serpent



The Tsodilo serpent, perhaps mankind's most ancient sacred sculpture.

For early man, the journey to transcendence, truth, and divinity (especially undertaken by the shaman) was in the downward direction. Deep caves leading into the earth presented fortuitous openings and sacred avenues to the divine. In this context we should view paleolithic

cave art, found in the dark, innermost recesses of mountains. That art witnesses to early man's efforts at transcendence and *communion with divinity*.

Not only were caves holy, but the serpent—that master at navigating crevasses in the earth—was perhaps the first 'sacred emissary' (messenger, angel) from and to the divine realm below. Lacking lids, the serpent's eyes are ever open—as if it is all-knowing. Furthermore, because it sloughs its skin, the serpent seems to have conquered death and to possess *the secret of immortality*. It is no coincidence that, in the imagery employed by Gnostics through the ages, the serpent is their preferred carrier of wisdom. Of course, in anti-Gnostic polemic the serpent is the ultimate villain.

In the virtually inaccessible **Tsodilo Python Cave** of Botswana, Southern Africa, a colossal serpent, twenty feet long and as high as a man, is carved in stone. The context is clearly sacred and the entire ensemble dates back about 70,000 years before the present. It may, indeed, be one of Homo Sapiens' first works of 'art.' Interestingly, behind this giant serpent was a hidden shaman's cubicle.

The foregoing teaches us that 'primitive' man was already developing quite abstract insights and that he was thinking allegorically. The serpent would only have had sacred meaning in a context such as that described above: the gods live *below*, and the serpent is their blessed *emissary* to man.



The stunning upside-down horse of the Lascaux 'Axial Gallery' (17,000 years BP), which Dr. Lewis-Williams proposes was Paleolithic man's attempt to represent the confusing, downward psychological vortex leading to 'the other side.'

Passing through the upside-down vortex

Physiological and psychological factors (these have been well researched) buttress the above. There is not space here to enter into detail, but a profound feeling of falling/passing through a downward spiral accompanies the extensive loss of blood that attends the 'near death experience.' Having passed through the descending vortex (as reported even by modern victims—see Dr. Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*), the now transcendent soul 'on the other side' approaches a

loving, all-knowing 'Being of Light.' This experience is universal and ancient. Parallels between the Being of Light and Jesus of Nazareth are uncanny.

Stone Age cosmology can be summarized as follows: The divinities lived in a great watery home, one they left during the day and to which they returned at night. That watery home was below the earth and extended from horizon to horizon. It was imagined that the heavenly deities traveled from west to east during the night (reversing their course of the daylight hours), to re-emerge at the eastern horizon in the morning. The gods lived exclusively in the transcendent, watery realm. They moved placidly quite apart from this nasty, temporary, and brutish terrestrial existence.

Evidently, our Stone Age ancestors had views contrary to those held today:

(1) Truth is metaphorically (and physically) not on high, but *below*. (Consider the etymologies of our words *profound*, *fundamental*, *basic*, the phrase '*deep wisdom*,' and so on.) We moderns consider truth as that which is self-evident, in the open, and available to the senses for all to see. The ancients saw it otherwise: what is visible is a veil, a sham, a decoy (cf. the Buddhist concept of *mâyâ*). The truth is hidden and deep—just as is paleolithic art. It is obscured *under* what we can see, or even by what we can see.

(2) The gods were 'at home' *during the night*, after the sun returned into the ocean whence it came. Broadly speaking, our entire existence (whose activity takes place principally during the daytime) is a sort of aberration, mirage, or flight from reality (again, the Buddhist *mâyâ* comes to mind). Deep truth is most present at night—and particularly in dreams.

(3) The moon was exalted, for it dominates the night. Furthermore, the moon rules water—immediately noted by its pull on the tides.

The moon

In Bronze Age religion, the moon deity (Nammu, in Mesopotamia) was vastly superior to the sun, and *the cool light of the night was superior to the hot light of the day*. Ancient man was also endlessly amazed at *the moon's ability to shine in the darkness*. The sun cannot do this. In fact, it must have appeared to our ancestors that the sun, for all its daytime hubris, simply abandoned mankind each night. That was precisely when the moon emerged as a friend, to guide our forefathers through the darkness. It is no coincidence that 'gnostic' movements through history have been devoted to the moon—from Enki (the Babylonian water-god), to Osiris (Egyptian moon god in the 18th Dynasty), to early Israelite veneration of the moon (on this, see [here](#)), to Nabonidus (sixth century devotee of the moon god Sin), etc. It can be argued that all these inclinations were gnostic, anti-materialistic, and also very much in the minority. The reigning priesthood of each era had a ready term for them: *lunatics*.

Yet the moon endlessly impressed and amazed our ancestors. They were thrilled at its ability to shine at night—that is, *to produce its own light*. This must have appeared unfathomable, wonderful, and quite heroic.

“Ani found it necessary to take the form of the god who produced light from his own person, for by this means he would be able to lighten the dark places and to travel through them in safety... He had the power to establish the light of the moon on the day of the full moon... The recital [by the priests] of this chapter [of the Egyptian Book of the Dead] enabled Ani to merge himself in the substance of the Moon-god, i.e., Osiris...” [E.A.W. Budge, *The Book the Dead*, 1960:311]



The flag of Turkey

Monumentally impressive, too, was the quiet, inevitable, and unassuming manner in which the moon accomplished its daring mission of conquering the darkness. Each month, emerging after three days of inky blackness, the nocturnal orb began its victorious journey in the most inauspicious way—as the merest crescent of light. This sacred moment survives today on many flags of Arab countries—though the crescent’s original meaning has quite been forgotten. We are speaking of light conquering darkness, and no more apt metaphor exists for *understanding conquering ignorance*. (We should all bear this in mind the next time we read the Prologue to the Gospel of John.)

Beginning on the first day of the month, ancient man watched a celestial drama unfold as night after night the undaunted moon slowly waxed greater and greater. It was a mighty lesson—well, really a double-lesson, played out on the vast canvas of the sky: that we, too, must produce our own light, and that we, too, can overcome the darkness. Even immersed in total darkness, there is always hope. It is no wonder that ***the moon was man’s first divine friend and his trustworthy mentor.***

Sunset on the first day of each month—the New Moon—was a time of great celebration among the common people. It was also the holiest

event of the month. Some temples (especially those on hilltops, as at Petra), provisioned with the symbolic water of gnosis, were oriented to the eastern moonrise three days after the summer solstice. Why the summer solstice? Because that date marks the beginning of six months when the night (which is at its shortest) becomes longer, and the day shorter. Thus, the summer solstice is a 'big brother' analogue to each new moon, or lunar birth. Though June 21 is the day on which the sun shines most spectacularly, it is also the day marking the beginning of the sun's decline. Metaphorically speaking, then, the beginning of the sun's death is also the beginning of the moon's birth.

And why the three days' delay? One might say that, metaphorically, three nights of darkness take place before the new moon appears. Practically speaking, however, there is a several day delay in effect: though the solstices theoretically take place on Dec. 21 and June 21, the very slight changes in length of day/night are not suddenly appreciated. For this reason, the Roman mithraic celebration Dies Natalis Solis Invicti ("Birth Day of the Invincible Sun") took place not on Dec. 21 but on Dec. 25, when the daylight hours are *appreciably* longer. The Christian Church appropriated that celebration for its birthday of Jesus.

The moon, water, and the Baptist

I now touch on a number of fairly startling observations, generally passed over in the literature. The first is that the summer solstice is **the traditional birthdate of the great immerser, John the Baptist**. To be precise, his nativity is celebrated three days later—on June 24—as if to allow for three days of darkness! Those three days, of course, are the 'days in the grave' between the last of the old moon's light and the first light of the new moon—the *resurrection*.

Secondly, in Sardinia, Sicily, and other parts of the central Mediterranean, John's birth is celebrated in midsummer by bathing in water (read: in *gnosis*) whereby one's sins are forgiven. Then, too, a temple to John the Baptist at Marsala in Sicily is located over a spring whose water has magical properties. (On these and other interesting facts relating to veneration of the Baptist, see James Frazer, *Golden Bough* IV:246 f.)

Thirdly, June 24 is also the great feast of the god Adonis, when he metaphorically died (to great wailing of women), only to be resurrected after three days. Jerome anciently observed: "The one whom we call Adonis, he is named Tammuz in Hebrew and Syriac... In the month of June he is supposed to have died and then resurrected again, and for this reason the month is named Tammuz" (On Ezek. 8, Migne Lat. XXV.82).

Fourthly, *Tammuz* is a corruption of *Dumuzi-Abzu*, Sumerian for "True Son of the Deep Water." (For the significance of "deep water," please see above.)

All this is most intriguing, but it should be noted that we have not spoken of Jesus. We have spoken of *John the Baptist's* birth, death, and resurrection! These events occur, *nota bene*, exactly six months from the birth of Jesus on the winter solstice—that is, as far away on the calendar as possible the one from the other!

Jesus of Nazareth now somewhat eerily enters into the picture—as an interloper. He was by tradition born in a cave of Bethlehem. However, that very cave (Jerome obligingly informs us) was dedicated by the heathen to the worship of Adonis. Jerome would have us believe that the 'heathen' secondarily transformed the cave to their use. But the increasingly regnant Christians would hardly have tolerated *that!* And if the heathen were second, then would not the cave still be dedicated to Adonis? Yet it is dedicated to the birth of Jesus. Finally, the cult of

Adonis/Tammuz is most ancient, while that of the Christian relatively new. It is clear that Adonis was the *first* to be venerated in the Cave of Bethlehem, and that the Christian Church usurped both the veneration and the cave for Jesus.

Connecting the dots

We have now come full circle: In Christian times, John the Baptist replaced a most ancient *water* god. One would think it would be Jesus, not John! This is a hint—one of many—that ***Christianity was originally gnostic and centered not on Jesus of Nazareth but on the water cult of John the Baptist/Adonis.***

In the posts thus far, water has been the common theme from Stone Age times to Late Antiquity—from the the great ocean ‘beyond’ (home of the celestial orbs), to veneration of the moon (which rules the tides), to the great feast day of the water god (Dumuzi-Abzu, Adonis, John the Baptizer) at the summer solstice.

And yet, in all of this long history, water is a powerful, unifying *symbol*. While the physical substance is ubiquitous, indispensable and life-giving, the spiritual symbolism of water is equally life-giving: *gnosis*.

Highlights of this post:

- in the ancient Levant water symbolized hidden wisdom/gnosis
- the ocean under our terrestrial earth was the place of ultimate truth and where the gods lived
- the serpent was the first ‘divine emissary’ between gods and man
- though real, the material world is not where true meaning is found
- truth is on ‘the other side’ of a downward, tumultuous vortex
- long ago, the moon divinity ruled both gnosis and water

- the moon was man's divine friend and spectacular mentor
- traditionally, the feasts of the moon's light, of John the Baptist, and of Adonis coincide (June 24)
- Christianity was originally gnostic and centered not on Jesus of Nazareth but on the water cult of John the Baptist-Adonis.

Part 5

baptism, Christian origins, Therapeutae

It is easy to become wearied of the many sects and names that populate the history of religion. This and the next post mention the Therapeutae, Mandaeism, Falasha, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Buddhism... Yet, I maintain that different times and places often had different names for the same thing—in this case, for the path to the knowledge of life (literally, *Manda d’Haije* in Mandaic). I advise the reader to focus on the unity of underlying doctrine and outlook, rather than on the quite misleading plethora of names. In this way, s/he will better appreciate Dr. Detering’s bold attempt to build a cross-cultural and cross-religious bridge between East and West, one based on an examination of the Exodus, of ‘crossing over,’ and of reaching ‘the other side.’

For the historian of religion, the nature and expression of belief are more important than sectarian names.

– R. Reitzenstein, *Die Vorgeschichte der Christlichen Taufe* (1929:258)



Note: Dr. Detering's original writing (translated, paraphrased, or summarized) follows.

The lengthy first section of Detering's paper, under the rubric "The Gnostic View of the Exodus," extends to twelve pages. This part of his paper is ground-breaking, for scholarship has heretofore hardly cared about how the Gnostics viewed the Exodus. For Detering, however, the issue is critical. He argues not only that the Exodus motif was central to Gnostic thought, but also that it was central to the emergence of Christianity. For Detering, it all has to do with the concept of "crossing over."

In order, Detering reviews how the Exodus was viewed by: the Therapeutae, Simon Magus, the Peratae, the Naasenes, *The Testimony of Truth* (NHL IX.3), *The Gospel of Truth* (NHL I.3), the *Odes of Solomon*, and the *Mandean Book of John*. In this and the next post, we consider a possible lynchpin between East and West: the enigmatic 'sect' of Therapeutae.

The Therapeutae

Part 1 - Summary of the evidence

The group considered itself “the people at the Red Sea.” It understood, in the passage across that body of water, the *great mystery* itself: the passage from death to life. From Philo’s description (our only surviving source) we know that the Therapeutae re-enacted the passage across the sea in overnight singing and dance (*De Vita*, 83 ff). Philo’s passage reads:

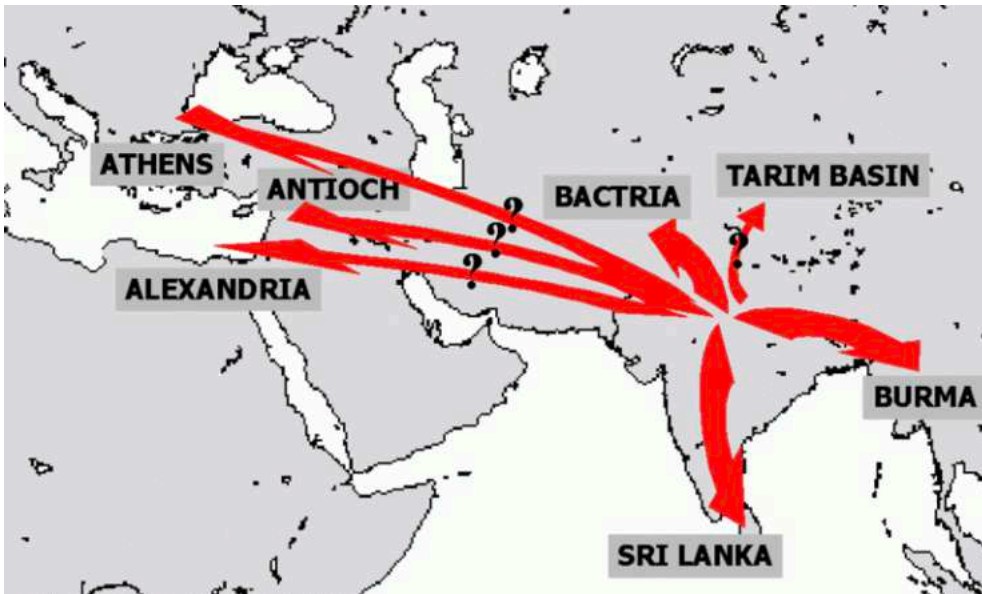
(85) Then, when each chorus of the men and each chorus of the women has feasted separately by itself, like persons in the bacchanalian revels, drinking the pure wine of the love of God, they join together, and the two become one chorus, an imitation of that one which, in old time, was established by the Red Sea, on account of the wondrous works which were displayed there; (86) for, by the commandment of God, the sea became to one party the cause of safety, and to the other that of utter destruction; for it being burst asunder, and dragged back by a violent reflux, and being built up on each side as if there were a solid wall, the space in the midst was widened, and cut into a level and dry road, along which the people passed over to the opposite land, being conducted onwards to higher ground; then, when the sea returned and ran back to its former channel, and was poured out from both sides, on what had just before been dry ground, those of the enemy who pursued were overwhelmed and perished.

(86) When the Israelites saw and experienced this great miracle, which was an event beyond all description, beyond all imagination, and beyond all hope, both men and women together, under the influence of divine inspiration, becoming all on chorus, sang hymns of thanksgiving to God the Savior, Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess leading the women.

Philo goes on to show how the Therapeutae, in their singing, re-enacted the exhilarated song of the Israelites after having crossed over.

COMMENTARY [R.S.]

Both Eusebius and Epiphanius surprisingly considered the Therapeutae to be early Christians. In fact, that view was not challenged until well into the 19th century. More recently, however, the view that the Therapeutae were once looked upon as early Christians has been something of an embarrassment and generally ignored by scholarship.



The authenticated Buddhist missionary activities of Emperor Ashoka, c. 250 BCE.

The reason is clear: if the Therapeutae had anything to do with Christianity, then the entire chronology of Christian beginnings is immediately in jeopardy. After all, if Jesus died c. 33 CE, then how could Philo (d. ca. 50 CE) write about a sect of Alexandrian Christians already contemporary with Jesus? Paul had not yet written his letters, and the Gospel of Mark was still well in the future. Moreover, for Philo, the Therapeutae are no Johnnies-come-lately. He already found them "in many places" (point i below), including in "every one of the districts [of Egypt], or nomi as they are called" (*Vita* 21).

Hence, scholars simply assume that Eusebius and Epiphanius were mistaken—the Therapeutae were *obviously* not Christians! The alternative is unthinkable and forces us to accept that *Christian chronology is wrong*. Jesus did not die c. 33 CE. And the most provocative allegation of all: *The 'Christian' movement already predated the turn of the era by several generations*. All these problems disappear if one proposes (as I do) that the true founder of Christianity was **Yeshu ha-Notsri** (crucified c. 75 BCE). Of course, scholars, Bible-thumpers, and pastors worldwide won't go *there*.

But we must go there. Dating Christian beginnings several generations earlier accommodates the data, pure and simple. It accommodates Philo's 'Christian' Therapeutae, and also other anomalies in the literature: Epiphanius' view that the sect of the Nasarenes was "pre-Christian" (Pan. 18), R. Bultman's view that the Mandeans were "pre-Christian," and R. Reitzenstein's argument that Philo's view of baptism depends already on the practice of the Mandeans (*Die Vorgeschichte Der Christlichen Taufe*, 1929:105) and that, hence, the Mandeans were pre-Christian. (Were the Mandeans, in fact, the Nasarenes of Epiphanius? Hmmm...)

Given that a theory is supposed to accommodate as much data as possible, then an earlier beginning to Christianity must now be seriously considered. Unfortunately, in order to accept such an earlier chronology, one must: (1) reject the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth; and (2) look upon the canonical gospels as fabulous, or even as fables.

What do we know about the Therapeutae?

Philo's description of the Therapeutae has given rise to all sorts of theories—they were Christians, they were Jews, they were both, they were neither, and now (Detering) they were "Jewish Buddhists." One would think there would be more agreement, given that Philo wrote

only nine pages (in Yonge's translation) on the sect—and two of those pages (sections 40–64) are a rambling excursus on the debauched eating habits of “others... full of trifling and folly.” The following is what Philo actually tells us about the Therapeutae:

Characteristics of the Therapeutae

- **(a)** they are meditative (given to the “speculative life”)
- **(b)** they are healers of both body and soul
- **(c)** they serve a “living” God who is “superior to the good, and more simple than the one, and more ancient than the unit” [*Vita* 2]
- **(d)** they are free from passion, and hence “completely happy” [6]
- **(e)** they are trained in insight, “being continually taught to see without interruption, [they] may well aim at obtaining a sight of the living God” [11]
- **(f)** they are ecstasies, “give way to enthusiasm, behaving like so many revellers in bacchanalian or corybantian mysteries, until they see the object which they have been earnestly desiring” [11]
- **(g)** they think “that their mortal life has already come to an end” [This is ‘realized eschatology’-RS]
- **(h)** they “leave their possessions to their sons and daughters” [13] and consider that “an undue care for money and wealth causes great waste of time” [15]
- **(i)** they are found “in many places,” but principally around Alexandria in Egypt [21]
- **(j)** they “study the laws and the sacred oracles of God... by reason” [25]
- **(k)** they are pure “even in their dreams” and speak oracles even in sleep [26]
- **(l)** the outward senses and world (= materiality) mean nothing to them [26]
- **(m)** they meditate on the scriptures and “unfold and explain the symbols, bringing the secret meaning naked to the light” [28, 78]; yet they also “explain with minute accuracy the precise meaning of

the laws" [31]

- **(n)** they possess writings "of ancient men" [29]
- **(o)** they are in seclusion for six days, and come together on the seventh day [30]
- **(p)** they are both men and women [32]
- **(q)** they are given to fasting [32]; "they eat only so far as not to be hungry, and they drink just enough to escape from thirst, avoiding all satiety as an enemy of and a plotter against both soul and body" [37 (This is very Buddhist.-RS)]
- **(r)** they abjure ornaments, and wear simple clothing "just stout enough to ward off cold and heat" [38 (Also very Buddhist.-RS)]
- **(s)** they are particularly concerned with truth and falsehood [39]
- **(t)** their great feast is on the fiftieth day, when they come together wearing white garments and celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night [65, 66, 83]
- **(u)** in hierarchy, "they do not look on those as elders who are advanced in years and very ancient, but in some cases they esteem those as very young men" [67]
- **(v)** they esteem chastity and their women are virgins "out of an admiration for and love of wisdom" and "hating the allurements of pleasure with all their might" (68-69) [This reveals the essence of encratism, i.e., the belief that pleasures and understanding are mutually incompatible.-RS]
- **(w)** they reject wine ("the medicine of folly") and meat [73]

Analysis

Parallels between the Therapeutae and normative Christianity.

Comparison of the above list with New Testament/Pauline Christianity reveals surprisingly little overlap. One can, of course, point to vacuous commonalities, such as that the Therapeutae are “both men and women” (**p**), and they are found “in many places” (**i**). Nor is point (**c**) particularly revealing: though Johannine christology presents the pre-existent Logos of God, Philo intimates that the conception of the Therapeutae goes *beyond* good and evil (“superior to the good”)—a rather different issue that transcends the concept of a “good God.” Also, the word “living” was code for “true, authentic” in gnosticism and may apply here. For example, the “living” water of Mandaean writings refers to the flowing or “true” (read: spiritual) Jordan, that is, gnosis.

One might suppose that point (**h**) offers a parallel with early Christianity, but it too is not close. At Acts 2:45-46 we read that “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Philo, however, tells us that the Therapeutae “leave their possessions to their sons and daughters” and consider that “an undue care for money and wealth causes great waste of time” [13, 15].

Point (**f**) above may offer a possible parallel with evangelicalism in New Testament Christianity. Paul mentions ecstasies several times, i.e., those who “speak in tongues” and who “prophecy” (1 Cor 13:8 & pars). But the resemblance is not close, for Philo describes not those who engage in prophecy but those who revel. Philo’s language (until they “see” the awaited “object”) almost suggests induced hallucination. It reminds one of later **Sufi whirling**, undertaken to reach “the source of

all perfection, or *kemal*." Yet point **(f)** conflicts with the sober and meditative tone of Philo's other descriptions. We can perhaps reconcile this contradiction by supposing that a special catharsis via movement and singing occurred among the Therapeutae at a great communal celebration each fifty days.

Parallels between the Therapeutae and heterodox Christianity.

Certain characteristics of the Therapeutae are strongly evocative of Jewish Christian sectarianism, most especially **(q)** "given to fasting"; **(v)** esteeming chastity; and **(w)** rejection of wine and meat. What we know about James the Just encompasses all of these (Eusebius, H.E. II 23.4 f). According to Epiphanius, the Ebionites and the Nasarenes (pre-Christian followers of Jesus) were vegetarian, and the Ebionites "honored virginity on account of James" (Pan 30.2.6). Also, point **(g)** is "realized eschatology," espoused by the Cerinthians and by some Gnostic writings in the Nag Hammadi corpus.

In the next post we consider the astonishingly large number of parallels between the Therapeutae and Buddhism.—R.S.

Part 6

Buddhism, The first century Alexandria

The Therapeutae

Part 2 - Extensive parallels between the Therapeutae and Buddhism

The preceding post closed by pointing out a number of interesting parallels between Philo's description of the Therapeutae and heterodox (Jewish) Christianity. On the other hand, we found very few (if any) parallels with what would become orthodox (gentile) Christianity. This is rather surprising. But far more remarkable is that of the numerous characteristics described by Philo, half are fully compatible with Buddhism, six more are at least partially compatible, and only two—points (**f**) and (**t**)—are clearly incompatible. In short, 21 of the 23 points signaled by Philo in his description of the Therapeutae resonate wholly or at least partially with Buddhism. What this means is that ***the Therapeutae were far more compatible with 'distant' Buddhism than with orthodox Christianity, heterodox Christianity, or Judaism.***

There is not space here to discuss each of the 23 points individually, and we'll touch only on the highlights. The most important may be the very first point (a): both the Therapeutae and Buddhists are "meditative." It is well known that Buddhism is *the* religion of meditation. At the same time, neither Christianity nor Judaism has any special interest in meditation.



Point (**e**) is related to meditation and may be even more revealing: the Therapeutae “are trained in insight.” This is most interesting, because training in insight has always been *one of the two major pathways of Buddhist meditative practice*—known as **vipassana**. The other major pathway is **samatha** (calming the mind). In Theravada teaching (that is, in the oldest school of Buddhism to survive), *samatha* is preliminary to *vipassana*. That is, calming the mind is a necessary prerequisite to insight.

Asceticism

Four points on the list can be grouped together under the rubric “asceticism” (**h, q, r, w**). Points (**q**) and (**r**) closely mirror Buddhist praxis and read like paraphrases directly from the Buddhist sutras. According

to Philo's point (**r**), the Therapeutae wear simple clothing "just stout enough to ward off cold and heat" (Vita 38). The Buddhist equivalent is: "Here a monk, reflecting wisely, uses the robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat..." (Majjhima Nikaya 2.13). In the same paragraph Philo writes that the Therapeutae "are not decorated with any ornaments." This mirrors **the eighth precept** in Buddhism: "I undertake the precept to refrain from wearing garlands, using perfumes, and beautifying the body with cosmetics."

In Philo's words, the Therapeutae "eat only so far as not to be hungry, and they drink just enough to escape from thirst, avoiding all satiety as an enemy of and a plotter against both soul and body" (point **q**). Here is the standard passage, oft repeated in the Buddhist scriptures:

Reflecting wisely, [the monk] uses alms food neither for amusement nor for intoxication nor for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the survival and continuance of this body, for ending discomfort, and for assisting the holy life...

(Majjhima Nikaya 2.14)



A traditional Jewish Passover meal. Note the wine and meat.

The ascetic point (**w**) is also very Buddhist: the Therapeutae reject wine (“the medicine of folly”) and meat (Vita 73). The parallel Buddhist tenth precept is as follows: “I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness.” In Buddhism, then, the avoidance of intoxicants and meat is in order to foster correct behavior (avoid “carelessness”) and, ultimately, mental focus. This seems to parallel Philo’s reason for the Therapeutic lifestyle:

... for just as *right reason* commands the priest to offer up sober sacrifices, so also [the Therapeutae] are commanded to live sober lives, for wine is the medicine of folly, and costly seasonings and sauces excite desire, which is the most insatiable of all beasts. (Vita 73-74, emphasis added)

Thus, we have here a double parallel: both in *content* and in *motive*. This similarity between the Therapeutae and Buddhism is only half of the equation, however. The other half is the remarkable *dissimilarity* to both Judaism and normative Christianity. One simply does not encounter a wholesale rejection of wine and meat in Judaism (apart from the temporary vow of the Nazirite). Fundamentally, the abstinence of Buddhists and Therapeutae runs counter to the basic Jewish love of life and acceptance of all things God has created as *good*. Dr. Detering will argue that the Therapeutae were “Jewish Buddhists”—and I will agree. But what we are clearly dealing with are “Jews” who have moved far from normative Judaism! Furthermore, **in considering the various “Jewish Christian” sects, we must now potentially view them from this new Buddhist perspective.** For (as we saw in the preceding post) the elements that separate Jewish Christianity from both orthodox Judaism and normative Christianity are precisely those ascetic elements that link them to *Buddhism*: (**q**) “given to fasting”; (**v**) esteeming chastity; and (**w**) rejection of wine and meat.

Point (**h**) is also non-Jewish yet very Buddhist: the Therapeutae “leave their possessions to their sons and daughters” (Vita 13) and consider that “an undue care for money and wealth causes great waste of time” (Vita 15). With all due respect, one can only smile at the profound non-Jewishness of considering care for money and wealth a “great waste of time”! On the other hand, such abstemiousness is profoundly Buddhist: “I undertake the precept **to refrain from accepting gold and silver** (money).” In such ways, then, Judaism and Buddhism are fundamentally opposed.

Encratism

This is related to asceticism. Encratism (< Gk. *egkrateia*, “continence”) stems from the view that passion is to be avoided. In Buddhism,

passion and desire (*tanha*) are directly opposed to mental insight (*vipassana*). Philo notes three characteristics of the Therapeutae that fall under the encratite rubric:

- **(d)** they are free from passion, and hence “completely happy” (*Vita* 6)
- **(k)** they are pure “even in their dreams” and speak oracles even in sleep (26)
- **(v)** they esteem chastity and their women are virgins “out of an admiration for and love of wisdom” and “hating the allurements of pleasure with all their might” (68-69)

All this is quite un-Jewish—yet also quintessentially Buddhist!

Healers

Philo notes that the Therapeutae “are healers of both body and soul.” It is not well known that the Buddhist missionaries that King Asoka sent westwards c. 250 BCE were charged with healing both man and beast ([Rock Edict 2](#)). This, of course, may have some link to the name “Therapeutae.”

Realized eschatology

Buddhism has no belief in the afterlife, nor in an enduring soul. The goal of enlightenment is here, in this life. Gnosis is to be realized through *vipassana*. Philo may intimate something along these lines in point **(g)**: the Therapeutae think “that their mortal life has already come to an end.” In other words, the Therapeutae have already ‘crossed over’ to a better, transcendent existence. This view will be expanded by certain Gnostic sects who believed that even in his physical lifetime one can enter the kingdom by conceiving the light within. This is, of course, baptism in the ‘water’ of gnosis (sometimes represented as the sacrament of the bridal chamber or holy marriage, *hieros gamos*).

Emptiness of materiality

Philo writes that, for the Therapeutae, the outward senses and world “mean nothing to them” (Vita 26). Once again, this view is not at all Jewish. In Buddhism, however, the material is fraught with seductive danger and should be viewed as a great decoy. I offer one citation (from [Buddhist and Christian Parallels](#), chp. 8):

**Sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tangibles,
Yea, all impressions and ideas thereof—
These are the direful bait that draws the world,
Therein the world lies infatuated.
If they go beyond all this, leave it behind,
The Buddha’s followers with mind aware
Pass beyond the range of the devil’s might.
Like the glorious sun do they shine
Filling the world with light.**

(Sam.Nik. 1.4.17)

Other

To the above may be added several *possible* parallels between the Therapeutae and Buddhism (points **c**, **j**, **n**, **m**, **o** and **u**). In these cases, Philo does not furnish enough information for certainty.

In only two cases does Philo signal clearly *non-Buddhist* attributes of the Therapeutae. One has to do with the overnight singing and dancing that Philo ostensibly witnessed on the ‘fiftieth day.’ Remarkably, this ceremony has proto-gnostic roots predating even Buddhism. We will examine those roots in the next post.

Part 7

B.C.E. times, Gnosticism Alexandria, moon

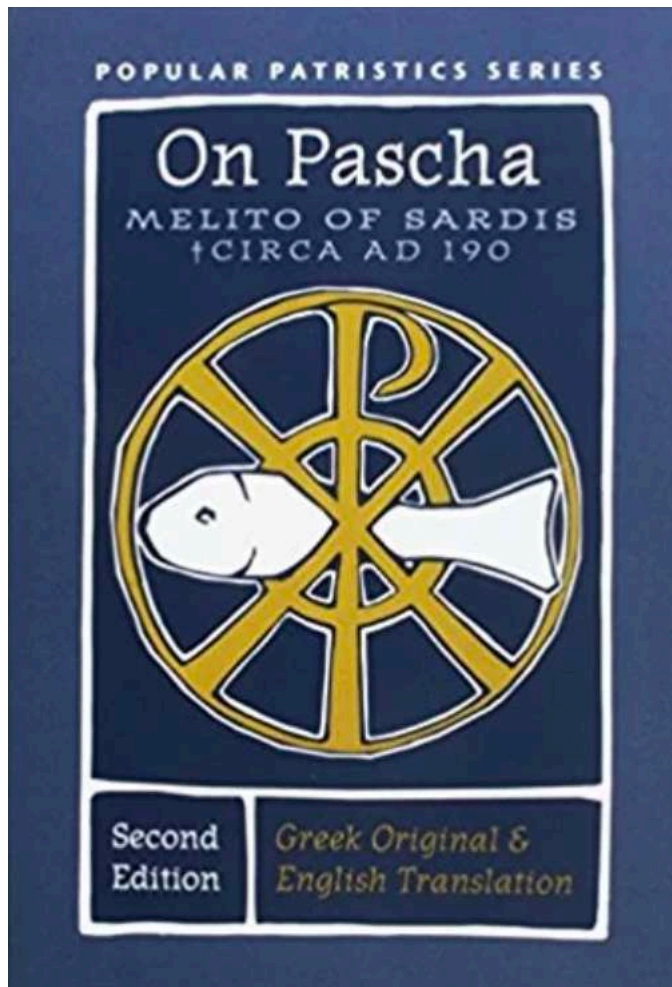
The Therapeutae

Part 3 - Passover and Pentecost

Normative Judaism and Christianity view the Exodus—traditionally commemorated by Jews at Passover—as a formative *historical* event in the distant past. However, one of the principal revelations of Dr. Detering in his article under discussion is that the Christian Gnostics of late antiquity viewed the Exodus as a *spiritual* ‘crossing over to the other side’—an inner transformation. Interestingly, this latter view was also known to mainline Christians, particularly in Alexandria:

At the end of the second century in Alexandria, however, we encounter a somewhat different understanding of the feast [of Passover], one that focused upon “passage” rather than “passion” —the passage from death to life. Clement of Alexandria describes the Passover as humanity’s passage “from all trouble and all objects of sense”... The same combination of themes can be seen in Didymus of Alexandria: “When the spiritual spring arrives and the month of the first fruits is at hand, we keep the Crossing-Feast, called in the Hebrew tongue Pascha”... (P. Bradshaw in Passover and Easter, 1999:83).

And here is what Melito, Bishop of Sardis wrote in the late second century CE:



It is he [Jesus] that clothed death with shame
and stood the devil in grief
as Moses did Pharaoh.
It is he that struck down crime
and made injustice childless
as Moses did Egypt.
It is he that delivered us from slavery to liberty,
from darkness to light,
from death to life,
from tyranny to eternal royalty,
and made us a new priesthood
and an eternal people personal to him.
He is the Pascha of our salvation.

(S. Hall translation, Melito on Pascha, 1979:37, emphasis added.)

The view of Passover as marking the passage from darkness to light is found even in Jewish thought, as in a rabbinic Haggadah on the Passover: “He [Yahweh] has brought us forth from darkness to bright light” (I. Yuval, in *Passover and Easter* I:101).

How to read this Calendar	1st Day SUN	2nd Day MON	3rd Day TUE	4th Day WED	5th Day THUR	6th Day FRI	7th Day SAT
Gregorian Date: 0							1
Day of Hebrew Month: Day 0 Example Day Note regarding Hebrew Day							Shabbat Spring Begins
New months in new seasons always fall on the Gregorian Sunday, starting with the first Sunday in April.	2 Day 1 New Month	3 Day 2	4 Day 3	5 Day 4	6 Day 5	7 Day 6 Preparation Day	8 Shabbat
To see why Passover is at the end of a 7th Day Shabbat, read our article: <i>The Death and Resurrection of the Messiah</i> .	9 Day 8	10 Day 9	11 Day 10	12 Day 11	13 Day 12	14 Day 13 Preparation Day	15 Shabbat Passover of Sunrise!
Passover is observed from evening to morning, followed by Unleavened Bread (Day 1), making it a high sabbath.	16 Day 15 Unleavened Bread (Day 1)	17 Day 16 Unleavened Bread (Day 2)	18 Day 17 Unleavened Bread (Day 3)	19 Day 18 Unleavened Bread (Day 4)	20 Day 19 Unleavened Bread (Day 5)	21 Day 20 Unleavened Bread (Day 6)	22 Shabbat Unleavened Bread (Day 7)
	23 Day 22 Wave Sheaf	24 Day 23	25 Day 24	26 Day 25	27 Day 26	28 Day 27 Preparation Day	29 Shabbat
	30 Day 29	<i>They finished investigating all the men who had married foreign wives by the first day of the first month.</i> Ezra 10:17					

Six and seven

Passover is more than a single day's celebration. It begins at the first full moon in spring and includes a seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. Whenever the moon enters into discussion the number seven is not far behind, for the month naturally divides into four periods of seven days (with a small—and inconvenient—remainder). As discussed in a prior post, the moon was anciently the 'king' of the gods. From the dawn of history seven has been a sacred number linked to the moon's

phases, a number that compounds into the divine month of 28 days (plus 2-3 days of darkness), and by which the month is divisible.

Also, seven is commonly the number of perfection, while six is the number of imperfection and evil. According to one Gnostic tractate found at Nag Hammadi, "the sixth is envy... the seventh is understanding", and "The sixth one is Cain... The seventh is Abel" (the *Apocryphon of John* 12:23 & 10:35). Another tractate reads: "And when [Chaos] was angry, he begot Death from his own death. It was set up over the sixth heaven. Sabaoth was snatched away from that place. And thus the number of the six authorities of Chaos was completed" (*On the Origin of the World*, 106).

Six was also the number of preparation, seven the number of completion. In Philo's account, the Therapeutae prepare for six days and come together on the seventh:

Therefore, during six days, each of these individuals, retiring into solitude by himself, philosophies by himself in one of the places called monasteries, never going outside the threshold of the outer court, and indeed never even looking out. But on the seventh day they all come together as if to meet in a sacred assembly... (*Vita* 30)

In some Gnostic texts the preparation for gnosis takes 'six days,' while the great and life-changing spiritual transformation takes place on the seventh day. More precisely, it takes place *during the night that gives birth to the seventh day*.

We see this, for example, in the [Secret Gospel of Mark](#):

And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.

The proselyte in this Secret Mark passage is like a newborn babe, born on the seventh day. This conception seems related to a saying in the Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus says: "Let the old man heavy with days not hesitate to ask the little child of seven days about the place of life, and he will live." (GTh 4a).

It should not escape us that the great celebration among the Therapeutae occurs during the night "at the end of seven weeks" (Vita 65, 83)—that is, on the *seventh* night of the *seventh* week.

Fifty days

<h1>JEWISH CALENDAR</h1>				
<i>Holiday</i>	5773 (2012-2013)	5774 (2013-2014)	5775 (2014-2015)	5776 (2015-2016)
Rosh Hashanah	<i>September 17th-18th</i>	<i>September 5th-6th</i>	<i>September 25th-26th</i>	<i>September 14th-15th</i>
Yom Kippur	<i>September 26th</i>	<i>September 14th</i>	<i>October 4th</i>	<i>September 23rd</i>
Sukkot	<i>Oct. 1-2/Oct.3-7</i>	<i>Sep. 19-20/Sep. 21-25</i>	<i>Oct. 9-10/Oct.11-15</i>	<i>Sep. 28-29/Sep.30-Oct.4</i>
Shmini Atzeret	<i>October 8th</i>	<i>September 26th</i>	<i>October 16th</i>	<i>October 5th</i>
Simchat Torah	<i>October 9th</i>	<i>September 27th</i>	<i>October 17th</i>	<i>October 6th</i>
Chanukah	<i>December 9th-16th</i>	<i>Nov. 29th-December 5th</i>	<i>December 17th-24th</i>	<i>December 7th-14th</i>
Purim	<i>February 24th</i>	<i>March 16th</i>	<i>March 5th</i>	<i>March 24th</i>
Pesach (Passover)	<i>March 26th-27</i> <i>March 28th-31st</i> <i>April 1st-2nd</i>	<i>April 15th-16th</i> <i>April 17th-20th</i> <i>April 21st-22nd</i>	<i>April 4th-5th</i> <i>April 6th-9th</i> <i>April 10th-11th</i>	<i>April 23rd-24th</i> <i>April 25th-28th</i> <i>April 29th-30th</i>
Shavuot	<i>May 15th-16th</i>	<i>June 4th-5th</i>	<i>May 24th-25</i>	<i>June 12th-13th</i>
Tish'a B'Av	<i>July 16th</i>	<i>August 5th</i>	<i>July 26th</i>	<i>August 14th</i>
<i>Note: Days marked in Italics are yom tov</i>				

October 2017 Calendar with Jewish Holidays

The Jewish year traditionally begins in the Fall but, long ago, the agricultural year universally began in the Spring (the Jewish month of Nisan, which corresponds to our March–April). The fact that the first full moon of the agricultural year also marks the Passover celebration suggests that the Jewish feast is secondary to a very ancient agricultural and lunar celebration, one that celebrated the conquest of

darkness by the moon's light—in gnostic terms, the passage from ignorance to understanding. After all, the full moon was the symbol, par excellence, of light conquering darkness. Of course, such a gnostic view of life was palatable neither to Judaism nor to Christianity. In both these religions the lunar feast was adopted but the gnostic meaning was masked by new dogma: (1) God acted in history to save the Israelites (the Jewish Passover); and (2) God acted in history to save the world through His Son's resurrection (the Christian Easter).

The Therapeutae may also have viewed the Exodus as an inner, spiritual 'crossing over.' In this, they would be echoing the sentiment of Gnostics in late antiquity, and also of Clement of Alexandria noted at the beginning of this post. Yet Philo supplies an interesting element of the Therapeutic celebration, one that separates it from Passover: it occurred in an all-night vigil, one accompanied by song and dance, fifty days *after* Passover:

In the first place, these men assemble at the end of seven weeks, venerating not only the simple week of seven days, but also its multiplied power...

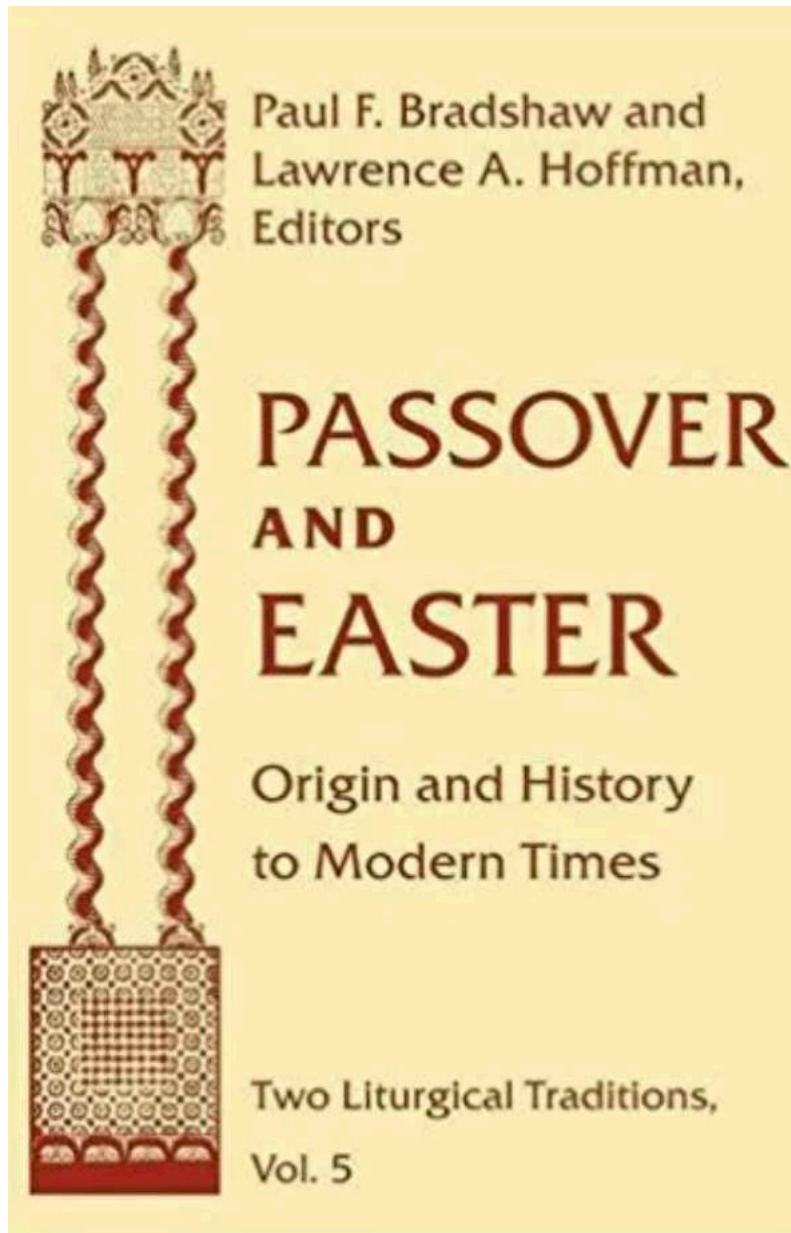
And after the feast they celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night... (Vita 65, 83)

The Therapeutic celebration on the eve of the fiftieth day coincides with the Jewish Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), and with the Christian feast of Pentecost, which take place in late spring fifty ($7 \times 7 + 1$) days after Passover. The entire period of fifty days leading up to Shavuot (known in Judaism as the *S'firat Ha'omer* season) is poorly understood: "It is hard to imagine a set of scholarly problems more complex than those occasioned by the *S'firat Ha'omer* season. The various biblical accounts regarding this interval display a maddening lack of clarity, which in turn, lead to multiple traditions concerning the exact date when Shavuot should be celebrated" (E. Zohar, in *Passover and Easter*

I, 1999:71). When one encounters such confusion, one can suspect: (a) a foreign origin has been poorly or incompletely integrated into religious tradition; and/or (b) an attempt has been made to cover up or change some foreign element, one that threatens a priesthood and the indigenous religious outlook. I suggest the latter: an ancient lunar and gnostic celebration has been *imperfectly* assimilated into both Judaism and Christianity.

Both Passover and Shavuot coincided with agricultural celebrations (the first fruits and the wheat harvest), but different traditions within Judaism had different ways of calculating the 50-day interval between them. In the *Book of Jubilees*—which is much interested in calendrical issues—the Shavuot/Feast of Weeks “is precisely dated to the fifteenth day of the third month” (S. Park, *Pentecost and Sinai*, 2008:243). That would also be a full moon day. Hence the entire first part of the year was once bracketed by two great feasts, each marking a full moon and separated by a period of seven sabbaths (eight sabbaths if we count from the *beginning* of the week-long Passover celebration). In any case, all this supports the view that, at an early time, man’s sacred year and affairs were ordered according to the *lunar* cycle. This, in turn, lends support to the theory that man’s early religious impulses had everything to do with light conquering darkness—that they were proto-gnostic.

The all-night vigil



According to Paul Bradshaw, Jewish tradition expected the coming of the messiah to be at Passover. Furthermore, some Jews observed a vigil at Passover—during which they meditated on the Exodus story:

The [Passover] Haggadah speaks of five Rabbis meeting for a seder at B'nei Brak. All night long they relate the Exodus story, until at last their

disciples interrupt to remind them that the time for morning prayer has arrived. (Bradshaw 85, 100).

The early Christians extended the Jewish Passover meal “into a vigil during the night, so that their celebration of the feast with a eucharistic meal only began at cockcrow—i.e., around 3 a.m.—after the Jewish festivities were over.” Christians, however, substituted meditation on the passion of Jesus for meditation on the Exodus. Furthermore, baptism at cockcrow after the all-night vigil was evidently practiced among early Christians. In a related vein, Bradshaw writes:

... It seems likely that [this choice] has its roots in watching and waiting for the predicted return of Christ to complete his work of redemption... The Sunday celebration by other Christians also included a preceding day of fasting and a night vigil culminating in the celebration of the eucharist.

... Christians in Egypt and Syria went even further and created six days of fasting from Monday until the end of the Saturday night vigil. Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century is familiar with a fast of this duration, and the Syrian church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* from the same period gives a detailed explanation of a similar practice.

... One other element in the vigil deserves being mentioned here because of the important part it would play in later tradition: the lighting of the paschal candle. By the fourth century, daily evening worship throughout the year in many places began with a ceremonial lighting of the evening lamp, in which were recalled the gifts of the natural light of the day, the lamps to illuminate the night, and above all the light of Christ. (Bradshaw 85, 86, 90)

The “light of Christ” at midnight recalls Mt. 25:1 ff. However, because we are speaking of a full moon celebration at Passover, it can be argued that “the light of Christ” is simply a more recent interpretation of the self-generated light of the full moon—*gnosis*.

Part 8

Buddhism, Christian origins, India, moon

The Therapeutae

Part 4 - Not this, not that

Buddhism with a difference?

A prior post summarized Philo's discussion of the Therapeutae in 23 points, and we have seen that most of those points surprisingly resonate with early Buddhism. But in two of the points, Philo attributes apparently *non-Buddhist* elements to the Therapeutae. The most obvious is point (f):

[The Therapeutae] are ecstasies, they "give way to enthusiasm, behaving like so many revelers in bacchanalian or corybantian mysteries, until they see the object which they have been earnestly desiring." (Vita 11)

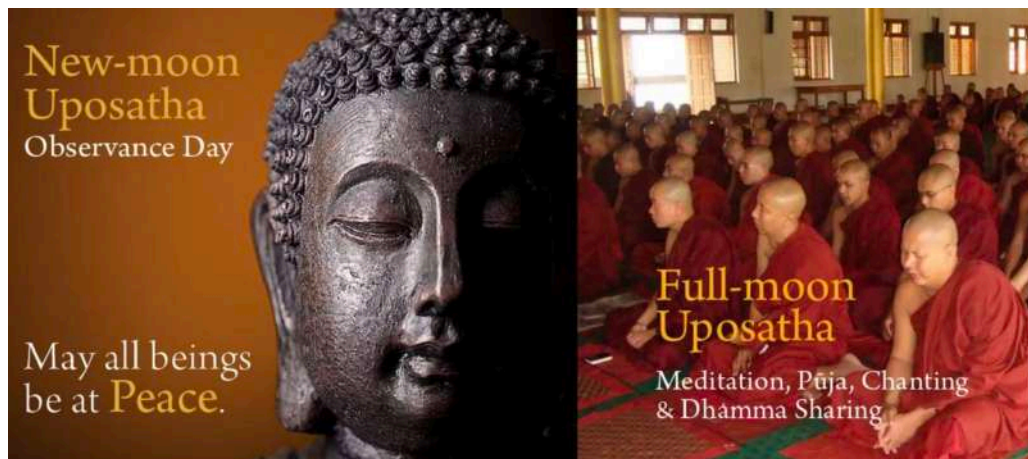
This contradicts the [seventh Buddhist precept](#), which explicitly states: "I undertake to refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to see entertainments." Point (f) also contradicts the meditative and sober aspects of the Therapeutae that Philo elsewhere describes (points **a, d, j, m, o**). In one passage, Philo states quite plainly: the Therapeutae are "free from passion" (point **d**, *Vita* 6). How to reconcile being "ecstasies" in one passage, and "free from passion" in another? I am not sure. Perhaps Philo was engaging in authorial license or exaggeration in his description of the nocturnal celebration. Or perhaps he simply

misunderstood the tenor of the “great feast”—a vigil that was joyous yet not *irresponsible* (“bacchanalian or corybantian”).

We also need to address the nocturnal aspect of the principal celebration among the Therapeutae, point (t):

“their great feast is on the fiftieth day, when they come together wearing white garments and celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night” (Vita 65, 66, 83).

In the preceding post we saw that the Therapeutae share a ‘fifty day celebration’ with Judaism (**Shavuot**) and with Christianity (**Pentecost**). All of these sacred proceedings also have a nocturnal component. Buddhism, however, knows no fifty-day commemoration nor, to my knowledge, does it have a nocturnal ceremony. It does, however, follow the moon in its principal events, known as **Uposatha** (observance, cleansing) days, which occur at the new and the full moon. During the Uposatha ritual, the Buddhist monks recite the 227 rules of the **Patimokkha**, which takes about an hour.



New moon and full moon uposatha convocations by the monks are customarily observed in Theravada Buddhist countries.

In addition, **we have seen** that Buddhism shares no less than 21 out of 23 points itemized for the Therapeutae. Without doubt, the

Therapeutae share strong similarities with Theravada (southern) Buddhism—the form of the religion that came to Egypt via Ashoka’s missionaries c. 250 BCE. However, their great, joyous, and nocturnal celebration on the eve of the fiftieth day—both in form and in content (points **f** and **t**)—comes from a non-Buddhist source. Nevertheless, that joyous celebration was ancient enough and powerful enough to influence multiple religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity. We will now see that the roots of the Therapeutic celebration may have come from a nearby, yet routinely overlooked source: the moon religion of ancient Arabia.

A little-known Jewish sect

In a very informative appendix (“Sanbat,” pp. 328 f) to R. Reitzenstein’s 1923 book *Die Vorgeschichte der Christlichen Taufe*, Dr. Luise Troje explicitly relates the nocturnal dance and song of the Therapeutae to ancient practice among an obscure Jewish sect: the Falasha (also known as the **Beta Israel**) of Ethiopia/Abyssinia. Troje writes that the indigenous people of that land worshipped the serpent until Ethiopia was Christianized in IV CE. About the turn of the era, however, a Semitic sect migrated there from S. Arabia. This sect brought with it the proto-gnostic cult of the moon. Some of those immigrants were Judaized (the Falasha), others were Christianized. Of interest to us here is that *the Falasha celebrated the seventh sabbath with communal music and dance—precisely as did the Therapeutae* (Troje 331).

In Falasha religion, the Sabbath (*Sanbat*) is a deity known as the “Son of God.” Such deification, of course, represents the ultimate honor that can be bestowed upon the number seven. One can then appreciate the magnified sacredness of the number 7×7 , that is, forty-nine. The great celebration among the Falasha of the seventh sabbath after Passover is known as *Lengela Sanbat*. It is simultaneous with the

Jewish Feast of Weeks/Shavuot and the Christian Pentecost, and it takes place at night.

Falasha Jews of Ethiopia

In Falasha religion, Lengela Sanbat is when Sanbat the Son of God rises from his throne in heaven in order to visit the earth, engendering great celebration among his followers below. Before Sanbat descends, he receives God's blessing with the words: "Those who honor you honor me, and those who reject you reject me; those who serve you, I will consider that they have received me" (Te'ezaza Sanbat, folio 40r, p. 154). These words are strikingly similar to Lk 10:16—"He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (cf. also Lk 9:48).



Falasha Jews of Ethiopia

In Falasha mythology, the moon and Sanbat are identical. This makes little sense unless we keep in mind the discussion of the preceding post, namely, that gnosis is (in one view) equivalent to the moon's light –to the self-created (Gk. *αυτογενής*) light that overcomes the darkness (of ignorance). When Sanbat descends from on high, then, *gnosis* descends to visit man.

In Christian mythology, parallels can readily be drawn between the foregoing and the scene of Jesus' baptism. It is at the baptism that "the spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove" (Mk 1:10). Then, too, the baptism took place in the Jordan (the river of gnosis, according to the Mandaeans) and marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. All these elements are laden with meaning for the Gnostic—the water of the Jordan, the descent of the spirit/gnosis, and the beginning of a new ministry / a new birth. Such is the spiritual "crossing over." Thus, a deep parallel also exists between the Exodus motif on the one hand, and the baptism motif on the other:

[Passage] from the world into the Jordan
[is passage] from the blindness of the world into the sight of God,
from the carnal into the spiritual,
from the physical into the angelic,
from the created into the Pleroma,
from the world into the Aeon,
from the servitude into sonship...

(A Valentinian Exposition, NHL 42:10-20.)

Parallels between Johannine Christianity and Falasha religion are also extensive: Sanbat sits in heaven at the right hand of God, he is everlasting, and he has always existed (is pre-existent). He is also the eschatological judge who saves his own—that is (in a gnostic context), he saves those *who are enlightened*.

Mandaism

Troje also draws parallels between Falasha thought and Mandaean texts. In Mandaism, the great savior is Manda d’Haije, literally “Knowledge of Life.” Manda d’Haije is the personification of gnosis *and also of baptism* (Troje 338). Baptism is when gnosis comes to the individual. (Cf. ‘adoptionism’ in early Christian thought [Mk 1:11], and also the Buddhist ‘moment of enlightenment.’)

In Mandaism, Habshabba is analogous to Sanbat among the Falashas. Habshabba is judge, and he is sent into the world by Manda d’Haije in order to forgive sins (Troje 368). This occurs at baptism, which is brought to the world by Habshabba. It is evident that, for Mandaeans, baptismal immersion in water is equivalent to the acquisition of gnosis and the forgiveness of sins. All this, of course, has great implications for later Christian doctrine. When one concludes that Mandaism preceded Christianity (thus Bultmann), then one can begin to connect the dots in a general way:

[1] the gnostic moon religion (many centuries BCE);

[2] the introduction of the gnostic religion of Buddhism to the West under Ashoka (mid-III BCE);

[3] the gnostic religion of Mandaism with its immersion in water (gnosis) by “John” (I BCE);

[4] the emergence of normative, anti-Gnostic Christianity (II CE, post-Marcion).

Troje derives the Mandaean practice of baptism from the first light/new moon celebration (p. 376). She sees “Indo-Iranian” precursors. (Discussion of the Mandaeans continues → [here](#).)



Modern Mandeans of Iraq. Note the white robes, in common with the Falasha and mentioned by Philo (*Vita* 66) in connection with the Therapeutae. (AP Photo/Karim Kadim)

Persia and India

Troje brings in Zoroastrian concepts (p. 351), including that Ahura Mazda (lit. “Lord Gnosis”) is pure light, in the sense that light = *nous*, “mind.” As with other lunar/gnostic religions, the number seven is perfect in Zoroastrianism, while the number six signifies imperfection and preparation. Similar use of the numbers six and seven is found in much Gnostic literature from the early Christian centuries. We recall that it is also found among the Therapeutae (point [o](#) of the list [here](#), and in Philo, *Vita* 30).

Finally, Troje discusses parallels with early religion in India, noting the Brahmanic equivalence between mind (*manas*) and the moon: “What this manas is, that is the moon above.” The moon is “beyond death,” that is, its light—occurring in the darkness of night—is transcendent/ from the other side. Furthermore, its knowledge is transferable to

human beings: "Thus does that deity carry him, who knows this, across death" (Brhad Aranyaka Upanishad I.3.16; III.1.6).

One long-forgotten aspect of the moon is its function as a time-measurer, a virtual clock in the heavens. Its attribute as expert measurer was early extended to religion: the moon is that which measures good and evil—it is the cosmic judge, rendered more acute by its ability to shine light in the darkness (Troje 357). But the moon is also within each of us: it is our conscience. Thus the Kaushitaki Upanishad 1.2: "When you come to the moon... it will ask you-'Who are you?' To this give answer... I am you."

From Troje's article alone, it is clear that—in pre-Christian times—the primacy of the moon (and implicit gnosticism) was undisputed from India to North Africa. In this religion, "not sacrifice nor service determined one's fate before the judge, but only gnosis—the knowledge that man is master of his fate..." (Troje 366). Both the moon and water were symbols of gnosis—the former for its ability to shine in the darkness, and the latter because the underworld ocean was the 'home' of the gods (see [here](#)). Inevitably, the symbols of water and moon became mixed, and we read in religious literature of "the moon in the middle of the water" (Rigveda 1.105.1), and of rain coming down from the moon (Aitareya Up. 8.28).

I suspect that the equivalence water = gnosis was so pervasive in the Iron Age that it seeped into many religions from India to North Africa. Even in Jewish scripture, we read of the Israelite priests standing in the water of the Jordan River (Josh 3:8, 13, 17), collecting stones from the riverbed to put up as sacred mementos on dry land (Josh 4:1-9). All this is meaningless without the gnostic water symbolism described above.



Hindu public prayer at the Ganges River

Ultimately, one cannot escape an Indian origin for the practice of baptism. Sacred immersion in the rivers Ganges and Sarasvati is still practiced in India, and it is age-old. It seems clear to me that, along with the importation of Buddhism to the West in III BCE, the practices of monasticism (uniquely Buddhist at that time) and also of 'baptism' or sacred immersion also percolated into the West. These eastern practices were clothed with western doctrines and rendered virtually unrecognizable to someone from India.

Were the Therapeutae Christians?

In the preceding posts we reviewed the practices of the Therapeutae, as reported by Philo Judaeus shortly after the turn of the era. We compared their practices and beliefs to Buddhism—with surprisingly positive results. In this post we have noted that the Therapeutae shared the nocturnal celebration on the fiftieth day with the Falasha, and that the Falasha brought their beliefs from Arabia to Ethiopia *at a time prior even to Philo and the Therapeutae* (Troje writes "at the turn of the era"). Thus, it is entirely possible that the Alexandrian

Therapeutae received their quasi-Buddhist practices (meditation, asceticism, etc) from the south of Egypt, and that they also received their lunar calendar with its celebration on the third full moon (see [here](#)) from the proto-gnostic Falasha, who imported their moon religion from Arabia.

In closing this part of the discussion, it is of interest to note that the Therapeutae are referred to again by a later writer, **Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite** c. 500 CE. In his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the sacred order of Christian monks as “higher than all the initiated,” having “attained to intellectual contemplation and communion in every ministration which it is lawful **to** contemplate...” He continues his effusive praise of monks, and then—astonishingly—he calls them “Therapeutae”! The entire passage is as follows:

Now the rank, higher than all the initiated, is the sacred Order of the Monks, which, by reason of an entirely purified purification, through complete power and **perfect chastity** of its own operations, has attained to **intellectual contemplation** and communion in every ministration which it is lawful for it to contemplate, and is conducted by the **most perfecting powers** of the hierarchs, and taught by their **inspired illuminations** and hierarchical traditions the ministrations of the **Mystic Rites**, contemplated, according to its capacity, and elevated by their **sacred science**, to the **most perfecting perfection** of which it is capable. Hence our divine leaders have deemed them worthy of sacred appellations, some indeed calling them “*Therapeutae*,” and others “Monks,” from **the pure service and fervid devotion to the true God**, and from the **undivided and single life**, as it were unifying them, in the sacred enfolding of things divided, into a God-like monad, and God-loving perfection. (Text from: J. Parker, *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Pt. 1; London: James Parker & Co. 1899:139. Emphases added.)

I have bolded the above phrases to show that there are far too many agreements between Philo’s description of the Therapeutae and the description of Pseudo-Dionysius for the identity between the two to

be casual or in error. That identity being therefore granted, it must astonish us that a Christian writer, c. 500 CE, thought that the Therapeutae exemplified “the most perfecting perfection of which it is capable.” In other words, Pseudo-Dionysius held that *the Therapeutae were models of Christian perfection!*

We will return to the Therapeutae later in this series (no. 25).

Part 9

baptism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Samaritans, Simon Magus, water

Simon Magus - Part 1

[Dr. Detering writes, p.3:]

We encounter another allegorical interpretation of the Exodus motif with Simon Magus, as reported by the church father Hippolytus... The passage gives an analogy between the World Tree and the umbilical cord of the growing fetus in the womb. In Simon's allegorical thought, the Book of Exodus is symbolic:

[Hippolytus writes:]

Again, the inscription of the second book is Exodus. Now, they say [Simon Magus] calls the Red Sea blood—and who has been produced, passing through the Red Sea, must then come into the wilderness and taste bitter water. For bitter, he says, is the water which is drunk after crossing the Red Sea; which water is a path to be trodden that leads us to a knowledge in this life of our toilsome and bitter lot. However, Moses—that is, the Logos—altered that bitter water and made it sweet... (Ref. 6.10, emphasis added and edited by R. Salm for syntax and clarity.)

[Salm:]

Simon Magus allegorized the crossing of the Red Sea as passage through the umbilical cord—as birth into “this life of our toilsome and bitter lot.” This view strikingly resonates with Indian religion. In Buddhism, *dukkha* (sorrow) is one of the three basic characteristics of existence (*ti-lakkhana*). *Dukkha* is also the first of the so-called **Four Noble Truths**—the very backbone of Buddhism. *Dukkha* “refers to the

unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena which, on account of their impermanence, are all liable to suffering ...” (Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*). In short, Simon Magus taught the Buddhist view that entry into life is entry into inevitable suffering.

[Detering:]

Like Philo’s Therapeutae, the author of The Great Revelation [i.e. Simon Magus] saw the passage through the Red Sea as a metaphor for purification [*Läuterung*]. Egypt and the Red Sea are symbols of the body, which (on the way to the immaterial spheres) must be traversed. However, the Logos—that is, Moses—makes the way manageable.

[Salm:]

We note that the Red Sea, in Simon’s unique view, is not a body of water at all—it is *blood*. The water is found *after* passage through the blood, that is, after human birth. The water is bitter until it is ‘sweetened’ by Moses. Now, this view extolling Moses strongly recalls Samaritanism, where Moses is the “only Prophet, Savior, and Celestial King.”³ The Samaritans also consider Moses as “the Light of the World” (whose light, incidentally, would be transmitted by the Levites).⁴ This is an unmistakably gnostic view, and it coheres well with Moses’ action upon water—namely, that he “altered that bitter *water* and made it sweet” (Ex 15:25).

³ J. Purvis, “Joseph in the Samaritan Traditions,” in G. Nickelsburg (ed.), *Studies on the Testament of Joseph*, SBL 1975:147.

⁴ *Samaritan Book of Joshua*, Chp. 9. Text in Anderson and Giles, *Tradition Kept*, 2005:80.



The Preaching of John the Baptist by Baciccio

When understood as symbolic of 'gnosis,' water is the unexpected link connecting many dots relevant to Christian beginnings. We learn, for example, that Simon Magus was "the first and most distinguished disciple" of John *the Baptist* (Cl.Hom. II.23). According to the same text, Dositheus followed Simon. Most interestingly, we learn that "*John and Dositheus were equivalent names.*"⁵ This is true: Jonathan in Hebrew means "Yah[weh] Gives," while Dositheus in Greek means "Gift of God"! We also know that the Dositheans were a baptizing movement among the Samaritans. Indeed, "it was said that the

⁵ J. Purvis, "The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans," *Novum Test.* 17/3:193.

Dositheans performed all their prayers in water.” (Purvis, “Fourth Gospel” p. 192; cf. also Jesus ‘Standing in the water’ in the final illustration at the bottom of this post.) Saying one’s prayers in water is, of course, utterly absurd *unless* understood allegorically. We encounter the same concept in the first century CE *Life of Adam and Eve*:

And Eve said to Adam, “My lord, tell me what is repentance and what kind of penitence should I do”... And Adam said to Eve... “Stand in the water of the [Tigris] river for thirty-seven days. But I will spend forty days in the water of the Jordan. Perhaps the LORD God will pity us.” (*Vita Adae et Evae* 5-6)

It should now be increasingly clear to the reader of these posts that ‘water’ symbolized gnosis in many ancient religious texts—including orthodox and heterodox Christian writings. Only by recognizing this important symbolism is it possible to understand the phenomenon of baptism—which is central to Christian origins. The frequent (and sometimes strange) focus on water—dipping into water, standing in water, crossing over water—is not about water at all. *It is about self-transformation through gnosis.* If the reader understands this critical teaching, s/he has taken a great step towards understanding Christian origins.

If ‘sweet water’ (above) is gnosis, then (by analogy) ‘bitter water’ is its contrary: ignorance. In Buddhism, ignorance is the great enemy of mankind—*avijja*. All this shows that a hardly-suspected syncretism exists between Buddhism, Gnosticism, and even Judaism. We must broaden our point of view, must take several steps back so that our focus is not merely Christianity but is man himself, is not merely the Levant but stretches from Egypt to India. Anything less will not furnish us the understanding we need—an understanding not of one or another religion (Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism,

Christianity) but of the gnosticism that produced these religions out of man's basic yearning to understand his condition.

Elements supporting the colossal syncretism of which I speak are just below the surface, as it were, and they are almost always passed over in silence. This has occurred because those vital elements do not fit any *local* lore. They do not support any local 'one-upsmanship'—which seems to be what everyone is so interested in. Hence, every local lore ('religion') is imperfect and ignores anomalous elements that don't fit in, elements pushed out to the fringe.

For example, at least one scholar has claimed that "Moses" means "Water Saves."⁶ That datum is completely anomalous. It does not fit Judaism, nor even what scholars consider to be Gnosticism. Its relevance depends on the obscure equivalence water = gnosis that I've presented in these pages. And yet, the datum "Moses" means "Water Saves" could be enormously enlightening in understanding Jewish origins as a proto-gnosticism, argued [here](#).

A similar case exists with the above citation regarding Adam and Eve standing in water for long periods. How very, very strange! It fits into no 'normative' religion. And yet, I maintain that such passages are vital to uncovering the root of Christianity, and perhaps even of other religions. In any case, when Christianity organized it repudiated its gnostic origin. Nevertheless, signs of that origin remain visible at the margins of the religion—in the apocrypha, and in lesser known elements (e.g. the fish symbol) whose *gnostic* meaning has long since been lost.

Employing the wider perspective gained by taking the several steps back mentioned above, it is now possible to theorize that Simon

⁶ J. Griffiths, "The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses," *J. of Near East. St.*, Oct. 1953:4, pp. 225-26.

Magus received a core element of his theology from Buddhism, and that he then transmitted it to Samaritanism: passage into life (birth) is also passage into suffering and ignorance ('bitter water'). Simon married this essentially *Buddhist* view with his *Jewish* heritage, and the result was Dositheanism—otherwise known as Samaritan gnosticism. Specifically, Simon taught (according to Hippolytus) that Moses brought an end to ignorance ('bitter water') by bringing gnosis ('sweet water'). Now, Simon Magus is commonly considered the 'founder' of Gnosticism. In his view, then, Moses was none other than a *gnostic* savior.

[For Buddhist background on early Christianity see [here](#) (historical connections), [here](#) (religious parallels), and click on the category "Buddhism" at the top of this post.—RS]

It is clear from the above that Simon Magus, the Therapeutae, and other gnostic groups viewed the Exodus not as an historical event in the remote past, but as the model of an inner, spiritual transformation in the present. Gnostics "interpreted" the Exodus event allegorically and applied that interpretation to the individual's own spiritual journey.

Philo tells us that the Therapeutae specialized in allegorical interpretation (Vita 29). Indeed, Philo was himself an allegorist. This furnishes us a key to the frequent accusation against Christian gnostics and sectarians—that they "mutilated" or "changed" Jewish scripture. That accusation was hurled against the Ebionites, the Dositheans, the Samaritans, and others. But these sects primarily interpreted Jewish scripture *allegorically*. In so doing they would have denied (or at least challenged) the history of the Patriarchal Age and the very foundations of Judaism. In interpreting the New Testament allegorically, heterodox Christians would similarly deny the historical validity of the canonical

gospels. All this is very dangerous territory, and it is no wonder that gnostics have been vilified wherever they have existed.

As an aside, we might consider which came first: the literary account of the Exodus, or the universal experience of spiritual transformation, of 'crossing over.' My own view is that gnosis is primordial, integral to being human, and as old as our species. The Exodus event, as described in the Old Testament, may be a reification of something once spiritual and universal, now particularized by the Jewish priests and 'owned' by them—even as the priests owned Yahweh. After all, for Jews to be exclusively Yahweh's 'chosen people,' then Yahweh must in turn be exclusively the God of Jews.



Standing in the water, Jesus is baptized by John and receives the spirit "like a dove" (Mk 1:10)

Of course, salvation cannot be owned or 'exclusivized.' Yet, when we look at religions since the dawn of civilization, it seems as if the first

preoccupation of every priesthood is precisely the ownership of salvation: “We have the way. Nobody else does.” Each priesthood claims the true message, and each imputes the lie to *everyone* else!

To the gnostic, however, the truth belongs to all and is directly accessible by any individual—without an intermediary. In gnosticism, salvation lies quite unseen within the heart and mind of each human being. The essential is a mysterious *inner transformation*—one brought about by self-acquired gnosis. Indeed, this very message seems to lie half-hidden behind many logia and parables in the Christian gospels. But the gnostic way immediately renders every priesthood superfluous, and that may be why Christianity early on repudiated the way of gnosis as its mortal enemy. Apparently, the changeover from a religion of gnosis to a religion of faith occurred simultaneously with the organization of the Church in the first half of the second century CE—along with the invention of Jesus of Nazareth.

I now bring to the reader’s attention that, thus far in the nine posts in this series, we have discussed the two most vital symbols in gnosticism—the **moon**, and water. The former shines in the darkness, the latter is gnosis itself. That so many early Christian texts and traditions center upon immersion in water (‘baptism’) is a clue that the texts are not to be taken literally (e.g. the Adam and Eve citation above), nor are they fundamentally about immersion in water at all. They are about immersion in *gnosis*.

With *that* we have the key to the origins of Christian ‘baptism.’

Part 10

B.C.E. times, Buddhism, The first century serpent

The Peratae

Part 1–Indian influences

[Dr. Detering writes, p.3:]

Further interpretations of the Exodus motif are found with the Peratae and the Naassenes. The two Gnostic sects—together with the Sethians—make up the so-called Ophites, described by Hippolytus in the fifth book of his *Refutations*. The name derives from the Greek word for serpent, *ophis*, based on the fact that the serpent plays a central role in the mythology of all three sects... 4 For them, the serpent in the Garden of Eden brought gnosis. It was also a symbol of healing and salvation.

...The Peratae identified the serpent with the Logos, whose domain is situated between the unmoved Father and Matter in motion. Thus the Logos is the middle term. On the one hand it turns towards the Father, whose powers it receives and passes on to the material realm. On the other hand, the Logos liberates the Father's powers from the material chains below and leads them back to the Father. Thus, at this "top of his head" are "setting and rising mingled one with the other."

For the Peratae, the creation is the realm of nothingness and transience. Because all is subject to these characteristics, for the

Peratae there is only one way to salvation: man must negotiate his demise—which he cannot avoid—even before physical death.

Commentary (R. Salm)

The serpent, Enki, and Kundalini

Due to their veneration of the serpent, the Peratae were denominated among the “Ophites” by Hippolytus. We have already briefly discussed the serpent-worship in Stone Age times ([here](#)). Veneration of the serpent continued into the Bronze Age and even later—that is, it was an important component of the religion of the earliest civilizations. It is important to note that this veneration was based on the serpent as *messenger of gnosis* from the transcendent realm (originally conceived as below the earth).



The Mesopotamian god Enki as half-man half-serpent is at left. The waxing crescent moon (center right) was also an ancient symbol of gnosis, representing the conquest of light over darkness.

In early civilizations, the serpent was venerated as wise—and also wily. **Enki**, the clever Mesopotamian god of wisdom, was usually depicted seated upon a (coiled) serpent throne. Alternatively, he was half-man, half-serpent. Given that water (in addition to the serpent) was also a symbol of gnosis, it is no surprise that Enki's mythical home was the underworld ocean, known as the **Abzu**.

Thus, early civilizations in the Levant knew *both* symbols for gnosis: the serpent, and water. Accordingly, we find the enlightened gnostic messenger from the transcendent/divine realm sometimes depicted as a serpent-man, and sometimes as a fish-man. We famously encounter the latter in **Oannes**, described by **Berosus** (III BCE) as the half-man/half-fish who rose from the sea to teach early people the arts of civilization. (Incidentally, considerable resonance exists between this ancient gnostic figure and 'John' the Baptist of later Christian lore.)

The wise serpent was also known in early India:

You [gods] who were born from waters... listen to my call... Looking on men, never slumbering... Borne on refulgent chariots, sinless, with serpents' powers..." [Rigveda 10.63:2-4].

Here, "serpents' powers" are an attribute of divinity. One commentator, H. H. Wilson, glosses "serpents' powers" with the words "unsurpassable wisdom," in which case the passage assumes a definite gnostic cast. Note the first phrase: the gods are born from *waters*. In the previous (and other posts) we have seen how water was a cipher for gnosis in Western gnostic texts. This view was known in India, and it supports Wilson's gloss "unsurpassable wisdom." With the apposite substitutions, the foregoing citation reads:

You **gods** who were born from gnosis... listen to my call... Looking on men, never slumbering... Borne on refulgent chariots, sinless, with unsurpassable wisdom..." **RV 10.63:2-4, edited**.

Indian influence is also discernible in an astonishing passage of Hippolytus, where the Church Father reports that the Peratae believed the creator was a great serpent:

And if the eyes of any, he says, are blessed, this one, looking upward on the firmament, will behold at the mighty summit of heaven the beautiful image of the serpent, turning itself, and becoming an originating principle of every (species of) motion to all things that are being produced. He will (thereby) know that without (the serpent) nothing consists, either of things in heaven, or things on earth, or things under the earth. Not night, not moon, not fruits, not generation, not wealth, not sustenance, not anything at all of existent things, is without his guidance. In regard of this, (the Peratic) says, is the great wonder which is beheld in the firmament by those who are able to observe it. For, he says, at this top of (the Peratic's) head, a fact which is more incredible than all things to those who are ignorant, "are setting and rising mingled one with the other." This it is in regard of which ignorance is in the habit of affirming: in heaven "Draco revolves, marvel mighty of monster dread." (Ref. 5:11)

This is very evocative of Indian themes. In **Kundalini**—whose origins are Upanishadic and centuries before the turn of the era—the serpent energy (*prana*) rises to the crown chakra at the top of the head, where the vital force "is spread over both the macrocosm, the entire Universe, and the microcosm, the human body" (Gopi Krishna). The macrocosm is above, and the microcosm below. Therefore the crown chakra is in the middle position, witnessing energy flowing upwards and downwards. This conforms remarkably with the Peratic view that "at the top of (the Peratic's) head... are setting and rising mingled one with the other."

Buddhism, emptiness, and transience

Buddhism teaches three enduring characteristics of existence (*tilakkhana*): transience, emptiness, and dissatisfaction. Each of these characteristics has received volumes of commentary over the centuries, and I won't enter into detail here. Suffice it to note that the

second characteristic, emptiness (*suññatâ*) is associated with (and sometimes synonymous with) the doctrine of non-soul or not-self (*anattâ*)—the single element that made Buddhism largely unacceptable and a ‘heterodoxy’ in South Asia.

For the Peratae, as Dr. Detering remarks above, “the creation is the realm of nothingness and transience.” This is quintessentially Buddhist—nothingness (“emptiness”) and transience are two elements of the *ti-lakkhana*. The former leads to the doctrine of non-soul and to the rejection of any notion of a future life. (We must, surprisingly, put aside the belief in reincarnation/rebirth *later* imported into Buddhism from Hinduism.) This, in turn, leads to the concept of realized eschatology: the goal in primitive Buddhism is to find salvation while yet in the flesh (“as if your hair is on fire,” said the Buddha). This requires no afterlife and no heaven or hell: ‘crossing over’ happens in the here and now:

If they go beyond all this, leave it behind,
The Buddha’s followers with mind aware
Pass beyond the range of the devil’s might. (Sam. Nik. 1.4.17)

In Buddhism, crossing over—i.e., leaving “all this” behind—must take place before physical death, or it will not take place at all:

“Now, suppose one were to say, ‘I will walk until I reach the end of the world.’ Brethren, were one to live even a hundred years and walk for a hundred years, one would die before reaching the end of the world. Why? Because the end of the world is not reached, not seen, not known, through such journeying.

“Yet I say to you, brethren, that unless you reach the end of the world, you will in no wise put an end to suffering.” (Ang. Nik. 9.4.7)

Once again, this reminds us of the Peratae. As Dr. Detering states: “[F]or the Peratae there is only one way to salvation: man must negotiate his demise—which he cannot avoid—even before physical death.” This is realized eschatology—and it is an original Buddhist tenet.

Part 11

baptism, Gnosticism, Simon Magus, The first century, water, GMark, serpent

The Peratae - Part 2

[Detering writes, p.4:]

The connection between the Peratae and the Exodus theme is already evident in their name. According to Hippolytus, it derives from the Greek for “cross over/cross through” [Ger. *hindurchgehen*, < Gk. *περαυ*]. In other words, they considered themselves “those who have crossed over”...

... For the Peratae, the creation is the realm of nothingness and transience. Because all is subject to these characteristics, for the Peratae there is only one way to salvation: man must pass through his demise—which he cannot avoid—even before physical death.

[R.S.]

The above paragraphs combine two concepts: (1) passing through/crossing over—that is, transcending this material realm of “nothingness”; and (2) doing so before physical death. The former is spiritual transformation, the latter is *realized eschatology*.



Jesus walks on the water and saves Peter (Mt 14:30)

The concept $\pi\epsilon\rho\alpha\nu$, “cross over,” is important to the Markan evangelist: Jesus “crosses over” the water repeatedly in the gospel, and the other canonical gospels are elaborations of the Markan patterns. The *raison d’être* of those passages is clearly to introduce elements of the miraculous and the dramatic (walking on water, saving Peter from drowning, calming the storm). Yet they do not advance the story at all—Jesus never intends to *go anywhere* in particular (merely “to the other side,” Mk 4:35; 5:21; 8:13). Nor does he intend to *do anything* in particular when he gets to the other side.

Without any practical reason for crossing the water, we are left only with the basic element: the crossing itself. In other words, the essence of these passages is not to be found in the plot (story-line), and the miraculous and dramatic elements are correctly seen as later

embellishments *added to an allegorical framework*. Without those embellishments, the crossings over have no literary purpose (cf. also Mk 5:1; 6:45; 10:1). We can now conclude that *the crossings of water in the Gospel of Mark (and in the other canonical gospels by analogy) have their origin in an allegorical gnostic view similar to that held by the Peratae, the Therapeutae, and Simon Magus* (as examined in this and prior posts).

Thus, a strong case can be made that both heterodox Christians and the Marcan evangelist were familiar with an important proto-gnostic conception: crossing over water = inner spiritual transformation. It would appear that Mark (1) suppressed this allegorical gnostic content, and (2) that he borrowed the allegory's general narrative framework to fashion his 'water' scenes. Mark creatively illustrated the received allegory with miraculous and dramatic elements centered upon Jesus the Nazarene. Thus, gnostic allegory became orthodox pseudo-history.

Certainly, the direction of influence was from heterodoxy to orthodoxy. The sequence is important, because the primacy of heterodoxy/gnosticism is at stake. We can infer the priority of the gnostic allegory because crossing water as an inner transformation was already known *before* the evangelist Mark—that is, to Philo and the Therapeutae, as we have seen.

When we recall that the canonical gospels are post-Marcionite and *mid-second century writings*, then the conclusion becomes even more probable that Mark knew—and drew on—the proto-gnostic 'water' tradition shared by the Peratae, the Therapeutae, and Simon Magus. As close as I have been able to ascertain, Mark effected his vital 'reinterpretation' of the gnostic allegory in the decade of the 140s CE. This reinterpretation laid the foundation of Christianity as we know it. Previous to Mark's work (that is, in the first century CE), Jesus/the

Savior was a spiritual power (gnosis), the Christian religion was one of inner spiritual transformation, and the texts are in the language of gnostic allegory. The evangelist Mark, however, began a new pattern: Jesus/the Savior is a material power (the God-Man), the Christian religion is one of fealty (faith), and the texts are in the language of invented history.



The serpent—again

Dr. Detering (p. 4) observes that the Peratae venerated the serpent as “bringer of gnosis” and as a symbol of wholeness and salvation. In this they drew on the Genesis story and on the account of Moses, who

lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness (Num 21:9). We have already seen how *serpent veneration is primordial*, a religious symbolism that goes far back into prehistory. Regarding the Peratae, Hippolytus writes that “looking upward on the firmament, [the Peratae] will behold at the mighty summit of heaven the beauteous image of the serpent.”

Detering adds an important consideration:

“The Peratae identified the Serpent with the Logos... In the middle position, it is situated between the unmoved Father and movable matter. On the one side it turns to the Father, so as to receive His power and then pass it along to the material realm. On the other side it liberates the Father’s powers that have become entrapped in materiality and returns them to the Father, so that “at this top of (the Peratic’s) head... are setting and rising mingled one with the other” (Ref 5:16).

Here, then, we have a fusion of the Indian Kundalini doctrine (discussed in the preceding post) with the Greek Logos doctrine.

Baptism as ‘life’ itself

[Detering writes:]

With this we come to the central mystery of the Peratae: baptism. For them, baptism is going down, demise [Untergang]. It is associated with water. Water and demise are synonyms with the Peratae. “But water, [the Peratic] says, is destruction; nor did the world, he says, perish by any other thing quicker than by water”—an evident allusion to the Flood (Ref 5.11).

The allusion to the Flood is revealing. In the Genesis account of the Flood, all humanity dies with the exception of Noah and his family—

attesting to the awesome destructive power of 'water.' However, Noah survives, and he does so based on *privileged information*: knowledge that the Flood is impending, and that he must build an ark without delay. Among all his contemporaries, then, for Noah water was not destructive at all. Indeed, it was water that lifted up the ark and permitted Noah and his accompanying living creatures to survive.



Noah's Ark. Italian mural painting, mid 16th century.

The critical element in the flood story—the difference between life and death—was *knowledge* (read: *gnosis*). This observation is more nuanced than the simple equations 'water = destruction' and/or 'water = salvation.' The Peratae, too, seem to have known this more nuanced

view, as Hippolytus writes. The Church Father reports that, on the one hand, “water, the Peratic says, is destruction.” Yet, on the other hand, he relates the following:

But we alone, [the Peratic] says, who are conversant with the necessity of generation, and the paths through which man has entered into the world, and who have been accurately instructed (in these matters), we alone are competent to proceed through and pass beyond destruction. (Hippolytus, Ref 5.11)

Thus, the Peratic was “instructed” in special knowledge. This is gnosis, equivalent to the “privileged information” available to Noah. In the Peratic view, all men must of necessity enter the ‘water’ (= turmoil of material existence). However, special knowledge allows the individual “to proceed through and pass beyond destruction.” Some people have that knowledge “from above,” but most do not:

For if any one, he says, of those [beings] which are here will have strength to perceive that he is a paternal mark transferred hither from above, [and that he is] incarnate... he is of the same substance altogether with the Father in heaven, and returns thither. If, however, he may not happen upon this doctrine [he will perish]. (Hippolytus, Ref 5.12)

If we now take a step back, a cosmic view of baptism emerges: for the Peratae, *life itself is immersion in water*. In other words, we are all subject to immersion, whether we like it or not. However, without saving gnosis, the water of life will certainly destroy us all, even as it destroyed humanity in the time of Noah, and as it destroyed the Egyptians in the Red Sea.

We might suppose that all will drown except those who come *out* of the water, who reach the other shore, who successfully ‘cross over.’ But the Peratic may be saying something a little different. We recall the view of Simon Magus, as stated in a prior post:

[Hippolytus writes:] Now, they say [Simon Magus] calls the Red Sea blood—and who has been produced, passing through the Red Sea,

must then come into the wilderness and taste bitter water. For bitter, he says, is the water which is drunk after crossing the Red Sea; which water is a path to be trodden that leads us to a knowledge in this life of our toilsome and bitter lot. However, Moses—that is, the Logos—altered that bitter water and made it sweet... (Ref. 6.10, emphasis added and edited by R. Salm for syntax and clarity.)

We can now appreciate that Simon and the Peratae held a similar view. Simon considered the Red Sea to be “blood.” That is, all who are born are necessarily ‘immersed’ in the Red Sea = materiality. All must also taste of the “bitter water” of life after passing through the blood/umbilical cord. For Simon, it was “Moses—that is, the Logos—**who** altered that bitter water and made it sweet.” In other words, Moses/the Logos = gnosis. For Simon, Moses was the embodiment of the salvific “privileged information” noted above.

Dr. Detering states,

“For the Peratae, the creation is the realm of nothingness and transience. Because all is subject to these characteristics, for the Peratae there is only one way to salvation: man must negotiate his demise—which he cannot avoid—even before physical death.”

Here we have the view of saving gnosis *in this very life*. That is realized eschatology.

The water holds back

In sum, gnosis is the ‘ark’ that neutralizes the destructive power of water and that allows Noah to ride out the Flood. Transferred to the Exodus account, gnosis is *the divine power that makes the water hold back*. This is a critical view, one found in many Christian gnostic texts from late antiquity. Indeed, whenever we read of the water ‘going back,’ or ‘holding back,’ or ‘reversing direction’—what we are reading

(in the gnostic interpretation) is nothing less than the allegorical expression of *the hidden power of gnosis*.

Standing on the dry river bed

It appears that the gnostics of late antiquity stretched this allegory to extremes. Consider: if the water holds back, then the river bed is exposed. Thus, an exposed river bed is shorthand for the gnostic allegory: gnosis saves, and only the possessor of gnosis makes the water hold back and exposes the dry river bed.

The most astonishing elaboration of this concept is that of *standing* in the middle of the river! In allegorical parlance, standing on the dry river bed is like an advertisement: it is proof positive that one has made the waters pull back, and that one is thus immune to the destructive power of water. Interpreted, this means that the one who stands in the middle of the river is the hero who possesses gnosis.

Of course, we find this scene already in the Old Testament (Josh 4:3 & 9). Furthermore, Moses, Joshua, and Elisha all made the water “stand still.” Can it be that the OT writers were already aware of the proto-gnostic views we have been discussing above?

Finally, Simon Magus was known as “the Standing One.” The meaning of this enigmatic appellation now begins to emerge: *Simon was the gnostic savior, or perhaps gnosis itself*. We shall consider the epithet in more detail in a subsequent post, as well as the object which—by its very nature of incorruptibility—perfectly embodies that which endures or “stands”: the rock (cf. Peter).

Part 12

Jesus-skepticism, Simon Magus, The second century

Simon Magus

Part 2—Person or cipher?

In the Clementine writings, the adversary Simon is nothing less than a (false) *Christ figure*. This is clear from the way Peter speaks of him: “For who would not marvel *at the wonders done by him* [Simon Magus], so as to think of him as *a god come down from the heavens for the salvation of human beings?*” (Rec. 2.6; Gebhardt p. 49; emphases added.) Epiphanius knows the same claim: “He [Simon] therefore came forward, and under the name of Christ...” (Pan. 21.2.1).

This must cause wonder. For over fifteen hundred years the West has been inured to only one Christ figure: Jesus of Nazareth. However, when one investigates the many ‘heretics’ and the plethora of texts that did *not* make it into the canon, other Christ figures emerge—and each will surprise most modern readers. They include Paul, Simon Magus, and **Joseph of Arimathea**—to name but a few.

From the above Pseudo-Clementine citation, it is clear that as late as c. 200 CE (when those texts were written) some ‘Christian’ heretics still existed who revered *Simon Magus* as the Messiah/Christ. More than that: they constituted such a formidable presence that combating them was the primary focus of the Pseudo-Clementines. The Simonians were not few, but many.

And now for an important correction: I deem it probable that the figure 'Simon Magus'—as portrayed in the surviving Christian literature—did not actually exist as a human being. And here we must move carefully: what no doubt existed (and what the Clementine author really combats) are *the gnostic doctrines* that 'Simon Magus' represents. In my view 'Simon Magus' is a cipher. He is a convenient strawman invented by the tradition for a specific polemical purpose: in order to ridicule and debunk dangerous and once quite popular doctrines. From the hostile account of the Pseudo-Clementine writings, we learn some of those doctrines espoused by the 'Magus': belief in a hidden, potent, and invisible God that is superior to the creator God; the emptiness of materiality; denial of the soul's immortality; and denial of the bodily resurrection.

Christian texts are replete with such convenient strawmen. Many figures are fairly obvious ciphers—they represent doctrines or sects, such as 'Ebion,' founder of the Ebionites (Epiphanius). *Ebion* means 'poor.' It immediately recalls the poor around James the Just (cf. Gal. 2:10). Elxai (the alleged teacher of Mani) is another such name. It derives from *El-chasai / El-kasia*, which simply means 'the hidden God.' Such characters are a convenient literary shorthand. They probably never existed. However, the doctrines that they (were made to) 'personify' very much existed.

The doctrines of different figures may also overlap. If both Simon Magus and Elxai held similar views, then is it not permitted to ask: *Were they one and the same person?* But we have already answered this question above, by proposing that both Simon Magus and Elxai never existed—they were ciphers.

The solution to this riddle is that the Church Fathers attacked the same views repeatedly, in different ways, *using different names*. Marcion also believed in the 'hidden, potent, and invisible God that is superior to

the creator God.' Thus, we can include him along with Simon Magus and Elxai as a potential 'equivalent' cipher.

Of course, doctrinal overlap does not in itself signal identity. It does, however, invite that *possibility*. Nor do different biographical details eliminate the possibility of identity, for (if nothing else) the Church Fathers were *very inventive*. They could readily have made up biographical details to suit their confessional and polemic purposes. Indeed, if different figures are ciphers, the Church Fathers were *compelled* to invent differing biographical details for them!

In sum, radical skepticism is the only correct attitude when approaching early Christian writings. Biographical details may be literary creations, persons may be ciphers, and no historical basis may exist for characters at all. This certainly occurs even in the New Testament—for example with the notorious criminal Barabbas. The name means 'Son of the Father' in Aramaic, and Jesus dies in order that Barabbas may live. It is a nice literary touch, presumably teaching the reader that Jesus died even for the worst among us. However, the scene makes absolutely no historical sense. According to the gospel accounts, Barabbas was a murderer, bandit, and insurrectionist (Mk 15:7 & pars)—the *last* sort of person the Romans would have freed! That they would have released him at the instigation of the populace is contrary to everything we know about the Romans (and about Pilate in particular). The custom (Mk 15:6) of freeing a prisoner at Passover by popular demand is documented nowhere but in the gospels. Finally, the act of publicly bartering one criminal for another is not only un-Roman, but it is also a strange way to administer justice, to say the least!

However, the scene makes sense as allegory and perfectly expresses Christian doctrine: the guilty Barabbas/Son of the Father stands for us

all, and the innocent Jesus indeed gave his life for all of (guilty) mankind.

Incidentally, the Pseudo-Clementines add an astonishing twist to the Barabbas narrative. We read: "And after him Barabbas, *the one who became an apostle in the place of Judas the betrayer...* was counseling the people to neither hate nor despise Jesus: 'Wherefore it is best for someone who has not recognized Jesus as the Messiah not to hate him, for God has determined a reward for love but not for hate'" (Rec. 1.60; Gebhardt 38; emphasis added). So, here we apparently have a tradition whereby the hardened criminal Barabbas not only becomes a Christian, but becomes the twelfth apostle in the place of Judas! In the tradition that place is taken by Matthias (Acts 1:26). However, consider Acts 1:23—"So they proposed two [candidates to fill the place of Judas]: Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias." *Barsabbas* and *Barabbas* are variants of the same name, while a few manuscripts read *Barnabas*... Make of this little anecdote what you will.

As a literary invention functioning allegorically, Barabbas is what I call a 'cipher.' A similar mechanism almost certainly underlies other names that are familiar to us from early Christian literature, perhaps including Simon *Magus* (Shimeon 'the Magician'), Simon *Cephas/Peter* (Shimeon 'the Rock'), John 'the Immerser,' and even Jesus ('Savior')—the ultimate cipher. It is not a question of whether *any* characters in the New Testament are ciphers, but if any are not! The evangelists manipulate their figures much like puppeteers at a carnival show, pulling the strings this way and that, introducing them when desired and dismissing them at will. And like a puppet show, any historical basis that *might* underlie a scene or a character is secondary to the purposes of the author and to his doctrinal goal in each pericope.

Dositheus, Peter, John the Baptist, and even Jesus (along with Simon Magus) may all be literary creations in the context of fictional accounts. The early Christian gospels and acts (both canonical and apocryphal) are thoroughgoing fiction *masquerading* as history. As such, they are deceptive from alpha to omega.

The characters that populate the gospels, acts, and early Christian lore are like puppets that do and say whatever those pulling their strings wish. As in a puppet show, the New Testament characters are also larger than life. They are caricatures, exaggerations, and the narrative story lines are correspondingly simple, intentionally streamlined in order to help the uni-dimensional characters and scenes convey uncomplicated, universal messages.

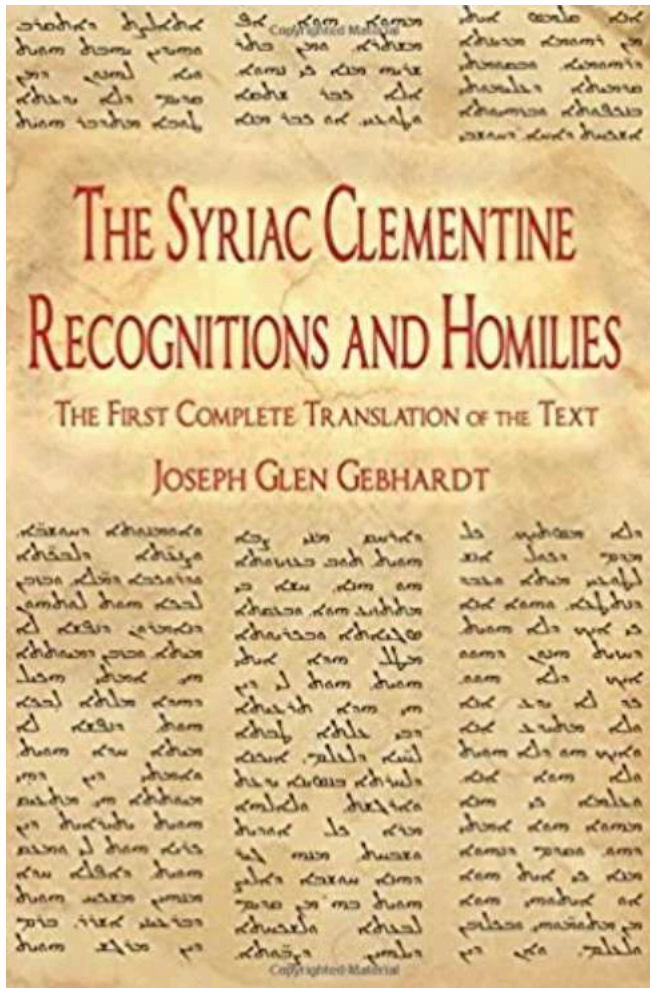
Both the puppet show and the Christian gospels/acts entertain. The main difference, however, is that the latter have a unique and overriding purpose: to transmit doctrine. That religious purpose is by-and-large hidden, masked under layers of pseudo-history. In short, the historical *claims* of the Christian texts—together with the reader's acceptance of those claims—allow the Church to achieve its doctrinal purpose, that is, to propagate its message.

The nascent Church seems to have early discovered the usefulness of the foregoing method, one borrowed from the stage, poetry, and age-old religious mythology. The difference is that Christianity now had new doctrines to convey. Those doctrines required new contexts, and also new characters—'ciphers' as I call them. Despite this, mimesis criticism is showing that the evangelists borrowed extensively from the stage, from epic poetry, and from the Old Testament.

A cipher is the perfect vehicle for religious conversion. If the hero can gain credibility, then the battle is won—what the hero says and does is also accorded credibility, and a new convert is gained. This is why

Christianity emphasizes 'belief' above all. Belief is the *only* element able to turn fiction into history.

Too many characters



Once we understand (a) the main purpose of the Christian texts (doctrinal conversion) and (b) the supporting position of all the pseudo-historical material, we are then able to view the characters in a new light. As inventions, they must change as doctrine changes. After all, if the invented characters exist to serve doctrine, then no single character can convey two different doctrines—at least, not in the same text.

The early christian centuries were centuries of immense doctrinal instability, of great development and change. The change was, however, gradual, and thus many overlaps exist between doctrines and between characters promoting similar doctrines. In the last post I noted that changing doctrines can stimulate new character formation. Gradual change in doctrine even produces lineages. One important lineage is found in the Pseudo-Clementines:

An important heterodox lineage

- 1) John the Baptist has thirty disciples, including Dositheus (Rec 2:8, Hom 2:24, Gebhardt 49).
- 2) Dositheus takes over at the death of the Baptist (ibid).
- 3) Simon becomes a disciple of Dositheus (ibid). On his deathbed, Dositheus appoints Simon leader of the sect, for Simon is “the Standing One” who possesses “Sihra”—i.e. “Moon”/gnosis (Rec 2:9, Gebhardt 50).
- 4) Simon is the first to go out to the gentiles (Rec 3:68, Gebhardt 121). He has disciples Nicetas and Aquila.
- 5) Nicetas and Aquila abandon the Simonian sect and convert to Peter and Christianity (Rec 2:1, Hom 3:1, Gebhardt 46).

Above is a lineage of personages, all of whom may be ‘ciphers.’ In other words, it is possible that *none* of the above figures actually existed in history. Incontestable, however, is a gradual devolution of doctrine from steps 2-5, a devolution away from gnosticism to (Petrine) Jewish Christianity.

And what of step 1? What of John the Baptist? Well, his star disciple Dositheus—the one who took over the sect after John’s death—was

incontestably a gnostic. Is it not all but certain, then, that *his teacher* was also a gnostic?

This makes good sense when we consider the name 'John the Baptist' from a gnostic perspective. After all, the figure is intimately linked to water (particularly the River Jordan), and we have seen that water was an important symbol of gnosis itself. The Jordan River, too, has critical gnostic implications—as we see, for example, in Mandaean literature. All this increases the suspicion *that 'John the Baptist' was originally a gnostic figure*. The lineage above bears this out. Of course, this gnostic connection of John with gnosis has been carefully ignored and even hidden by the tradition.

The above lineage is revealing. Instead of gnosis going directly back to John, the Jewish Christian tradition interposed two artificial figures: Dositheus and Simon Magus. Thus, the claim could now be maintained that gnosticism went back to *these intermediaries* and not to John himself. After all, John baptized Jesus, and John's name had to be kept 'clean' of all heretical associations. Nevertheless, gnostic clues remain: John is associated with *water*; he has *thirty* disciples (a number associated with the moon—another symbol for gnosis); and Simon Magus—John's eventual heir—consorts with 'the Moon' (Sihra, Luna, Helena).

Part 13

John the Baptist, Simon Magus, The second century

Simon Magus

Part 3–The doctrines

The principal sources for the doctrines of Simon Magus are two: **Book VI** (Chps 2-16) of the Refutation of All Heresies by Hippolytus, and the Pseudo-Clementine literature. Both documents are hostile to Simon and are full of tendentious material and obvious propaganda. Yet, though the Pseudo-Clementines are much longer, the précis of Hippolytus may be more rewarding as far as divining the gnostic doctrines ascribed to 'Simon.' Indeed, a careful analysis of Hippolytus' description reveals a profound and coherent doctrine. The following attempts a brief outline of Simonian theology. It includes a good deal of 'interpretation' with which other scholars may disagree:

- First of all, Simon taught that *man can perfect himself*. We can infer this from various statements of Hippolytus, such as that Simon "attempted to deify himself" (Ref. VI.2). In turn, man reaching up to divinity (apotheosis) brings Simon Magus into the realm of Jewish ascent literature, merkabah mysticism, and recalls the OT figures Enoch (Gen 5:21-24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:3-9).
- Second, Simon believed that the way to perfection is through "intellectual apprehension of the Great Indefinite Power" (Ref. VI.4). This "apprehension" (AKA understanding, gnosis, enlightenment) is "the root of all things." Such understanding can occur in this life ("realized eschatology"), in which case one who is "born of blood" is the "habitation" of gnosis. That understanding is an "indefinite power," which Simon equates with "the root of the universe."

This profound second point is very suggestive of Indian philosophy, particularly *tat tvam asi* "Thou art That." For easy reference, the passage in Hippolytus reads as follows:

This is the treatise of a revelation of (the) voice and name by means of intellectual apprehension of the Great Indefinite Power. Wherefore it will be sealed, (and) kept secret, (and) hid, (and) will repose in the habitation, at the foundation of which lies the root of all things. And he asserts that this man who is born of blood is (the aforesaid) habitation, and that in him resides an indefinite power, which he affirms to be the root of the universe (Ref. VI.4).

We see that Simon also taught that the Great Invisible Power was hidden and secret—both hallmarks of gnosticism. Furthermore, it is quite remarkable that Simon's above theology of the hidden "root of all things" resonates with numerous passages in noncanonical texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas, where the doctrine in question is ascribed to Jesus:

Jesus says: "I am the light which is on them all. I am the All, and the All has gone out from me and the All has come back to me. Cleave the wood: I am there; lift the stone and you will find me there!" (GTh 77; Doresse translation.)

It is also noteworthy that this theology is the essence of what I have dubbed "**Stage II Christology**"—namely, that 'Jesus' is a spiritual entity that indwells the individual and empowers him/her. This, I maintain, was the Christology before the invention of Jesus of Nazareth in II CE. It is, in fact, the original *gnostic* Christian message of light/enlightenment (gnosis).

- Third, Simon seems to think that all materiality is "on fire." His view (per Hippolytus and here paraphrased) is: "That which is secret is hidden in what is manifest and on fire; and that which is manifest and on fire derives its being from what is secret" (Ref. VI.4). This is, in fact, very Buddhist:

"Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what, bhikkhus, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye contact as

condition – whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant- that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say.” (Sam. Nik. 35:28)

In Buddhism, to overcome the “fire of delusion” is to attain gnosis and “cooling”: Nirvana.

“The Standing One”

- Fourth, Simon equated the Great Indefinite Power that is hidden with that which “stood, stands, and will stand” (Ref. VI.7 *et multi*). This element of his doctrine is so prevalent that Simon is often referred to as “The Standing One”—thus transferring the doctrine to the person. In this we see, once again, how *doctrine* determines the contours of the literary character—which is one reason I call it a ‘cipher’ rather than an actual historical figure.

‘The Standing One’ conforms perfectly to Simon’s doctrine of the Hidden Indefinite Power, which is unchanging and immanent in all. Hippolytus offers further detail: “According to Simon, therefore, there exists that which is blessed and incorruptible in a latent condition in everyone—that is, potentially, not actually; and that this is He who stood, stands, and is to stand” (Ref. VI.12).

In the same passage Hippolytus also explains the meaning of ‘image’—a technical term in Gnosticism: “He is to stand above, beside the Blessed Indefinite Power, if he be fashioned into an image” (Ref. VI.12). Interpreted, this means that the human being will ‘stand’ with the divine (i.e. become divine) if he make himself an ‘habitation’ (see above) by incorporating the ‘Blessed Indefinite Power’ (i.e. by finding gnosis). That rare human being then becomes an ‘image’ of the divine and no longer a mere ‘likeness’ (another gnostic technical term).

It is clear that the Great Indefinite Power is spiritual and apart from matter. Yet spirit and matter form a syzygy, the one taking away from

the other. For Simon, as mentioned above, the origin of matter ('generation') has to do with 'fire':

"And that, he says, the originating principle of the generation of things begotten is from fire, he discerns after some such method as the following. Of all things, (i.e.) of whatsoever there is a generation, the beginning of the desire of the generation is from fire. Wherefore the desire after mutable generation is denominated to be inflamed" (Ref. VI.12).

This is very Buddhist, where 'fire' = desire (*tanha*). For Simon, spirit is male, and matter is female, both deriving from the same root:

"For Simon expressly speaks of this in the Revelation after this manner: To you, then, I address the things which I speak, and (to you) I write what I write. The writing is this: there are two offshoots from all the Aeons, having neither beginning nor end, from one root. And this is a power, viz., Sige [= "Silence"], (who is) invisible (and) incomprehensible. And one of these (offshoots) appears from above, which constitutes a great power, (the creative) Mind of the universe, which manages all things, (and is) a male. The other (offshoot), however, is from below, (and constitutes) a great Intelligence, and is a female which produces all things." (Ref. VI.13)

The Father is *understanding* of the above duality, a *transcendence of duality* through gnosis. Thus, for Simon, the Father is hermaphrodite, neither male nor female:

"From whence, ranged in pairs opposite each other, they undergo conjugal union, and manifest an intermediate interval, namely, an incomprehensible air, which has neither beginning nor end. But in this is a Father who sustains all things, and nourishes things that have beginning and end. This is he who stood, stands, and will stand, being an hermaphrodite power." (Ref. VI.13)

The Standing One, then, is the gnosis/Father that infuses all things and that transcends them. It is neither spirit nor matter, but is above the division of spirit and matter. It is unseen, eternal, and unchanging. It is without falsehood–Truth. When Simon characterizes this as sige (Gk. "silence") we are approaching the apophatic tendencies of Buddhism

(cf. *suññata/shunyata* = “emptiness”) and of some western mystics. H. Detering has recently written on this ([here](#), pt. 3) in an essay concerning Basilides (fl. early II CE, Alexandria). It appears to me that the philosophy of Basilides is an elaboration of that attributed to Simon, and is probably *later*.

The most beautiful description of arriving at the goal (the Father) through emptying may be a pithy saying from the Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus said: “The kingdom is like a certain woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking [on the] road, still some distance from home, the handle of the jar broke and the meal emptied out behind her [on] the road. She did not realize it; she had noticed no accident. When she arrived home, she set the jar down and found it empty”. (GTh 97)

Here, “arriving home” happens with an *empty* jar. It may strike the reader as curious that Simonian doctrine is reflected in words of *Jesus*. But we must recall that these words of Jesus (in the Gospel of Thomas) were *rejected* by the tradition—even as was Simonian doctrine. When we consider that the authentic, early Christian tradition was gnostic, then parallels not only with Jesus but also with John the Baptist emerge:

If, however, a tree continues alone, not producing fruit fully formed, it is utterly destroyed. For somewhere near, he says, is the axe (which is laid) at the roots of the tree. Every tree, he says, which does not produce good fruit, is hewn down and cast into fire” (Ref. VI.11).

The above words are attributed Simon Magus in the Pseudo-Clementines, to John the Baptist in the canonical gospels (Mt 3:10; Lk 3:9), and also to Jesus (Mt 7:19)—showing the confusion that existed in the early tradition over *who was who*. Not even the Church Fathers knew, for (as discussed in the previous post) we are not dealing with people at all, but with ciphers—with carriers of changing doctrine. For example, according to Epiphanius, Simon was not baptized by John the Baptist or by his disciple Dositheus (see above), but by an entirely

different character: Philip. This effectively removed Simon *one step further* from the Baptist.

In the next post we continue our examination of Simonian doctrine, focussing on the important Old Testament roots of "stand."

Part 14

Buddhism, Simon Magus, The first century

Simon Magus

Part 4–The “Standing One” (cont.)

Having broadly summarized Simonian doctrine in the last several posts, Simon Magus emerges as a figure whose gnosticism had Buddhist precursors, whose outlook was Jewish, and whose doctrine was radically heterodox. The Buddhist aspects of Simon’s thought can be summarized as follows:

- (a) According to Hippolytus, Simon viewed entrance into life as entrance into suffering—*dukkha* in Buddhism (cf. part #9).
- (b) Simon taught that **the world is on fire**. In Buddhism, desire/craving (*tanha*) is a link in the chain of **dependent origination** and is equated with fire (on this, cf. part #13).
- (c) Simon preached the need for “investigation” (Rec 2:21; Gebhardt 55). In Buddhism, the entire spiritual journey is one of investigation—via meditation leading to gnosis/enlightenment.
- (d) Simon held that the Great Invisible Power is *hidden* and *secret* (Hip. Ref. VI.4; Rec 2:21). Compare the following Buddhist passages, which imply that the truth is hidden and generally misperceived:

Sorrow disguised as joy, the hateful as the loved—
Thus pain in the form of bliss
overwhelms the heedless one. (Udana 2.8)

What the world holds as true, the Noble Ones hold as false.

They see correctly, with perfect insight.

What the world holds as false, the Noble Ones hold as true.

They see correctly, with perfect insight. (Sutta-nipata 755)

(For canonical Christian parallels, see PDF [here](#), chp. 5.)

(e) Simon did *not* believe (1) in the Day of Judgment, nor (2) that souls are immortal (Rec 2:13; Hom 2:26; Gebhardt 53). Both of these tenets are compatible with Buddhism, which teaches the nonexistence of the soul (*anatta*).

All the texts link Simon with Samaria (Rec. 2:7: Hom 2:22; Geb. 49, etc). Considering that Simon was in the theological lineage of Dositheus (also with Samaritan/Samaritan roots) and John the Baptist—the ‘mentor’ of Jesus (the lineage is [here](#))—the distinct possibility emerges that Christianity originated as a Jewish fringe movement influenced by Buddhism. The movement seems to have taken root in Samaria at an early stage, and perhaps also in the Jordan valley-Decapolis-Bashan regions in the first century CE.

Overlaps everywhere

Given the meagre textual records and the extensive use of invented ‘carriers of dogma’ (what I call ‘ciphers’) functioning in pseudo-historical settings, it is not possible to establish clear historical or even doctrinal boundaries between Jesus, John the Baptist, Dositheus, and Simon Magus. Certain details belong to more than one of these figures. An example is the saying recorded in Mt 3:10 (‘the axe laid to the root of the tree’). In the texts it is ascribed variously to Jesus, John the Baptist, and Simon Magus.

In the past, some scholars have opined that John the Baptist was in fact a cipher for Jesus. Two such arguments are set forth in detail on this website: [“Was Jesus John the Baptist raised from the dead?”](#) (by Robert Price) and [“Hypothesis regarding John the Baptist”](#) (by

Georges Ory). Surprising overlaps also exist between Simon Magus and Jesus, such as that Peter considered Simon Magus to be a (false) Christ, mentioned in the preceding post. Another overlap is somewhat more complex. In my book *NazarethGate* I note the following:

Simon Magus was reputedly born in Gitta (Gath, presently Ramlah–Justin, *Apol.* I.26, 56), a town in Samaria approximately 40 km NW of Jerusalem. Archeologically, the settlement has been identified with Lydda (Lod). Now, Lod was where a certain Ben Stada was crucified on the eve of Passover according to Rabbinic writings [Footnote: See Zindler 2003:237 f; Herford 78 f]. This link between Simon Magus and Ben Stada takes on more force when we realize that “Ben Stada” is probably another corruption for [the] ‘Standing One’—a favorite euphemism of Simon Magus. Finally, Ben Stada clearly refers to Yeshu [ha Notsri]. Jesus of Nazareth, of course, was also crucified on the eve of Passover. (*NazarethGate*, p. 447)

Thus, ‘Simon Magus’ overlaps with ‘Ben Stada’, ‘Yeshu ha-Notri,’ and ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Also, **I’ve noted** that ‘John’ and ‘Dositheus’ are equivalent names. It is possible, however, that *all* these alleged figures were one and the same (or no historical personage at all), and that similar doctrine underpins them all.

The French scholar Georges Ory surmised that Dositheus = Theudas (the components of the names merely reversed). This opens an interesting line of speculation, in that **Theudas** was a Jewish rebel who, according to Josephus, proposed to part the Jordan River c. 45 CE. Ory further links Theudas/Dositheus with John the Baptist (see **here**). One supporting datum Ory points to is that:

... under the name “Jesus” in his Lexicon, Philip of Side reports that the synagogue of Tiberias preserved a certain Book of Theudas about a Samaritan Christ. The book relates that Christ was elected High Priest by the Jews. Now, there exists a tradition (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* III.31.3) according to which “John, who rested on the bosom of our Lord, was a priest who bore the sacerdotal plate [petalon pephorekws], martyr and teacher...” It is not surprising that the same legend [regarding the High Priesthood] attaches to Theudas as also to John-Dositheus, given that

these are one and the same "Christ." (Cahiers du Cercle Ernest Renan, no. 11, 1956. Discussion [here](#).)

As far as the evangelists were concerned, it was easy for them to create fictional figures and to construct situations in which those figures acted and spoke, situations that best promoted the Church's doctrines and that portrayed 'heresy' in the worst possible light. And if a heretical sect venerated one or another teacher/prophet, it was easy to lampoon that teacher by name, with invented situations, words, and deeds. This, one supposes, was the situation with Simon Magus. Towards the end of II CE gnostic doctrine had a following, and one way the Church dealt with it was via 'Simon Magus,' a convenient puppet-figure who could be put in the most unflattering literary situations and vilified at will. Thus in the *Acts of Peter* Simon is a charlatan and thief who spectacularly fails a magical contest against Peter in the Roman Forum. It is all quite obviously contrived and shows absolutely no interest in the facts of history. If anything, those facts of history were an obstacle to the Church's purposes.

When we realize that the characters that act and speak in early Christian texts are not historical figures, then we can examine them correctly as, first and foremost, vehicles of propaganda. The situations in which those invented figures move have been constructed in a way that best promotes the Church's position and that paints the 'heretics' in the worst possible colors.

What more do we know of "The Standing One"?

Hippolytus writes: "According to Simon, therefore, there exists that which is blessed and incorruptible in a latent condition in everyone—that is, potentially, not actually; and that this is He who stood, stands, and is to stand" (Ref. VI.12). From this we can infer that Simonian

doctrine conceived all beings as *potentially* divine: we can all ‘stand.’ Indeed, we *must* all ‘stand.’

The word ‘stand’ obviously is key to Simonian thought. **We’ve briefly seen** how it relates to the crossing of the River Jordan by the Israelites in the Book of Joshua. Here, we will look more closely at the OT usage of ‘stand,’ which will prove important for an understanding of the Magus. The following citations are coded for reference:

(a) **[Yahweh commands] “When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still [תעמדון] in the Jordan.” (Josh 3:8b)**

(b) **“When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand [ויעמדון] in a single heap.” (Josh 3:13)**

(c) **So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still [ויעמדון], rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabian, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. (Josh 3:15b-16)**

(d) **While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood [ויעמדון] on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan. (Josh 3:17)**

It is interesting that the same Hebrew verb is used for the priests ‘standing’ in the middle of the Jordan River (a, b, d), as well as for the waters of the Jordan that ‘stood still’ (c)—as if there were a link between the priests standing and the waters standing. And indeed there was such a link, as the OT author makes clear by the way he narrates the event: God commands the priests to stand in the river, and if they do so the waters will stand still.

The Hebrew verb used in all the above citations is *amad* ('md, עמד). It is an important word in the OT, and is used in sensitive contexts that are in a way liminal: the upright man is able to approach into the presence of God—he 'stands' before God. The same verb is also used in secular contexts, such as when one is deemed worthy to 'stand' before a king or other dignitary. *Amad* is also used in humble presentation. For example, Moses, Aaron, the priests, and even Israel or all Judah 'stand' (i.e. present themselves) before Yahweh for worship and/or to receive instruction.

Only the worthy person 'stands.' Thus, use of the verb indicates the excellence of the person doing the 'standing.' True prophets 'stand' (Jer 23:18, 22; cf. 18:20). Elijah introduces himself as the prophet of Yahweh, "before whom I stand" (1 Kg 17:1), and God raises up prophets to "stand before Him" (Deut 18:5, 7 etc). Of particular interest to us will be the fact that the Levites, most especially, typically 'stand before the Lord' in performing their duties (1 Kg 8:11; Deut 10:8 *et multi*). We will see that the Levites play an important role in esoteric Jewish traditions in Second Temple times, a role often associated with wisdom traditions and proto-gnosticism.

Thus, when Simon Magus is described as 'the Standing One,' the usage conforms to an old tradition in Judaism, one implying that *he is worthy to be in the presence of God*.

There is, however, a second important usage of *amad*, 'stand,' in the Old Testament. It is often used in the sense of 'endure.' God's plans 'stand firm' (Ps 33:11), and His righteousness endures (*amad*) forever (Ps 111:3, 10). Indeed, God Himself endures (*amad*, Ps 102:26²⁷). But wickedness does not endure. The Babylonian warriors, for example, will not 'stand,' for the Lord will push them down (Jer 46:15).

A third usage is as a noun (עמוד) *'ammûd*, which includes the meanings "column, pillar." Of most interest to us is that Yahweh

appears to the Israelites as a permanent 'column' of smoke guiding them in the wilderness (Ex 13:21-22).

In light of the foregoing second and third usages, we gain greater clarity regarding Simon Magus' astonishing claim to be the one who "stood, stands, and will stand." This is an uncompromising claim to divinity. Of course, such a claim for a human being is unheard of in Judaism (with the notable exception of a few Thanksgiving Hymns from Qumran). But I have argued in these posts that Simon Magus was not a real person of history but, rather, he was a convenient cipher, a butt for doctrinal disparagement. 'The Standing One,' then, is not Simon Magus the person. On its own doctrinal terms, the Standing One is *the divine inside each person*. As we saw in the last post, Simon Magus is said to have believed in the Hidden Indefinite Power that is unchanging and immanent in all (according to Hippolytus). *That doctrine* is what the heresiologists were combating—not a person.

"To stand" and baptism

It astonishes me that, despite thousands of scholars daily studying early Christianity, to my knowledge not a single one has pointed out a monumentally important and fairly elementary datum regarding Simon Magus: in the Aramaic language, *the word "stand" (amad) also means "baptise."* This fact is so vital to understanding the Magus that it changes everything one can say about him. One wonders why it is I—a sometime author entirely outside the mainstream of professional Christian studies now writing an obscure blog on the Internet—why it must be me who brings this remarkable fact to light, and why I am doing it years, decades, and even centuries after the study of early Christianity began. Obviously something is very wrong with the field, one that assiduously ignores critical information like this.

The consequence is clear: Simon's most known moniker, "the Standing One," also means "the Baptizing One." Further meanings in Aramaic/Syriac are intimately associated with water, particular with *going down into water*.

But don't simply take my word for it. Here is J. Payne-Smith's entry under *amad* as verb, in his *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, p. 416:

AMaD [ayin-mem-daleth] (a) to dive, plunge, sink, set...(b) to penetrate... (c) to dip in or under water, to bathe, wash... (d) to be baptized...

In the related form *amud* (noun), Aramaic/Syriac mirrors the third meaning in Hebrew given above: "column, pillar, platform, meteor." We recall that God chose the form of a column for his enduring theophany while the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness.

Furthermore, we recall the second meaning given above in the Hebrew: "endure, stand firm." This, of course, perfectly captures Simon's doctrine of the Great Indefinite Power that is hidden, immanent, eternal, and that "stood, stands, and will stand." This meaning of *amad* as "enduring" also links both Simon and the "Standing One" with the semantic field of "rock, stone."

Thus, this one Hebrew/Aramaic root AMD unites in itself many disparate elements:

- "stand," in the sense that only the Great Indefinite Power truly endures
- "baptize," in the sense of immersion in water (= gaining gnosis)
- "column," in the sense of a theophany
- "meteor," in the sense of that which endures: rock (-> "Cephas, Peter")

Suddenly, Simon Magus "The Standing One" potentially assumes a central position in the development of earliest Christianity. We must

now wonder whether the New Testament figure of Peter *was simply a friendly version* of Simon Magus—a version shorn of every gnostic vestige. We can also wonder if John ‘the Baptist’ was not somehow a sanitized version of Simon Magus ‘the Standing One’—that is, ‘*the Baptizing One*’...

The ‘rock,’ of course, is also intimately linked to the crossing of the Jordan: at Josh 4:2 Yahweh instructs the priests to gather twelve ‘stones/rocks’ from the dry river bed in the middle of the Jordan. The scene is obviously allegorical, with the Jordan waters holding back and the priests gathering stones. Because ‘stone/rock’ is of considerable importance in early Christianity, we look at it more closely in the next post.

Part 15

baptism, christology, John the Baptist, Simon Magus, The first century

Simon Magus

Part 5–Conclusion

In the Book of Joshua, stones assume an important and rather strange role in the Israelite crossing of the Jordan River. The relevant verses are below, taken from chapter 4:

1 When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: 2 "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, 3 and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.'" 4 Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. 5 Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, 6 so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' 7 then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever."

8 The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. 9 (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing

the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

10 The priests who bore the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua...

19 The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. 20 Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, 21 saying to the Israelites, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' 22 then you shall let your children know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.' 23 For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever."

The above informs us that the stones are a "sign... the waters of the Jordan were cut off." This is because the stones came from the middle of the Jordan River. Had the stones come from anywhere else, they would not have the significance that the author intends. Thus, the value of the stones is in their witness to something else: to the miracle of the water holding back. That is their meaning *according to the OT author*.

To a later gnostic, however, the entire scene would carry a different meaning than it did to the OT author. While one was telling a *story*, the other was expressing an *allegory*. The interest of the gnostic was not on the Israelites crossing a particular river and eventually conquering the terrain between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. Rather, the gnostic was interested in:

(1) immersion in gnosis as symbolized by immersion in water;

(2) the Jordan River as 'river of gnosis,' for it alone issues from sacred *Mt. Hermon*, the ancient home of the gods (see Ugaritic and Enochic

literature), the gateway to the subterranean waters ('Abzu'—home of moon, sun, and all the gods), the goal of Gilgamesh in his quest for Truth, and the home of **Atrahasis** ("Ultra-Wise");

(3) the eternal stability of hidden Truth. This is implicit in Simon Magus' theology of the blessed and incorruptible, 'Great Indefinite Power' that is hidden, immanent, eternal, and that 'stood, stands, and will stand.' For such a gnostic, then, *the 'stones' in the middle of the Jordan are symbols of the enduring and unmoving Truth in the midst of gnosis.* Indeed, Hippolytus confirms this view when he reports concerning the eternal Standing One: "He stands below, *when in the stream of waters*" (Ref. VI.12).

It is noteworthy that the Samaritans have a slightly different version of the Jordan crossing. According to the conclusion to the commandments (Ex 20:17; Deut 5:21) in the Samaritan Pentateuch, the stones are to be inscribed with the words of the Law and set up on Mt. Gerizim (see [here](#)).

John the Baptist → Jesus

As scholars have long known, the figure of John the Baptist is at the heart of Christian origins. Not only did John 'baptize' Jesus, but many of John's disciples went over to Jesus—demonstrating doctrinal overlap between the two prophets. That doctrinal overlap is evident in the canonical gospels themselves: in at least one point ('the axe laid to the root of the trees... and thrown into the fire') both John and Jesus deliver the same teaching (Mt 3:10/John and 7:19/Jesus).

It is well known that the figures of John and Jesus overlap in myriad ways, particularly in their New Testament birth stories. Mary and Elizabeth are related by blood (Lk 1:36), the same angel (Gabriel) appears to both mothers announcing their impending pregnancies, and in both cases those pregnancies are contrary to nature—Elizabeth

conceives John in old age, and Mary conceives Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Thirty years later both John and Jesus were preaching in close proximity to one another. All this overlap makes one suspect that originally one figure lay at the root of these stories, not two. In other words, it appears that an artificial separation was effected between the Baptist and Jesus at an early time.

As mentioned in the last post, certain scholars have suspected that John was Jesus. These scholars include **Robert Price** and **Georges Ory**. The latter concluded: "This complex of facts permits one to advance the hypothesis that John the Baptist was the principal Christian messiah" ("**Samaria: The Messiah's Homeland**"). Not only do the above overlaps in the tradition offer firm grounds for their suspicion, but clues in various non-canonical traditions bolster that suspicion. We will now briefly look at some of those additional clues.

First of all, there is the emerging realization that "Jesus" was **a mobile and spiritual entity** in I CE, before the canonical gospels were penned towards the middle of II CE. This being the case, the most probable inference is that John was a very human prophet, and 'Jesus' *was the spirit that indwelled him*. The Gospel of Mark can be read in such an 'adoptionist' way, whereby Jesus receives the spirit of God at his baptism. Now, if one substitutes John for Jesus, then we arrive at the probable underlying event: John received the Spirit of God at his 'baptism,' that is, when he immersed in gnosis (became enlightened) in the metaphorical waters of the Jordan River. According to this view, the enlightenment of John was transformed by the Christian evangelists *into the baptism of Jesus by John*. That's quite a transformation: (a) the Church pushed John aside and subordinated him to (b) an invented new 'savior' *Jesus* (which means 'savior!'); and (c) the gnostic symbolism of water was replaced by the mere ritual of

dipping into water ('baptism'), whose gnostic roots were no longer acknowledged.

Another clue that John (and not Jesus) was the prophet at the source of Christianity is in the *Protevangelium of James* (c. 150 CE). There, in the context of the extermination of the infants, we read that "Herod was searching for *John*" (PrJa 23.1, cf. 22.3).

A third clue occurs in the much-ignored *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, edited by Dr. George Howard. The scholarly consensus is that HebMt is a medieval work dating to XIV CE. Howard, however, demurs and finds many ancient elements in the text, elements that he maintains go back to the first Christian centuries. As regards Jesus and John, Howard writes:

In summary, this series of readings asserts that none is greater than John, the prophets and the law spoke concerning John, John (Elijah) is to save all the world, and Jesus' own disciples are disgraced for not having believed John...

... [Hebrew Matthew] never identifies Jesus with the Messiah. John the Baptist is given an exalted role (even takes on messianic traits), similar to the one polemicized against in the Gospel of John and the Pseudo-Clementine writings. (Howard, 1995:219, 234.)

Most astonishing is verse 3:10 in the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew (Howard p. 11). There we read, in black and white: "*John is Jesus*"!

What does it mean to assert "John is Jesus"? The statement is inconceivable if both entities are viewed as separate *persons*. However, if 'Jesus' is viewed as a *spiritual* entity, then the true meaning emerges and the original, pre-canonical scenario appears: the *person* John received the *spirit* Jesus ("savior"), and *then they both became one*. That is, we have a person indwelled by the Holy Spirit 'Jesus.' It's actually quite a simple concept. This is the authentic Christology that predated the Church and that predated the New Testament. I call it **Stage II Christology**, and it was dominant until mid-II CE—that is, until

the canonical gospels appeared. If we want to know what first century 'Christians' believed (something so many conservative Christians desire), then the answer is here. The first believers knew a spiritual Jesus that indwells the worthy human being. (In Simonian terms, that worthy person is the one who 'stands' in the flowing water of gnosis.)

The Church called those spirit-believers 'docetists' and lampooned them as believers in a phantom, as 'those who believed that Jesus had no body.' Of course, that explanation is only a half-truth and entirely misleading. It omits the critical element, namely, that 'Jesus' is an all-pervading spiritual entity: "that which is blessed and incorruptible in a latent condition in everyone—that is, potentially, not actually; and that this is He who stood, stands, and is to stand" (Hippolytus on the doctrine of Simon Magus, Ref. VI.12).

The critical moment at which John 'became' Jesus was at the moment when John 'immersed himself in the waters of gnosis'—that is, at John's baptism. In Buddhist terms, this would be the moment when John became 'enlightened.' In all this, then, the founder of Christianity is not Jesus at all. *It is John.*

Simon Magus → Simon Peter

As it happens, the saying mentioned above regarding the 'axe laid at the root of the trees' is not only attributed to John the Baptist and to Jesus in the gospels (Mt 3:10, 7:19), but it is also attributed to *Simon Magus* by Hippolytus (Ref. VI.11). This is more evidence of 'character migration' from John to Simon to Jesus. Other clues exist in the canonical gospels. For example, 'the woman with five husbands' (Jn 4:18) is common to both the woman at the well and to Helen of Troy (whose husbands were Theseus, Menelaus, Paris, Diophobus, and Achilles). Helen of Troy is relevant because, according to the patristic legend, Simon Magus claimed to have rescued in Tyre a certain

prostitute Helen and married her. The legend has it that this Helen was a reincarnation of Helen of Troy. The mention by Jesus of “five husbands,” then, is a clear indication that the Lucan evangelist was quite familiar with the simonian legend. (See **“The Simonian origins of Jesus and the woman at the well.”**)

Here, however, I wish to focus on the possible early identity between the two Simons: Simon Magus and Simon Peter. We know from Hippolytus and the other sources that the Magus was a carrier of gnostic doctrine, as analyzed in this and prior posts. That gnostic doctrine was of course anathema to the nascent Church. What is little appreciated (and even denied by the mainstream) is that the gnostic doctrine of ‘Simon’ *preceded* the invention of Jesus of Nazareth. It is quite clear that the canonical gospels were written in II CE, probably after the Bar Kochba revolt and much later than the timeline taught today in universities throughout the world (which places the 4G in I CE and GMk about 70 CE).

Towards the middle of II CE—about the same time that ‘Jesus’ ceased to be purely spiritual and became the god-man ‘Jesus the Nazarene’ (Mark)—Simon Magus seems to have been co-opted and sanitized, eventually emerging as Simon Peter, the foremost of Jesus’ disciples. The connection between the two Simons can be seen not only in their identical first names, but also in the moniker Cephas/Peter, which means “rock, stone.” The latter immediately recalls “that which stood, stands, and will stand.” It also recalls the stones (= enduring entities) taken from the middle of the Jordan River (above). Thus it is that the nascent Church ignored gnostic Simonian doctrine and turned “the Standing One” into “the rock upon which I shall build my church” (Mt 16:18). Simon Magus became Simon Peter.

There is no question that the ancient texts treat Simon Magus with great caution. Obviously, at the base of this figure was a doctrine of

considerable profundity and very dangerous to the incipient Church, which singled out Simon Magus as the 'father of heresy.' The Pseudo-Clementine literature takes great pains to rebuff at length the figure and gnostic doctrine of the Magus. In that literature we essentially have a struggle between the two Simons: Peter contra the Magus.

Apparently, a gnostic figure of the past (partially historical, partially literary) known as 'Simon' was bifurcated into (a) the heretic Simon Magus and (b) the orthodox Simon Peter. The former became the 'father of heresy,' the latter the Church's great champion. In opposing one Simon to the other, the Pseudo-Clementines witness that the split was still fresh. The whole purpose of the Clementines is to authenticate the new Simon 'Peter' against the older Simon 'Magus.'

'Magus' means 'magician' and Zoroastrian priest, with the added inferences that the powers of Simon Magus came from the devil and were foreign.

Simon 'Rock/Stone' (Cephas/Peter) became 'the Standing One,' *but now for Jesus and the Church* and shorn of all gnostic doctrine.

In short, I suspect that Simon Peter is a sanitized and rehabilitated Simon Magus.

Part 16

Gnosticism, Naassenes

The Naassenes⁷

On pp. 5-7 of his article, Dr. Detering considers the views of the Naassenes. Our main source for this sect is the fifth book of Hippolytus' *Refutation of all Heresies*. The Church Father offers an extensive but hardly clear treatment. From one sentence to the next he brings forward the Greek mystery religions, the Genesis story, the 'giants,' Egyptian gods, and obscure names such as the Corybantes, Curetes, Cabiri, etc. That the Naassenes had ties with all these makes them very imposing indeed. And, I dare say, given the extensive treatment of Hippolytus, they must have seemed very important (or threatening) to him, at least. I suppose one could parse Hippolytus sentence-by-sentence and produce a 500 page tome on what he does or does not say about the Naassenes (has it been done?). Here, I just offer some comments relative to Dr. Detering's observations, with the caveat that Hippolytus has many interesting things to say about the Naassenes that do merit fairly extensive consideration.

Detering writes:

"Hippolytus first reports that [the Naassenes] designated themselves as 'Gnostics' and that they claimed "alone to know the depths of wisdom'" (Ref. 5.1). Hippolytus notes that their name derives from the Hebrew nahash (nun-het-shin), "serpent."

⁷ An insightful study of the Naassenes, written for the layperson, is M. H. Gaffney's *Gnostic Secrets of the Naassenes* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2004).

[RS:]

This shows that the Naassenes were a gnostic sect drawn from Judaism. Their veneration of the serpent—an age-old gnostic symbol—links the Naassenes with ancient Levantine religion going back to the Bronze Age. Hippolytus (Ref. 5.5) cites a psalm of the Naassenes, given here with added formatting:

The Naassene Psalm

[a] The world's producing law was primal mind,
And next was first-born's outpoured chaos; and third, the soul
received its law of toil.

[b] Encircled, therefore, with an aqueous form, with care
overpowered it succumbs to death.
Now holding sway, it eyes the light, and now it weeps on misery
flung; now it mourns, now it thrills with joy;
now it wails, now it hears its doom; now it hears its doom, now it dies,
and now it leaves us, never to return.
It, hapless straying, treads the maze of ills.
But Jesus said, Father, behold, A strife of ills across the earth wanders
far from Your breath; But man seeks to shun bitter chaos, And knows
not how to pass through.

[c] On this account, O Father, send me; Bearing seals, I will descend;
Through ages whole I'll sweep, all mysteries I'll unravel, and forms of
gods I'll show; And secrets of the saintly path, styled "Gnosis," I'll
impart. (The G.R.S. Mead translation is [here](#).)

The psalm depicts the wandering soul that, "hapless straying, treads the maze of ills." This is very Indic. It reflects the concept of samsara, a Sanskrit word going back to Vedic times that means "wandering" or "world", with the connotation of cyclic, circuitous change. The view that life is suffering is particularly Buddhist. *Dukkha* ("discontent", "suffering") is one of the three primary characteristics of existence in Buddhist metaphysics. This view is remarkably close to that expressed in the Naassene Psalm, particularly in part **b** above.

Detering points out

In the Naassene Psalm, the savior Jesus is a pre-existent figure, showing that the concept of the savior's pre-existence was already a fact in fairly early Christian times. (Hippolytus was writing c. 200 CE.) As regards the Exodus motif, for the Naassenes the sea symbolizes the earthly material realm, as opposed to the "Heavenly Jerusalem" as "Mother of the Living" (Ref. 5.2).

[RS:]

A previous post noted the gnostic emphasis on the *direction* of water flow: the downward (natural) flow represents materiality and destruction; the upward flow (contrary to nature) represents spirituality and liberation. Accordingly, the upward flow is miraculous—or, at least, quite beyond ordinary comprehension. Hippolytus describes the difference in water direction for the Naassene:

This, he says, is ocean, "generation of gods and generation of men" ever whirled round by the eddies of water, at one time upwards, at another time downwards. But he says there ensues a generation of men when the ocean flows downwards; but when upwards to the wall and fortress and the cliff of Luecas, a generation of gods takes place. (Ref. 5.2)

Thus, the downwards flow = the "generation of men," while the upwards flow = the "generation of gods." The above passage continues quite revealingly: "This [i.e., the generation of gods] is that which has been written: 'I said, Ye are gods, and all children of the highest.'" Here the Naassene asserts the great gnostic hubris: man *becomes* god—in potential, design, and purpose. Ultimately, man's ignorance of this keeps him back. 'Man to god', or 'man *into* god' (*apotheosis*)—this is the gnostic Way, as asserted by the Naassenes.

For the Naassene, the transition from man to god is also the transition/passage across the Jordan 'to the other side.' That passage, or

crossing, can only be accomplished if the water is made to flow in contrary direction: 'upwards.' This is all mythological gobbledy-gook until we understand some of the Naassene terminology. Hippolytus explains it in the following passage:

This, he says, is the great Jordan which, flowing on (here) below, and preventing the children of Israel from departing out of Egypt-I mean from terrestrial intercourse, for Egypt is with them the body,-Jesus drove back, and made it flow upwards.

Let's unpack the above sentence. Firstly, "Egypt" = "terrestrial intercourse", i.e. sexual relations. In other words, the flight of the Israelites out of Egypt was a flight *away from sexual relations*. This view is known as 'encratite.' It was shared by most gnostic groups of antiquity.

Secondly, Jesus "drove back" the water of the Jordan and made it flow upwards. In other words, Jesus is the hero who reversed the natural course of the Jordan and showed that it *could* be done. He showed the way and bears emulation. His 'way' involved a renunciation of "terrestrial intercourse," i.e., of sexual relations. This is Naassene theology in a nutshell.

Dr. Detering points out (p. 6)

that this "Jesus" is none other than the Joshua of the Old Testament. He cites the now-familiar passage from the Book of Joshua:

14 When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people.
15 Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, 16 the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea,[a] were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. 17 While all Israel

were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan. (Josh 3:14-17)

[RS:]

No doubt the Naassenes interpreted the Israelite crossing of the Jordan in an encratite way for, as we have seen above, in the Naassene view the water 'standing still' = abandoning sexuality. More astonishing, however, is that the OT author of the Book of Joshua (writing, according to Gmirkin, c. 270 BCE) must have already known such an encratite theology, for he could only have been reacting against *already existing* proto-gnosticism. What we know of (a) Mt. Hermon's ancient significance as home of the gods and of the enlightened being (*Atrahasis*), (b) the Jordan as that sacred mountain's primary river, (c) the symbolism of water, and (d) the stones in the midst of the river—all of these signal that the narrative of the Jordan crossing rests securely on a proto-gnostic basis. In other words, *the encratite theology described above must have existed already in early III BCE*. Furthermore, the OT writer knew that theology but papered it over. The Book of Joshua suppresses an older proto-gnostic worldview.

In all this I am not proposing that the *Naassenes* predated the turn of the era. What I am suggesting here is more broad: that gnosticism itself was far earlier than 'Christian Gnosticism.' We may consider the Naassenes as merely one group that inherited an ancient esoteric tradition of encratite gnosticism. The study of Indic (Mohenjo-Daro, Vedic, Upanishadic), Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Elamite, Babylonian) and Syrian (Baalbek, Ugarit, Mari) religions all bear out the existence of such an encratite theology and symbolic system. Once, long ago, that theology was normative. With the advance of civilization in the Iron Age, however, it became more and more 'esoteric.' Once, religion involved the transformation of man into god through extraordinary

effort leading to gnosis. This religion involved personal liberation through (among other things) sexual continence. Vestiges of that older religion of divine transformation endured in the so-called “Mystery Religions” of Greek and Roman times. They also survive in aspects of Christian asceticism.

The gnostic sought to destroy sexuality—“the works of the female” (Coptic *Gospel of the Egyptians*)—and to destroy duality and gender itself. God was hermaphrodite, and the true disciple was like a pre-pubescent and asexual child (the prelapsarian Adam) who disrobes without shame (GTh 21). In gnostic parlance, male and female no longer exist. The enlightened person is not male or female: s/he is “complete”—either a hermaphrodite (both sexes), or an emasculated Attis figure (neither sex). The *Gospel of Thomas* sums up this theology in a few words:

Jesus said: “And if you make the male and the female one, so that the male is no longer male and the female no longer female... then you will enter the Kingdom.” (GTh 27)

It appears, then, that the Gospel of Thomas teaches Naassene theology. Support for this comes from logion 12 and from Hippolytus, both of which mention James the Just. Hippolytus tells us (Ref. V.2 and X.5) that the Naassenes received their tenets from James via ‘Mariamne.’ In the *Gospel of Thomas* we read:

The disciples said to Jesus, “We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?”

Jesus said to them, “Wherever you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” (GTh 12).

Those are strong words, and they place the Naassenes under suspicion of being identical with those responsible for the Gospel of Thomas. Because James the Just is known to the tradition as the head of the Jerusalem Church—the first Christian Church—we arrive at the very interesting proposition that the earliest Christians were none

other than gnostic Naassenes. Those early Christians are also denominated 'Ebionites.' Suddenly, all gets murky very quickly, as one realizes that **earliest Christianity was *ultra-heretical* and that the 'tradition' surrounding Jesus of Nazareth came much later...**

Interesting, indeed!

Part 17

baptism, Mandaeism, water

The Testimony of Truth

On pages 7-8 of his article, "The Gnostic Meaning of the Exodus and the Beginnings of the Joshua/Jesus Cult," Dr. Detering considers the Testimony of Truth (TT), a Christian Gnostic tractate from the Nag Hammadi Library (IX.3). This interesting work was originally written in Greek, probably around Alexandria, Egypt, c. 200 CE or a little later. Birger Pearson writes in his introduction to the tractate (*The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1977:406) that "the false doctrines and practices attacked are clearly those of the catholic Christian church." But the author of the TT is not satisfied with attacking the nascent Church. He also vilifies certain views of other gnostic sects. It is apparent that what we have here is an eclectic view authored by a sincere, intelligent writer from the Alexandria area.

The TT cites the NT at various points. When we consider that the canonical gospels (and indeed the entire NT) were first composed and assembled about the middle of II CE, then the earliest that the TT could have been written was in the second half of that century.

Detering cites a passage from the TT:

But the Son of Man came forth from imperishability, being alien to defilement. He came to the world by the Jordan river, and immediately the Jordan turned back. And John bore witness to the descent of Jesus. For he is the one who saw the power which came down upon the Jordan river; for he knew that the dominion of carnal procreation had come to an end. The Jordan river is the power of the body, that is, the sense of pleasures. The water of the

Jordan is the desire for sexual intercourse. John is the archon of the womb. [TT 30.19 ff.]

The opening sentences describe (a) the coming of the Son of Man; (b) the descent of Jesus; and (c) the waters of the Jordan turning back. These three elements occur simultaneously and are in some way equivalent. Thus, we have the following equation:

- the coming of the Son of Man = the descent of Jesus = the waters of the Jordan turning back

In another post we learned that, for some gnostics, 'the waters of the Jordan turning back' = the hidden power of gnosis. Making the appropriate substitutions in the above series, we are thus able to detect the root of a very pervasive gnostic Christian theology: the coming of the Son of Man = the hidden power of gnosis. Elsewhere in the TT (49.1 ff), the author also equates the serpent with the Christ. (From the context, it is implied that Jesus = the Christ.) Simplified, the following early equivalences emerge:

- the Son of Man = Jesus = gnosis = the serpent

Because Jesus = gnosis, the earliest conception of the 'baptism' scene emerges: *John is transformed by the spirit Jesus/gnosis*. In this original scene there is only *one* person—before, during, and after: John. This is certainly the origin of the later and now-familiar scene of the baptism involving *two* people: Jesus (transformed into a human being) and John (transformed into 'the baptist' of Jesus). Another passage from the TT, unfortunately full of lacunae, hints at the original conception:

... upon the Jordan River when [the Holy Spirit] came to John at the time [John] was baptized. The Holy Spirit came down upon him as a dove... [Christ?] was born of a virgin and it took flesh [i.e., the flesh of John]. (TT 39.24 ff.)

All the names can be confidently reconstituted as above except the word "Christ" that needs to be inferred. For the author of TT "Jesus" and "Christ" are not identical, as we learn from comparing passages.

Jesus ("Savior") = the Holy Spirit of gnosis that descends upon John by the river Jordan, but Christ ("Anointed One/Messiah") is the *product* of the union of (a) the spirit Jesus, and (b) the human prophet John. That cosmic union was precisely the original meaning of the baptismal scene. According to this scenario, then, John *becomes* the Christ at his 'baptism' by Jesus (*gnosis*).

Before proceeding, please take a moment to clearly understand the preceding paragraph, which can be confusing. We have three actors: Jesus, John, and Christ. The first is gnosis or the Holy Spirit. (In fact, "Jesus" is all the equivalencies pointed out above.) John is the *only* human being present at the baptismal scene. Christ is the *fusion* of Jesus and John, of gnosis and flesh. Thus Christ—the Messiah/Anointed One—was birthed at baptism. John was 'reborn' as the Christ.

All this of course is allegorical, metaphorical language, such as is familiar to so much religious literature where real and invented figures mingle in partially contrived/partially historical settings. At one point, however, the author of the TT chases away metaphor and speaks plainly—well, almost plainly. He implies that it all boils down to knowing oneself:

And those who have knowledge... the great ... the resurrection ... he has come to know the Son of Man, that is, he has come to know himself. This is the perfect life, that man know himself by means of the All. (TT 36.20 ff.)

So, "to know himself" is to know the Son of Man. As we saw above, however, the Son of Man = Jesus. Thus, the entire baptism scene, with all its metaphorical trappings, devolves into the Socratic dictum to "know thyself." That is gnosis. That is receiving "Jesus." That is, in fact, becoming "the Christ."

The original gnostic understanding of baptism (= immersion in gnosis) obviously fell by the wayside with Mark's astonishing boldness and

creativity. Towards the middle of II CE the evangelist adapted the theology of self-transformation through gnosis, a theology with which he was evidently intimately familiar. Mark rejected the gnostic theology but adapted some of its principle elements to his new theology: faith in the god-man, Jesus the Nazarene. In the process, John—the original gnostic hero—was demoted to ‘the Baptist,’ an accessory figure. John became the mere precursor to *the god-man Jesus, whom Mark invented out of whole cloth.*

Mark’s boldness was breathtaking. And so was his betrayal—betrayal of the received gnostic message of self-transformation. Mark—whom tradition places in Alexandria—must himself have once been a gnostic, for the gospel under his name betrays intimate familiarity with gnostic theology, now allegorized and veiled. Incidentally, in all this we must include ‘Secret Mark,’ the (authentic) vestige of a gnostic gospel, now lost, which was an intermediary to the canonical gospel.

In chronicling the mighty adventures of Jesus the Nazarene, the Son of God and Savior of the World, Mark unashamedly wrote pseudo-history and did so with panache. Because the evangelist intends his *writing to be taken as history*, to be understood as *actually having happened*, Mark is not a novelist, nor a raconteur, nor is his gospel a diversionary read for quiet moments in the evening. Rather, his purposes are deadly serious: to awe, to convert, and therewith to gather power via a long and elaborate series of *untruths*. As a result, Christianity is founded on the bold and colossal *lie*. For all its good works (and there are many), Christianity can never exorcise the rot at its very core, simply because falsehood birthed it.

Water: a nuanced symbol

John is the only human participant in the TT’s ‘baptism’ scene. It is evident that we have here an adoptionist scenario, where the spirit

Jesus comes from “imperishability” and enters into John. John “saw the power” and “knew.” In other words, John is the *only* person at this ‘baptismal’ scene. The event being described in the Testimony of Truth is clearly *within* John.

In the TT, it is noteworthy that Jesus/the Son of Man comes to the world “by” the Jordan River—Jesus is not standing “in” the Jordan, as in most conceptions of the baptism. This and other indications suggest to me that the author of the TT is not within the Simonian tradition (the “Standing One”) that we have been considering in previous posts. Also, the author of the TT has a negative view of water—contrary to the view of many other gnostics who viewed water (and the Jordan) positively as a symbol of gnosis. We have seen, for example, that “life” for the Peratae is metaphorically “immersion in water” (see [here](#)). For the Mandeans, also, water is positive—gnosis:

You living water
descend to the decaying ruin [i.e. the world],
proclaim the summons of the Life
and spread splendor over the house [i.e. the body].
Be a helper of the souls
who are being persecuted for the sake of Yawar’s name.
In you they shall gain the living baptism... [Right Ginza XV.3]

Here, it is not Jesus that descends upon John at baptism, but the “living water” (i.e. gnosis) that descends upon the world and confers “the living baptism” (i.e., enlightenment).

On the other hand, the author of the TT represents another gnostic tradition wherein water is metaphorically negative:

The Jordan river is the power of the body, that is, the senses of pleasures. The water of the Jordan is the desire for sexual intercourse. (TT 30.31)

It is clear that ‘water’ was such an important symbol in gnosticism that it lent itself to diverse and fairly complex interpretations. The Flood,

the Exodus, and the crossing of the Jordan were interpreted in various ways. Sometimes 'crossing over' (Gk. *eis to peran*) was paramount, in which case the water was a barrier/'death.' In the cases of the Flood and the Exodus, however, water functioned both negatively and positively—it killed the many yet saved the elect (see also [here](#) and [here](#)). This equivocal view of water is reflected in many traditions, including Catholic Christianity. Thus, for Justin Martyr:

Justin's main point is that the waters of the Flood are a 'symbol' or 'type' (for he elsewhere uses the words interchangeably) of the waters of Baptism, in that deliverance came to Noah by being 'borne upon the waters.' He does not mention St. Peter's First Epistle, but his language is clearly reminiscent of 'few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water' [1 Pet 3:20]. They escaped through water to the ark of safety. Alike in Justin's exposition, and in St. Peter's words, the waters of the Flood are taken to be, not waters of destruction (as elsewhere in Scripture) but waters of deliverance, on which the ark rode securely. (J. H. Bernard, *Studia Sacra*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1917:28.)

Not only could water be seen as both positive and negative, but the *direction* of water flow became diagnostic for some gnostics: when the water flows normally (downwards) it signifies pleasures, corruption, and ignorance—the ordinary way of the world. But when the water is made to flow *upwards*, then it signifies enlightenment and the dominion over pleasures. This was the gnostic terminology among the Naassenes, as discussed in the previous post.

The author of the TT focusses on the negative view of water. Nevertheless, he is true to the core gnostic message: gnosis overcomes carnality. For him, John saw "that the dominion of carnal procreation had come to an end." This inner transformation is, in fact, the crux of every gnostic struggle. The author of the TT is even more explicit when he implies that John overcame "the desire for sexual intercourse."

This could not be more Buddhist

All this is very Buddhist. Removing the overlay of Christian geography and names reveals core Buddhist praxis: domination of pleasure (*râga*) leads to understanding/enlightenment. In Buddhism, pleasure is the handmaiden of ignorance, and it is clear that the author of TT also has the antithesis pleasure/ignorance vs. understanding very much in mind:

... But as for one who is in ignorance, it is difficult for him to diminish his works of darkness which he has done. Those who have known imperishability, however, have been able to struggle against passions [read: pleasures, *râgâ*]... The foolish-thinking in their heart that if they confess 'We are Christians,' in word only but not with power, while giving themselves over to ignorance, to a human death, not knowing where they are going nor who Christ is... hasten towards the principalities and the authorities. They fall into their clutches because of the ignorance that is in them. [TT 31.7 ff.]

Reading between the lines, we recognize that the author is upset at Catholic Christians who profess Jesus the Nazarene but who do not even know "who Christ is" (namely, the *spiritual* Christ of gnosis). Like a good Buddhist, the author is concerned with ignorance and the passions. This is Buddhism removed from its Indic trappings and placed in a new environment, one with "principalities," "authorities," "Christ," and "Christians." Here, then, we have Eastern doctrine expressed in Western vocabulary. West has met East, and the result is something very old now dressed in something very new: *Christianity*.

For the author of the TT, baptism has to do with acquiring truth and *renouncing* the world: "But the baptism of truth is something else; it is by renunciation of the world that it is found" (TT 69.21). Compare one of many possible Buddhist verses: "Except by renouncing and forsaking all, no safety can I see for living things" (S 1.2.17).

Gnosis under assault

The 4G with their new and awesome Christ, Jesus the Nazarene, appeared about a half century before the TT. The author of the TT obviously knows the catholic texts, for he cites them. From his defensive and polemic tone, however, we can infer that the author of the TT felt under grave pressure from emerging catholicism, even under assault. But he has already lost the war! We know this because *he uses the language of the catholic texts* to communicate his gnostic message to his readers. This shows that the new savior, Jesus the Nazarene, was already quite popular c. 200 CE. Furthermore, in attempting to use catholic language to communicate his gnostic message, the author of the TT engaged in a sort of hybridization that is not always successful. Consider, for example, the following opaque passage:

John was begotten by the Word through a woman, Elizabeth; and Christ was begotten by the Word through a virgin, Mary. What is the meaning of this mystery? John was begotten by means of a womb worn with age, but Christ passed through a virgin's womb. When she had conceived she gave birth to the Savior. Furthermore she was found to be a virgin again. Why then do you [pl.] err and not seek after these mysteries which were prefigured for our sake? (TT 45.6-18)

Literally, the above would eventually become Catholic doctrine (where Mary's virginity was perpetual). C. 200 CE, however, the author of the TT was not concerned with Mary's perpetual virginity. He was attempting to describe the nature of Christ which, for him (as we have seen above), is gnosis itself. Thus, Christ/gnosis "passed through a virgin's womb." This tells us that, metaphorically speaking, virginity/chastity/continence (*egkrateia*) gives birth to gnosis. *For the author of the TT, then, Mary = virginity.*

This is an somewhat desperate 're-definition' of Mary, and it had no chance against the grand yet false narrative of the 4G. And so, the TT

was relegated to complete obscurity, while the canonical gospels went on to conquer the world.

Part 18

Buddhism, Gnosticism, The second century, water, Odes of Solomon

The Odes of Solomon - Part 1

[H. Detering:]

We encounter another allegorical interpretation of the Exodus motif in the Odes of Solomon. This collection of early Christian hymns apparently comes from an Alexandrian milieu in the first half of the second century. The 39th ode compares the “power of the Lord” with “raging rivers” that “send headlong those who despise Him” (v. 1). But “those who cross them in faith shall not be destroyed” (v. 5). Verse 8 follows: “Therefore, put on the name of the Most High and know Him, and you shall cross without danger; because rivers shall be obedient to you.”

A structural similarity [of Ode 39] with the aforementioned gnostic interpretations of the Exodus is unmistakable. Crossing the water is the judgment: it represents salvation for believers, but destruction for unbelievers. [H. Detering, pp. 8-9]

Dating

Essential to understanding the **Odes of Solomon** is the text's dating. Dr. Detering writes “the first half of the second century,” which indeed reflects current scholarship. M. Lattke (*The Odes of Solomon*, Hermeneia, 2009:10) is slightly more precise: “the first quarter of the second century.” This locates the Odes in the final pre-canonical period when ‘Jesus’ was transforming from a spiritual entity to a god-

man. By mid-century I suspect that all four canonical gospels had been written—at least in their ‘first editions.’ The early second century also witnessed the writing of Secret Mark (a gnostic gospel) and the Gospel of Peter (the first Passion account). In those murky decades leading up to the Bar Kochba Revolt we are thus on the cusp of the invention of Jesus the Nazarene, Son of God and Savior of the World.

Locating the collection in early II CE also agrees with the content of the Odes. This is clear when we realize that the Odes seem to know—but only vaguely—the two most essential high points in the career of a Messiah/Christ figure who is not yet Jesus the Nazarene: the baptism and the crucifixion. The name ‘Jesus’ does not appear even once in the Odes.

Regarding the baptism, **the Odist writes**: “The dove flew onto the head of our lord Messiah, because he [the Messiah] was her [the dove’s] head” (24:1). Lattke predictably (and erroneously) supposes that the origin of this dove “must be sought in the Synoptics” (p. 342). This, however, is not possible according to the foregoing dating considerations. Regarding the dove, Lattke’s conclusion is more tenable: “this is the ancient motif of the dove as servant and messenger.”

As for the crucifixion, the Odes seem to imply the cross at one or two points, e.g.:

**I extended my hands and approached my lord,
For the expansion of my hands is his sign.
And my extension is the common cross [Lattke: “straight wood”]
That was lifted up on the way of the Righteous One.** (42:1-2;
Charlesworth translation. Cf. 27:1-3; 28:17/18.)

‘Water’ once again

As cited above, Detering writes: “A structural similarity **of Ode 39** with the aforementioned gnostic interpretations of the Exodus is

unmistakeable. Crossing the water is the judgment: it represents salvation for believers, but destruction for unbelievers" (pp. 8-9). The dual role of water as destroyer and savior passed, in the hands of the catholic Church, to Christ as judge at the end of time—the one who metes out universal damnation but also salvation. This figure of saving/destroying cosmic judge, however, was not new with Christianity but very old, known already in early Egyptian religion. And the dual nature of saving/destroying water too is very old, as we see in the Gilgamesh Epic's account of the Flood. So, both religious traditions of judge and water existed more or less in parallel through the ages.

Nevertheless, the water tradition was older. When we look back to the dawn of history, we find a suspicion of the visible, of the material, and of that which is transient. (This is also very Buddhist.) The king of the gods was the water god Enki (Ea), and his home was in the underworld ocean, the Abzu. That was also the home of hidden gnosis.

The Aryan invasions of the early second millennium BCE changed everything. The material world now inspired confidence, and only that which was visible had 'power.' Sky gods (those active in the daytime) gained the ascendancy, and the tradition of the cosmic judge was normative from about 1800 BCE onwards. Hidden wisdom lost its meaning, while lunar deities (active at night) and the old gods of water and of the underworld were denigrated.

In religious literature from the Late Bronze Age onwards the Sky and Sea are in perpetual conflict. But the sky is ever victorious: in Mesopotamia Marduk defeats **Tiamat**, the sea goddess; at Ugarit Baal defeats **Yam** ("Sea"); in Canaan Hadad defeats **Lotan**; and in the Bible "the spirit of God hovered over the waters" (Gen 1:2) and Yahweh defeats **Leviathan** (Ps 74:14). Many of these mythological sea

creatures are also serpents/dragons—confirming their gnostic essence (cf. Gen 3:1). Essentially, the struggle is between two incompatible and opposing views: materialism on the one hand, and gnosticism on the other. The seen vs. the unseen. The creation vs. the uncreated. The above (visible) vs. the below (invisible). Action vs. insight. Pleasure vs. understanding.

In my view, religions begin with ‘water’: as the gnostic insight (‘enlightenment’) of a prophet who teaches *hidden* wisdom, the emptiness of the world, and the need for understanding. This austere gnostic message, however, has always been far too elevated for the masses and does not long survive. The only exception in history that I know of is Buddhism—and even there I speak only of the Theravada school and only if it is shorn of many popular and monkish accretions (such as belief in rebirth and Abhidhammic speculations). Critically, the Theravada strain of Buddhism came to the West c. 250 BCE via Ashoka’s missionaries. In my view, that powerful contact ‘seeded’ the eventual birth of Christianity two centuries later (i.e., with the prophet **Yesu ha-Notsri**, d. ca. 70 BCE).

Though a religion usually begins on the ‘water’ side of the ledger, as it gains adherents it predictably transforms from a religion of hidden gnosis to a religion of visible power—of anti-gnosis, if you will. Most religions eventually betray their roots, and that betrayal is absolutely necessary if a religion is to have wide appeal. We also see this in Christianity, and the change-over from gnosis to anti-gnosis took place precisely when the Odes of Solomon were being written—in the first quarter of the second century CE.

The original ‘Christian’ religion—until c. 150 CE—was gnostic. In that religion, ‘Jesus’ was the gnosis itself (cf. the Gospel of Thomas). *It* was spiritual. Then came along Jesus the Nazarene, a creator god (technically: the ‘Son’ of the creator God, ‘one with the Father,’ etc)

who will come again with power as eschatological judge. Henceforth, gnostics were heretics and their manuscripts were burned. The Catholic son murdered its Gnostic father.

Ode 39, the Flood, and Buddhism

Profound parallels exist between the above gnostic interpretation of the Exodus—dating to late antiquity—and far more ancient accounts of the Flood. As Detering writes above: in Ode 39 water “represents salvation for believers, but destruction for unbelievers.” In the account of Noah, too, water plays a dual role: the Flood both destroys and saves—it destroys all of mankind, but not the righteous Noah.

In its negative aspect (and here I venture to evoke a later Buddhist perspective) water is the equivalent of ignorance (Pâli: *avijjâ*), the basic condition in which all sentient beings are born/come into the world. In its positive aspect, however, water is gnosis. Just as negative and positive are opposites, so also ignorance and gnosis are opposites. The Flood account figuratively captures this antithesis quite well: water destroys all of mankind while enabling the ark to survive.

Similarly in gnostic sources: if one possesses gnosis, it is salvific. But if one lacks gnosis, that lack is itself damning. A famous example of this irony is found in the Gospel of Thomas: “When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will know that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you will be in a state of poverty, and it is you who will be the poverty” (GTh 3).

In the Flood story, what saves Noah is not water nor even an ark—it is the *knowledge* that he must build an ark, and that he must do so quickly, namely, when the weather is still fine. The scene has been carefully crafted. One can imagine the ridicule from others upon seeing Noah and his family, *in fine weather*, engaged in building a very

large boat on dry land! No doubt, the counter-intuitive nature of the scene was exactly what the creator of the story wanted. Gnosis is counter-intuitive. What the world thinks is true is actually false—and vice versa. This is gnosticism reduced to its essence, and a couplet from the Buddhist *Sutta-Nipata* perfectly captures the dichotomy:

What the world holds as true
The Noble Ones hold as false.
They see correctly,
With perfect insight.

What the world holds as false
The noble Ones hold as true.
They see correctly,
With perfect insight. (Sn 755)

In the Flood story, water is a benign and even salvific element—*if one knows how to use it*. Without the knowledge to build an ark, however, water is lethal. Everything turns on possession or lack of knowledge. This, of course, is gnosticism: ignorance is the ultimate evil, knowledge the ultimate good. Thus, the Flood story expresses a great irony: that which saves Noah, his family, and the few animals with him, at the same time kills myriads of living beings. All depends on the possession/lack of gnosis.

Part 19

Gnosticism, The second century docetism, Odes of Solomon

The Odes of Solomon - Part 2

The preceding post noted that the Odes of Solomon date to the first quarter of the second century CE. That was the critical 'transition' period—the final generation before 'Jesus the Nazarene' appeared on the world stage. As a transition work, the Odes seem to have one foot in the coming catholic world and one foot in the gnostic past.

Buddhism, and the Odist's gnostic credentials

The Odist is clearly at home with the gnostic worldview. He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of gnosis/knowledge/understanding, equating it with the Word (12:3, 13) and even with the Savior (41:11). The Odist knows encratism and esoteric bridal symbolism (33:5 f; 38:9 f). At one place he mentions going up "into the light of truth as into a chariot" (38:1), which recalls the Jewish hechalot tradition. The Odist also uses the symbolism of water = gnosis discussed in these posts (11:6-8; 28:15/16; Ode 30). In all, the Odist can be described as a gnostic Jewish-Christian for whom the 'savior' is the gnosis.

When one recognizes that Buddhism also qualifies as a 'gnostic' religion—an important recognition made today by virtually no New Testament scholars—then the Odes at several points resonate with Buddhism. Of course, to perceive such resonances one must already be familiar with Buddhism and also somewhat sympathetic to parallels between Buddhism and Christianity—again, these are attributes that today are hardly to be found in New Testament scholarship. Hopefully

this limiting state of affairs will change in the coming generation. In any case, one thing can be said with confidence: the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity, taken seriously, are the next major step forward in understanding Christian origins. Dr. Detering's article that has stimulated this extensive series of posts is one of the first significant steps along this new path.

An example of a parallel with Buddhism is the following from the Odist: *"There is no hard way where there is a simple heart, Nor barrier for upright thoughts"* (34:1). Compare the following Buddhist teaching:

**To the Pure One is eternal spring,
Eternal holiday is his.
The Pure One whose deeds are always clean
Is granted his every wish. (MN 7.20)**

K. Neumann's German rendering:

Dem Reinen lächelt steter Mai
Dem Reinen steter Feiertag
Dem Reinen der nur Reines wirkt
Ist allezeit der Wunsch gewährt.

The sentiment is the same, the words are different. In another place the Odist writes: "Ignorance appeared like spray and like the foam of the sea. Vain people thought that it was great; they came to resemble it and were rendered futile" (18:11-12). This flagrant misapprehension of what is worthy is also found in Buddhism, as we have **already remarked**.

It has been claimed that astonishing confirmation of Buddhist (or at least Indic) influence on the Odes of Solomon occurs in regards to an enigmatic 'wheel' in Ode 23. In allegorical language, the Odist describes a letter (representing the thought of the Lord) which is 'sent' to mankind. We read: "But a wheel received it [the letter]... And

everything that disturbed the wheel it [the wheel] mowed down and cut to pieces" (23:11 f). Some have postulated a link between this "wheel" and the Indic wheel of samsâra (the cosmic wheel of endless becoming and re-becoming). While an Indic connection is possible, in this case I tend to agree with Lattke (op. cit. 332) who associates the wheel with the OT chariot/mekabah. For its part, the letter recalls Sethianism, a Jewish gnostic tradition wherein Adam's truth was transmitted only to Seth and then to future generations in written form (letter, stele, etc). Furthermore, the descent of the letter upon the wheel parallels the descent of the dove (= gnosis) upon the head of the Messiah at baptism (see [here](#)).

Nevertheless, many other indications in the Odes show that the author has indeed received Buddhist/Indic influences. Yet those influences are now quite distant and have passed through some strong western filters. Though demonstrably Buddhist in sentiment at many points, the Odist's writing would certainly not be recognized as such (or even understood) in India.

On the border between gnosticism and catholicism

While it is true that the Odes of Solomon proceed from a gnostic worldview, the Odist is acquainted with certain catholic tendencies. For example, 42:10-20 begins with a gnostic/docetic understanding of the Messiah's passion: "I was not rejected, although I *seemed* to be, and I did not perish, although they thought it of me" (v. 10). We may ask: who are "they"? This can only refer to incipient catholics. Further, we may ask: who is "I"? The Odist tells us that this entity does "not perish." Hence it cannot refer a person of history whom the Odist calls the Messiah/'Anointed One.' According to the Odist, that which does not perish is 'the Lord' and 'the Word.' Hence his theology becomes clear: the Word indwelled a prophet of history known as the 'Messiah.' The salvific aspect in history was the Word within the Messiah. That

Word can also indwell any of us—as it does for the Odist himself. Thus we may all become ‘Anointed Ones.’ I have termed this **Stage II Christology**. This theology was well-nigh universal before the rise of Christianity and overlaps with the so-called Mystery Religions. In the next post we will see that this theology is powerfully reflected in both the Pauline epistles and in the Gospel of John—as well as in numerous non-canonical texts.

The Odist’s view leads to multiple messiahs which, in turn, leads to the centrifugal shattering of a religious community. It is communal suicide. The emerging Church did away with multiple messiahs and went in the opposite direction: centralization. It combined both the Word and the Messiah into ‘Jesus Christ,’ an inimitable god-man who unites into a single awesome figure every element of power known to the ancient world. In my opinion, this was a *practical* strategy. The invention of Jesus Christ/the Nazarene/of Nazareth, who is GOD, SON OF GOD, as well as MAN, is not based on any doctrinal consideration—much less on history. Rather, the Jesus myth is the central and unifying tent pole holding up and keeping together the entire structure of the Church. He is the necessary and central figure around whom all can rally. The formulation of the Pauline kerygma (and its labored refinement in many Church councils) followed the invention of Jesus Christ. That kerygma really has nothing to do with any actual doctrines. It is my view that the pragmatic Church would have adopted *whatever doctrines* served to increase its centralizing authority. The first five or six centuries of Christianity were primarily a clarification of what, pragmatically speaking, works best among the masses. Ultimately, then, Christianity is an opportunistic religion. Faith-smitten idealists may indeed populate the lower ranks of priests and nuns, but they will not rise high in the religion. The Church’s movers (and here I speak of the Catholic Church)—the bishops and college of cardinals—are hard-headed realists.

The Church lampooned the gnostics, with their *spiritual* Word and many Christs, as those who believed that Jesus was a phantom with no body ('docetists'). The Odist is *already* fighting back against that unfair strawman (as we see in verse 42:10, cited above). This is one indication that catholicism was on the upswing even during the Odist's time.

I have argued [elsewhere](#) that originally there was no Jesus—whether personal or corporate. The first religion at the origins of Christianity was salvation by gnosis (what I have called 'Stage 1 Christology' and 'Primary Gnosticism'). That religion is also the core of Buddhism. It needs no intermediary or Savior other than gnosis itself. Walther Schmithals, noted scholar (and H. Detering's *Doktorvater*), asserted this long ago: "At the beginning of Gnosticism stands no redeemer myth, but rather the redeeming Gnosis as such" (*The Office of Apostle*, 1969:126).

And, indeed, the first 'Jesus' was gnosis in the form of 'the Word.' This is the religion of the Odes of Solomon. Yet I must qualify: the Odes are already at some remove from this theology. For example, man no longer finds, discovers, or seeks out the Word—it is given by the Most High and by grace (12:4). In the Jewish Christian Odes of Solomon, then, agency/power is entirely with God. This uncannily recalls the tone of many Qumran texts.

In fact, a genetic relationship almost certainly exists between the [Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice](#) (also known as the 'Angelic Liturgy,' 4Q400-407) and the Odes of Solomon—particularly the 'ascent' odes (nos. 11, 21, 36, and 38). Both the Qumran collection and the Odes emphasize understanding and the ascent to truth. Both also share surprising commonalities in vocabulary. The DSS work is corporate in tone, while the Odes are emphatically *personal*. Nevertheless, both the *Songs* and the Odes seem to lie on the same gnostic trajectory.

In pure gnosticism (and Buddhism) the Word/gnosis is strictly personal. In normative Christianity, however, the Word/Jesus eventually ballooned into a very public and even cosmic entity, one that acted at a decisive point in history and that affects us all in both the material and spiritual realms. In places, the Odist appears to be grappling with this new catholic view. Occasionally he actually crosses the line into catholicism himself, apparently contradicting some of his gnostic views in other passages. One critical example is the Odist's view of the Word. In numerous passages, the Word is closely linked to gnosis-understanding-knowledge-truth and the symbol 'water' (12:1,3,13, etc). Yet, in the following lines from Ode 41 the Odist betrays a surprising understanding of the Word:

11a And his Word is with us in all our way: 11b The Savior who gives life and does not reject our souls, 12 the man who was humbled and exalted by his own righteousness. 13 The Son of the Most High has appeared in the pleroma of his Father, 14 and the light dawned from that Word that was in him from the beginning. 15a The Messiah [Christ] in truth is one, 15b and he was known from the foundation of the world, 16a that he might give life to souls forever by the truth of his name.

In the first two lines the Word is equated with the Savior. Yet line 12 equates this Savior with "the man who was humbled and exalted." This cannot recall Jesus of Nazareth, who had not yet been invented. In my opinion, it recalls another quite unknown figure, Yeshu ha-Notsri. To return to the passage above: in line 13 the humbled Savior is now the "Son of the Most High." This all sounds quite catholic, yet the operative element in line 14 is not the divinity of that Son (as would become normative) but is still the *Word* "that was in him from the beginning." Finally, however, the last three lines decide the matter in favor of catholicism. When fully appreciated, line 15a is especially meaningful: "The Messiah in truth is one." This is the crucial catholic position post-Arius, that Jesus was "of one substance with the Father," that the Word *became* flesh, that it (now the god-man) was divine from the

foundation of the world, and that it gives life “to souls forever.” These few lines from the Odist seem to chronicle his transformation from a gnostic to a catholic—in early II CE. The essence of that transformation is the fusion of god and man. It is critical to understanding the emergence of Christianity as we know it, for that transformation evidently occurred in the early part of the second century and led directly to the canonical gospels and to the figure of Jesus Christ that we know so well.

Ode 42 closes with a *Descensus ad Inferos*. The Word is now *Savior* (v. 18), and the Savior goes down to Sheol to free those souls that are to be resurrected with ‘it.’ The Word/Savior is still a spiritual entity—it is not at all the resurrected body of Jesus the Nazarene, nor is it even Jesus at all. Yet in the *Descensus* we have a significant step towards catholicism, for the Word is no longer private in its activity (affecting only the one who finds it, i.e., “in him” as in line 14 above) but now has universal meaning—even for the dead (cf. line 16a above). Only one further step was necessary for full catholicism: “the Word became *flesh*.” As we can now surmise, that step was taking place in the generation that the Odist was himself writing.

Other catholic tendencies detectable in the Odes are the importance of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ (42:9,19)—which will become central to catholicism—and also that the Odist’s message is directed not merely to Jews (31:12) but also to Gentiles (10:5-6).

For all the above, it is all too easy to read later Catholic elements into the Odes of Solomon. If we succumb to that temptation, the Odist will pull us up short and remind us that he has different ideas, as in the following quite astonishing passage:

**While I gave praise by the composition of his odes,
[the Holy Spirit] brought me forth before the face of the Lord,
And although I was a son of man,
I was called the Shining One, the Son of God,**

while I was glorious among the glorious and was great among the great. (36:2c-4b)

This exaltation does not refer to Jesus the Nazarene the Son of God—but to the Odist himself! He becomes the Son of God, glorious, shining, and “great” among men. Furthermore, what makes the Odist all these things is not God but the Holy Spirit, a mobile entity (elsewhere identified as gnosis/the Word) that can indwell any person and that has entered the Odist himself. Once again, the Odist uncannily recalls some Qumran writings (in this case, the ‘Self-Glorification Hymn’ and other poems of the Hodayoth). Most importantly, the Odist belongs to **what I have called Stage II Christology**, where the Savior is a spiritual, mobile entity that indwells the saint and makes him/her into an ‘Anointed One’—a Messiah. This was ‘Christian’ theology *before* Jesus of Nazareth.

A hunch

As a musician reading through the Odes, I am impressed with how well they would adapt to a sort of antiphonal recitation—or even to group singing. **Antiphony** is where one voice or group alternates with other voice(s). This works well with the Odes because they so often shift suddenly in point of view. For example, the first half of Ode 41 uses the pronouns “us, we, our” (vss. 1-7). Suddenly in v. 8, however, the Odist begins with “I.” Then, the final verses of the Ode are in the third person (“he” = the Savior). If this were a theatrical work, one might expect indications such as: “The community speaks” – “The Odist speaks” – “Concerning the Savior,” etc. In a dramatic or musical setting, Ode 41 divides into three sections:

- (1) I (a single voice)
- (2) We (a larger group)

- (3) The Savior/He (the entire congregation, for the "Savior/Word" is present in all of those who are singing)

It is only a hunch. I would not make it except that indications exist in the ancient records of something very similar. For example, we read in Eph 5:18-19—"Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual odes." This is precisely the scenario described above. Then, too, Philo describes antiphonal singing in his discussion of the Therapeutae of Alexandria:

Then, when each chorus of the men and each chorus of the women has feasted separately by itself, like persons in the bacchanalian revels, drinking the pure wine of the love of God, they join together, and the two become one chorus, an imitation of that one which, in old time, was established by the Red Sea...

Now the chorus of male and female worshippers being formed, as far as possible on this model, makes a most humorous concert, and a truly musical symphony, the shrill voices of the women mingling with the deep-toned voices of the men. The ideas were beautiful, the expressions beautiful, and the chorus-singers were beautiful; and the end of ideas, and expressions, and chorus-singers, was piety; therefore, being intoxicated all night till the morning with this beautiful intoxication... when they saw the sun rising they raised their hands to heaven, imploring tranquillity and truth, and acuteness of understanding. (*Vita* 85, 88-89.)

Part 20

*Buddhism, christology, Gospel of John, Paul, The second century
Mystery Religions, Odes of Solomon*

The Odes of Solomon

Conclusion: The theology of immanence

The two prior posts have briefly considered the Odes of Solomon, a 'Christian hymnbook' dating to the early second century CE. My discussion took its *point de départ* from Dr. Detering's observation that Ode 39 knows dual outcomes of the Exodus: "Crossing the water is the judgment—it represents salvation for believers, but destruction for unbelievers" (pp. 8-9). **We have seen** that this dual outcome is very ancient and goes back to the Flood. Its equivocal nature allowed gnostics to interpret water as salvation (gnosis) for those who possess understanding, and as doom for those who do not.

I proposed in a prior post that the early second century CE, when the Odes were penned, was a particularly critical period in Christian formation. Those decades witnessed the invention of Jesus of Nazareth, and also the beginning of a momentous transition in thinking—from the savior as a spiritual entity (gnosis) to the Savior as a unique God-man. I have called these Stage I and Stage III Christology. (On these stages, see [here](#).) It appears to me that the Odes belong to the intermediate Stage II: "the spirit indwells a saint, producing a spirit imbued prophet."

The Odes of Solomon are a unique window offering a view on the very cusp of emergent catholicism (Stage III). From our distant vantage

point, we today might suppose that the Odes of Solomon reflect two worlds, two christologies in basic opposition, each struggling for hegemony: the Stage I salvation by gnosis vs. the Stage III salvation by “the Man who humbled himself but was exalted because of His own righteousness” (Ode 41:12). But there is no need to suppose that the Odist was schizophrenic, believing one thing on one page and another thing on the next. Nor is it necessary to posit multiple authors (unlikely—see Lattke 2009:5). Passages such as 16:1 indeed suggest a single writer to me. My view is that the apparent diversity of content to a *modern reader* simply reflects the complex era in which the Odist lived, and the time of transition in which the Odes were composed.

In my view, the Odist betrays a deep and fertile *gnostic* background (Lattke 2009:13)—attested by interest in gnosis/understanding/knowledge, ascent motifs, asceticism, imagery of the bridal chamber, and so on. It is not possible to deny his gnosticism simply because there is no emanation theory, no demiurge, and no earmarks of florid gnostic mythology. Ever since the 1966 Colloquium of Messina, gnosticism (broadly: the search for and acquisition of hidden gnosis) has been misdefined in terms of a later (post-Valentinian) cosmological system. The Odes predate Valentinus and the development of a florid gnostic cosmology—yet they are still ‘gnostic.’

For the Odist, the search for hidden gnosis (which is a broad definition of gnosticism) is seen in the investigation of “that which is invisible” (16:8; cf. 7:13). This is quite compatible with the affirmation of both the Creator and the creation (16:9 ff). In other words, we cannot force modern categories upon the Odist.

In earlier gnosticism (Stage I) man is the prime mover, while in later Catholicism (Stage III) God is the prime mover. Agency moves from man to God as we progress from gnosticism to Catholicity. The Odist is somewhere in the middle of that progression (Stage II): gnosis is still

necessary, but now it is not achieved by man but is *given by God*.

Other signs of oncoming Catholicity are that the Odist professes faith (28:3; 29:6; 34:6) and he is open to the Gentiles (10:5-6; 29:8).

Up until the mid-second century (that is, until the invention of Jesus of Nazareth)—the primary conception was of a saving, mobile, spiritual entity available to all. That entity was sometimes called “Jesus” (Gospel of Nicodemus), but sometimes “Messiah” or the “Word” (Odes of Solomon). The Odist does not use the name Jesus even once. For the Odist, the Word of God indwelled a prophet of history, who was the ‘Anointed One’ (Messiah). The Messiah, in turn, has shown everyone the way to salvation. That way is to emulate the Messiah and to incorporate the Word of God so that we, too, can become Christ’s—‘Anointed Ones’ (cf. GPh 67:27).

The Mystery Religions

This theology of the indwelling spirit (Christological Stage II) was the common theology of antiquity before the invention of Jesus of Nazareth (= Stage III). Consider the so-called Mystery Religions, wherein the goal of the proselyte was precisely to fuse with divinity. In the words of one scholar, “the proper outcome is rebirth as a divine being” (Reitzenstein). In the Mysteries, the way to such rebirth/fusion was through *hidden knowledge*. When one examines the use of the “Word” in the Odes of Solomon, one sees much in common with the Mysteries: the Word increases gnosis; it dwells in man; it grants understanding of all and grants knowledge of the Lord; and it searches out what is invisible (12:3,12,13; 16:8).

Reunification with the divine was also the heart of Orphism:

The Orphics moralized this myth into a symbol of man’s composite nature, consisting of the evil, or Titanic, elements and the divine or Dionysiac elements. From the former man must, through self-renunciation, liberate himself and return to God, with whose life he

may be united. The body is the tomb of the soul; salvation consists in rescuing the divine, Dionysiac, spark from the enveloping evil matter, and so securing escape from the round of reincarnation to which the soul is subject. (S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions*, 1975:46).

Reunification with the divine, evil matter, renunciation... This all sounds very much like *gnosticism*! But we are speaking of a 'mystery religion.' Likewise, in the Hermetic writings, we read: "This is the good end for those who have attained knowledge, namely, Deification" (Poimandres I.26). Both Mystery Religions and Hermeticism long predated the so-called Gnosticism of the second century CE—that date considered to be the incipience of Gnosticism, according to the Colloquium of Messina. In fact, Christian Gnosticism emerged out of the Mysteries:

The Mystery Religions were systems of Gnosis akin, and forming a stage to, those movements to which the name of Gnosticism became attached. They professed to satisfy the desire for the knowledge of God which became pronounced from at least the second century BC and increased in intensity until the acme of syncretism in the third and fourth centuries of our era. The Mysteries brought men into contact with that god 'who wishes to be known and is known to his own.' (Angus, *op. cit.* 52.)

The mysteries were secret religious groups composed of individuals who decided, through personal choice, to be initiated into the profound realities of one deity or another. Unlike the official religions, in which a person was expected to show outward, public allegiance to the local gods of the polis or the state, the mysteries emphasized an inwardness and privacy of worship within closed groups. The person who chose to be initiated joined an association of people united in their quest for personal salvation. (M. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 1987:4)

All this could also apply to the Odes of Solomon, which are private, inward expressions of "profound realities" of the divine. In the Odes, the link between God and man is the Word, also called the Spirit of the Lord (3:10 etc). The Word/Spirit indwelling man can also be termed "pneumatic adoptionist" theology, a phrase that has been

used in relation to another major work contemporary with the Odes, namely, the **Shepherd of Hermas**:

The easiest way to understand these verses [Similitude V.6.5-8] is to see them as teaching a pneumatic adoptionist Christology: the pre-existent Holy Spirit, by coming to dwell in the historical, non-pre-existent person of Jesus, constituted him as holy (v. 5) and subsequently exalted him to heaven (v. 6)... (C. Osiek, Commentary on the Shepherd of Hermas, Fortress: 1999:36.)

What I am getting at in all these citations is that a common theology existed *before* Jesus of Nazareth, a theology of fusion with the divine. That theology has many guises, some Christian and some non-Christian. However, labels like "Gnosticism" and "Mystery Religions" are not helpful in understanding the true genesis of Christianity out of a popular spirituality, one based in hidden gnosis and personal salvation through fusion with the divine.

We moderns are offended by the notion of 'becoming Divine.' One reason is that we have an exalted conception of the Divine that did not obtain in antiquity (except among the Jews). We have forgotten that the Divine infuses everything—including man. Indeed, a god could even take human form. In Euripedes' play *The Bacchae* (V BCE), "Dionysos, son of Zeus and Semele, reveals himself as 'a god incognito, disguised as man'" (Meyer 66). Euhemerus taught that the gods were originally humans. Fusion with the Divine was essentially the realization of one's true nature, which is spiritual and not material. This divinization was common language even to Christian writers of late antiquity:

'If anyone knows himself he shall know God, and by knowing God he shall be made like unto Him;' and again, 'that man with whom the Logos dwells... is made like God and is beautiful... that man becomes God, for God so wills it'; and 'the Logos of God became man that from man you might learn how man may become God,' Further, that the true [Christian] Gnostic 'has already become God.' (Citations from writings

by Clement of Alexandria, cited with references at Angus, op. cit. p. 106.)

Indeed, "In Chapter 12 of the *Exhortation to the Greeks* Clement presents Christianity as a mystery religion, with 'truly sacred mysteries' that offer pure light and a vision of the one God" (Meyer 243).

Paul, the Fourth Gospel

The reader will of course be aware that the onset of Paulinism is generally dated to the mid-first century CE. This traditional dating is potentially valid, but only if we admit a radical reversal: *'Paul' predated Jesus of Nazareth!* The Paul-Jesus sequence is entirely understandable if one approaches the epistles with an open mind. They have no knowledge of the Nazarene, of the wonder-worker, or even of the preacher/teacher from Galilee. They know a spiritual Jesus (see below). Thus, the Pauline epistles belong to my Stage II Christology. They may date as late as the first decades of II CE—the same time the Odes were written—or they may date somewhat earlier.

According to the content of the epistles, Paul espouses the religion of divine immanence (Stage II)—as seen in his frequent expressions "in Christ," "in the Spirit," and "Christ in you." He writes: "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14), "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20), "Christ will be honored in my body" (Phil 1:20), "If then you have been raised with Christ... your life is hid with Christ in God... you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:1-4), *et multi*.

In the Fourth Gospel, also, it is not difficult to find evidence of divine immanence:

[Chp. 14]

... I will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also... He who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do... [The Paraclete] dwells with you and

will be in you... In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you... If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him...

[Chp. 15]

... Abide in me, and I in you... He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will...

[Chp. 17]

... all mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them... Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one... I do not pray for these only but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one,... Fther, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am... that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

In passing, mention can be made of another mystery religion, Mithraism, that knew a ceremony “so reminiscent of the Christian ‘Lord’s Supper’ that it proved an embarrassment to the Christian apologist Justin Martyr” (Meyer 8). There is no space here to investigate the ‘rock’ from which Mithras was born, its relation to ‘Peter,’ to the rock upon which the Church was based (Mt 16:8), and to Simon Magus as the ‘Standing One.’ (On my theory that Simon Magus -> Peter, see [here](#).)

The Odist has absolutely no knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth. “Jesus” is not mentioned once in the Odes. There are no biographical details of the prophet from Galilee, details that will soon be filled in by the evangelists (in the decade of the 140s?). At most, a case can be made that the Odist has a vague idea of the cross/crucifixion, and perhaps of

the baptism—but little more. This cautions us against conservative editions of the Odes such as that by Charlesworth (1977), which is an “eclectic” edition (Lattke) that presumes knowledge of the canonical gospels and offers editorial additions such as “Christ speaks”, “the Odist speaks,” etc.

In isolation, it is possible to point out ‘gnostic-sounding’ passages from the Odes, as well as Catholic-sounding passages. Admittedly, it is difficult to conceive that one poet could write from both points of view. Once again, however, this is to look at the Odist in the hindsight of history, a history in which the two paths diverged and eventually came into complete and diametric opposition. But that is *our* vantage point! In the early second century, the paths had *not yet separated*. The Odes of Solomon themselves are proof of this. Thus, we must be wary of applying later categories to early texts such as the Odes, categories such as “gnostic” and “Catholic” that did not yet exist.

The truth is that virtually everyone was “gnostic” until mid-II CE. With the notable exception of Judaism (Yahweh worship), there really was no other spirituality.

Dr. Detering’s recent article on the Odes

The 22-page German article has been recently [uploaded to Academia.edu](#) and is entitled “*Amatoria carmina studiose discutunt*”– *Basilides und die Oden Salomos* (Tr: “They eagerly learn love poems”– Basilides and the Odes of Solomon). The Latin phrase is from a comment on a tract by Augustine and refers to followers of Basilides. In his article, Detering argues in detail that Basilides authored the Odes. While I haven’t researched this issue in detail, I find Detering’s arguments entirely cogent. I wish here merely to comment on one point. On p. 14 of his article, Detering considers the enigmatic term “middle” that appears in a couple of Odes:

**You who leads me down from the height and up from the deeps,
and you who gathers those that are in the *middle* and joins them
to me.**

You who scatters my enemies and my adversaries... (Ode 22:1-3.
Lattke.)

**Draw water for yourselves from the living spring of the Lord...
Because it issues from the lips of the Lord,
And from the heart of the Lord is its name.
And it came unbounded and unseen,
And until it was set in the *middle* they knew it not.
Blessed are they who have drunk from it,
And have found rest by it.** (Ode 30:1, 5-7. Charlesworth/Lattke.)

Scholars have long been mystified at the meaning of “the middle” in these passages. However, someone familiar with Buddhism will immediately suggest that the Odist is referencing the **Middle Way**, an important concept in Buddhism. The Middle Way refers to the Noble Eightfold Path “which, by avoiding the two extremes of sensual lust and self-torment, leads to enlightenment and deliverance from suffering” (Nyanatiloka). In this Buddhist sense we can understand the first citation above from the Odes: the Lord leads “me down from the height and up from the deeps”—that is, into the Middle Way. In the second citation, water (i.e. gnosis) is “set in the middle”—that is, gnosis is found only on the Noble Eightfold Path.

Part 21

Christian origins, Gnosticism, Gospel of Thomas

The Mandean - Part 1

[H. Detering:]

[P. 9] **With the Mandean we also encounter the allegorical-gnostic interpretation of the Exodus theme. This sect originated on the eastern border between Palestine and Syria. Apparently it was genetically closely related to early Christian baptist sects. The Mandean viewed the Exodus in a way quite similar to that already discussed. Mark Lidzbarski, the devoted translator of Mandaean texts, observed: "The allegorical and eschatological interpretation of the Exodus from Egypt by the Mandean goes back to Alexandrian hermeneutic: the city's fleshpots, the view of existence as material and sensual, the Exodus as flight from this hylic world to a more spiritual plane, and the Red Sea as border between the two realms. In the Red Sea the evil find their demise, only the devout cross over. These conceptions are mirrored in Mandaean literature."** (M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch Der Mandäer*, 1915:21; cf. pp. 60, 90, 105, 203, 239.)

Detering adds: "Lidzbarski points to the frequent Mandaean interpretation of the Sea of Reeds as the 'Sea of Ending.'" That some gnostics in late antiquity interpreted the "Red Sea" as "Sea of Ending" is a critical point. In the Hebrew Old Testament, Moses crosses the *Yam Suf*, literally "Sea of Ending" or "Sea of the End" (*yam* = "sea," and *suf* =

“end”—BDB 5490). Astonishingly, this is almost always translated “Red Sea” (BDB 5488)—an arbitrary geographical interpretation that entirely ignores the clearly allegorical, original meaning of Yam Suf.

The geographical meaning is obviously artificial, for the Hebrew word *suf* (samekh-vav-peh) has only two attested meanings, neither geographical: [a] “end, ending”; and [b] “reed” (cf. Ex 2:3, 5). The former meaning is by far the most common, while “reed” is questionably based on the Egyptian loan word *twfi*, “reed” (BDB 5488). Neither [a] nor [b] fit the Red Sea, which is hardly known as a “Sea of Ending” or as a “Sea of Reeds.” The only explanation is that the Pentateuchal authors desired to counter a pre-existing tradition, namely, that the Israelites crossed over *spiritually* to a better world. Why was this unacceptable? Because only the physical interpretation allowed the formation of a *chosen people*, allowed conquest of a *promised land*, and empowered the Jewish people in the material sense.

“Sea of Ending” is a curious phrase to our ears. **When we recognize that water was an ancient symbol for gnosis**, then the original (pre-scriptural) meaning of the Exodus emerges: in the Bronze and Iron Ages, crossing over water symbolized the end of this world (of ignorance) and entrance into a transcendent world of understanding. These connotations must have been quite familiar to the authors of the Pentateuch, for they evidently suppressed the old gnostic interpretation, the only one that fits the words *Yam Suf*. As so often happens in religion, profound abstractions full of meaning become cheapened and interpreted in a banal, mundane way. Making the Sea of the Ending into a plain geographic entity is a little like calling gold a mere metal, or calling a diamond a mere rock. Similarly, ‘Crossing the Sea of the Ending’ has profound connotations: crossing over death and passing beyond finite limits. But what of crossing the Red Sea? Is that not merely crossing a body of water? Jewish scripture, then,

abandoned an exalted spiritual interpretation in favor of a prosaic geographical interpretation. It exchanged a diamond for a rock.

Little noted are the Syriac/Aramaic meanings of *suf(a)* [samekh-pe-aleph]. Those meanings must be considered when discussing Christian origins, for by the turn of the era Aramaic had long supplanted Hebrew as the *lingua franca* in Palestine. In addition to "end," the Aramaic meanings include "shore of the sea, bank of a river, brim, edge" (Payne Smith 385). The Aramaic completely changes the complexion of the Exodus, for the gnostic meaning comes clearly to the fore: *suf* as the "other side" beyond ignorance, materiality, and finiteness—*suf* as the sacred place of gnosis beyond every limit. Significantly, the Aramaic usage prefigures a phrase often found in the Gospel of Mark: *eis to peran*, "to the other side."

The Mandeans retained the spiritual meaning

The Mandeans did not employ the foregoing linguistic gymnastics. In Mandaism, *Yam Suf* never means the Red Sea but retains its ancient meaning: Sea of Ending (Mandaic Dict. 323). The Mandeans knew two meanings: the great ocean of destruction (cf. the Flood), and an end to "this hylic world" and entrance into "a more spiritual plane" (from Lidzbarski's words above).

We read in the Mandaic Book of John (chp. 59): "Whoever is not enlightened and instructed by me [the Messenger of Light] is cut off from the light and falls into the great Sea of Ending [*Yama rba dSuf*]." For the Mandeans it was not merely "Egyptians" who were lost—all who are *unenlightened* are lost in the great Sea of Ending.

Of interest also is another Mandaic phrase: *Yoma d-suf*, "the day of the end," i.e., Judgment Day. The phrase often occurs in the Mandaic Book of John (see Mandaic Dict. 190). In Semitic languages "day" (*yom/yoma*) and "sea" (*yam/yama*) are quite similar—even identical

when the vowels are not written (“defective” vs. “plene” spelling). This gives rise to possible confusion and the possibility for wordplay. Both meanings actually fit the Exodus account: for the Egyptians armies following Moses, the crossing of the *Yam Suf* (Sea of Ending) was also the day of judgment/destruction, *Yom Suf*. For gnostics, too, the spiritual crossing was a judgment and occurred at baptism—that is, in the water of gnosis. Gnostics interpreted the Exodus as the event when the Israelites went over to “the other side”—in gnostic terminology, they were “saved.” In these senses, *Yom Suf* and *Yam Suf* are interchangeable. We perceive here also a link between the Exodus/crossing over and baptism/enlightenment.

For gnostics, the Exodus event was the epochal passage through death ‘to the other side.’ It was deeply personal, not corporate. It had nothing to do with a people crossing a body of water, but was an inner *transformation*. Already in Old Testament times, however, the personal dimension is suppressed and the Israelites under Moses merely cross a body of water.

When we look forward many centuries we also find an esoteric Islamic movement whose members call themselves *Sufi*. Scholars are entirely undecided on the etymology of this name. Though none has proposed a relation to “end” as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, I do so here. After all, not only has Sufism many gnostic traits in common with the Mandaeans and other baptist sects, but Sufi theology has been summarized as “the transcending of ordinary limitations” (Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi*, 1969:14). Can it be a coincidence that crossing over, “transcending,” and otherwise bringing an end to “ordinary limitations” is precisely the meaning of *suf* and also of *Sufi*?

Without wishing to venture too far afield, it can be noted that the goal of Buddhism also is an “ending,” a cessation. *Nirvana*, after all, **derives**

from nir ("out") + **vaa** ("blow"), i.e., to blow out, to cease blowing, to become extinguished. All-in-all, it appears that the Exodus event originally marked a universal theme in religion—that of cessation of the mundane, of transcendence, and of 'crossing over to the other side.'

Ever-present gnosticism

Considerations such as those above allow one to pierce through the bewildering plethora of names used by the **puthujjana**—a Buddhist term meaning the worldly common folk. Academics, rabbis, and casuists make their living by splitting hairs and parsing intellectual chaff, the better to argue with one another *ad nauseam* and thus perpetuate the guild, sell books, and make reputations. So, here I include most biblical scholars among the **puthujjana**—they know literally hundreds of distinct religions, sects, factions, orthodoxies and heresies, yet they fail to see the direct line, the simple impulse common to peoples, eras, and continents everywhere: man wishes to *understand* his condition. He will always have a simple, naive, and perennial question: "What is this all about?" That question has been humbly asked (and answered) by great prophets, even as it was asked long, long ago by Paleolithic man. It is asked today and will continue to be asked by those who reflect on what it means to be alive and to be human. The gnostic would say that the understanding that comes from asking—and answering—that simple question is man's final purpose, his ultimate journey, his *being*—life itself.

What I am getting at in these paragraphs is that the roots of gnosticism are ancient and probably primordial. Ultimately, those roots are private, not corporate. And there is the rub: the gnostic quest—though vital to everyone's inner happiness (according to the gnostic)—is useless to priesthoods and organized religions of every kind. No church can exist where everyone is self-sufficiently seeking on his/her

own terms, and focussed inwardly. Gnosticism removes every need for priest, deacon, and sacrament.

Thus gnosticism defeats all attempts to organize. It dissolves the religious group, replacing the centralized authority with a thousand points of light. The socially corrosive aspect of gnosticism was recognized long ago. As a result, gnosticism has perennially been inimical to every faith that seeks to amass power, to gain converts, and to manifest itself on the material rather than the spiritual plane.

Time and again in history we witness churches and organized religions soon adopting an adversarial stance toward gnosticism. It is calculating and self-serving, for each gnostic necessarily represents one less convert. The gnostic is also the ultimate competition, claiming the high ground of *that which is, immediately apprehended*, with no need of a creed or belief system.

The irony is that most religions probably had gnostic beginnings. They began as an authentic search for truth/understanding on a strictly personal level. In time, however, like-minded seekers of greater or lesser sincerity came together and the nucleus of a corporate religion was born. Once this happens, the focus quickly moves from an inner search to considerations of gaining converts and amassing influence. In its growing lust for power, every church, sect, and priesthood metaphorically assassinates its gnostic parents. In sum, such is the inevitable *devolution* of man's religions—past, present, and future—from a private spiritual quest to public adherence to codes, commandments, and cant. What was inner becomes outer. The Exodus changes from a universal saga of transcendence to crossing a body of water.

Part 22

Christian origins, Gnosticism, Mandaeism

The Mandaeans - Part 2

[H. Detering, p. 10:]

Lidzbarski points to the frequent Mandaean interpretation of the Sea of Reeds as the "Sea of Ending." As the following citation from the Book of John shows, the crossing of the sea (symbolized at the baptism by the water of the 'Jordan') is, for the Mandaeans, God's judgment: the water causes the destruction of those who are evil, but for believers it is a bridge to the light. The gnostic savior calls out:

I am the treasure, the treasure of life. The evil ones are blind and do not see. I call them to the light, yet they bury themselves in the darkness. 'O you evil ones,' I call to them, 'who are sunk in darkness, rise up and fall not into the abyss.' I cry out to them, yet the evil ones do not hear and sink into the great Sea of Ending [= Yam Suf]. So, the Jordan is a bridge for the Uthras [the Uthra is a "divine messenger of the light" or "angel"]; it is a bridge for the Uthras but cuts off the evil ones and throws them down into the great Sea of Ending.

[RS:]

Once again we see the dual nature of water: it is the destroyer of the many who are evil, but the savior of the few who are good (the Uthras). Also, the "Sea of Ending" is explained not as a geographical but as a spiritual entity (see preceding post). In Mandaeism, the Suf Sea is where the evil ones sink down and also where the good are carried over to

the light. For the gnostic Mandeans water = gnosis and baptism is their principal sacrament. In this context, the allegory of the Exodus is readily explained: possession of gnosis carries the few over to the light, while lack of gnosis (ignorance) drowns the many in the "Sea of Ending."

[Detering p. 11]

The exhortation goes out to believers: "Love and bear up one another, as the eyes mind the feet. Love and bear up one another, for then you will cross the great Sea of Ending.

This shows that the key to 'crossing over' is ethical. And here we find a great divide between certain spiritual teachings common to religious traditions on the one hand, and 'the world' on the other: for while the multitudes drown in a flood of ignorance, greed, and pleasure, the elect find a hidden path to survival and to 'crossing over' the metaphorical sea by the dictum to "love and bear up one another." This astonishing pathway to happiness (the Buddhist nirvana, the Christian kingdom of heaven) is invisible and ironically counter-intuitive, for it runs counter to man's universal selfish effort to make good in the world and get ahead. The ultimate religious basis for this ethical dictum is known in Indian religion as karma and in Christianity as the Golden Rule: as you do unto others, so it will be done unto you (Mt 7:12; 10:40-41; 12:36-37, etc). Only in this way does one find true, abiding joy. Dr. Detering cites two Mandaean passages (p. 11) that support the foregoing:

Who cannot demonstrate alms and charity, for him no bridge is built over the rivers. Who cannot demonstrate alms and charity, for him is no passage across the sea.

Love charity and love the Sabbath, that a bridge can be built for you over the sea... A thousand thousand stand on the near shore, yet from a thousand only one crosses over, and two from two

thousand. Only those who are eager and worthy of the Place of Light go across. (Lidzbarski, Johannesbuch 102f.)

Mandaism thus possesses certain core elements in common with better known religions of East and West, including the emphasis on 'doing good.' Less appreciated is a hidden yet also universal connection: that between ethics and gnosis. In Mandaean (as also Buddhist and Christian) teaching ethics and wisdom go hand-in-hand: none gains gnosis except the one who is pure in heart (cf. Mt 5:8, etc). Related is becoming innocent as children, as Jesus so often exhorted. Ironically, becoming innocent 'as a child' is key to gaining a certain wisdom invisible to the world—a higher knowledge. Paradoxically, lowering oneself in the eyes of the world raises oneself in the eyes of truth. The resulting gnosis is the metaphorical bridge across water described by the Mandaeans.

Dr. Detering concludes his review of gnostic interpretations of the Exodus theme with a pithy 3-stage summary:

- (1) **Moses liberates the people from Egypt; the waters of the Red Sea draw back (Therapeutae, Peratae)**
- (2) **Joshua/Jesus liberates the people from Egypt and makes the Jordan flow upwards (Naassenes)**
- (3) **Jesus comes across the Jordan into the world; the waters draw back (Testimony of Truth)**

It takes no great insight to recognize a genetic relationship between the Old Testament Joshua/Jesus (2) and the Jesus of the Testimony of Truth (3). We note in the foregoing sequence that the Naassenes provide a link between Moses and Jesus. They conserved the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, but substituted Joshua/Jesus for the formerly expected Moses. (Detering, p. 12)

In the foregoing second point, the water flowing upwards symbolizes the gnostic's reversal of ordinary behavior and activity. As I noted above, this way "is invisible and ironically counter-intuitive, for it runs counter to man's universal selfish effort to make good in the world and get ahead." This is the hidden meaning that originally underlay the parting of the Red/Reed Sea by Moses in Jewish scripture. I would maintain that this essentially gnostic message was already familiar to Bronze Age man. In Mesopotamian religion, for example, we find the ubiquitous symbolism of the fish swimming *against* the current; we find waters coming from the shoulders of Enki (the god of wisdom/gnosis) and going *upwards*; and we find the enigmatic fish-man, Oannes (= John), emerging from the sea to teach the sacred arts of civilization to mankind.

All this brings home to us an astonishing fact: "The early Christians called Jesus Christ the Fish" (J. M. Robertson, *Pagan Christs*, 1966:109). Certainly, the roots of Christianity are ancient indeed!

And those roots are gnostic.

Part 23

Buddhism, Gnosticism, water

Resumé of the series thus far:

In the foregoing posts we have seen that the Exodus theme is far deeper than a mere physical event involving a body of water. The roots of 'crossing over' are primordial and spiritual, ultimately involving the liminal threshold at death. For the gnostic, the crossing over was from ignorance to understanding. Such a view can only exist for those who define 'life' as gnosis, and 'death' as ignorance itself. For the gnostic, then, one can cross over from death to life even while in this body—that is, long before physical death. This is called realized eschatology, and it has apparently existed in one form or another since shamanism and even before the dawn of civilization.

Up to this point in his lengthy article, Dr. Detering has reviewed the Exodus traditions in various Western movements and religions. His conclusion, however, is negative: the traditions of 'crossing over' that we find in early Christianity and Gnosticism (including the Therapeutae, Simonians, Peratae, Naassenes, and Mandeans) cannot derive either from (Middle) Platonism nor from Heraclitus—the most obvious Western precursors.

This leads Detering to “the overlooked terrain of Indic and Buddhist traditions” (p. 12). And here we come to the real ground-breaking essence of his article, for Detering finds abundant grounds to propose Indic influence on early Christianity. He spends the next twenty-three pages (the second major section of his article, pp. 13 to 36) in surveying 'crossing the water' in Indian spirituality, and the influence of that motif on Christian origins. The field of inquiry is vast, for Indian

spirituality extends from the Vedas to later (Mahayana) Buddhism—approximately three millennia.

“Crossing over” in the Upanishads: a spiritual transformation

Detering begins his treatment of Eastern spirituality with the Upanishads. Those famous writings demonstrate a view of crossing over that is remarkably similar to that held by later western gnostics:

With the silver OM as boat, [cf. Noah and the ark-RS]
He crosses the space of the heart
and arrives at the other shore,
in the innermost space
that opens to him...
and so he enters Brahman’s dwelling. (Maitri Upanishad 6.23)

The above crossing over “from the darkness... to light” is similar to the later, western gnostic view. From a gnostic perspective, as argued in prior posts, we are dealing here with man’s universal goal—with the purpose and meaning of life.

Here we read of a boat crossing water to the other shore. No physical journey is intended. The boat and the shore are figurative of an inner, spiritual journey across “the space of the heart... the innermost space.” The great inner journey (the only journey that is ultimately meaningful) is portrayed in the familiar terms of materiality. This technique is common to both East and West: expressing the unseen through the seen is found over and over in scriptures in both Indian and Gnostic scriptures.

This reaffirms my thesis in the foregoing posts that the Exodus event was originally spiritual. This despite the fact that the description in the Old Testament is laden with physical detail and is *calculated to portray a physical event* with very mortal consequences on the material plane. But that is the *author’s* intention! He has taken a pre-existing spiritual

tradition and has transformed it into what is essentially a grotesque and entirely unbelievable event on the physical plane. Normative Judaism (and Christianity) would accept the *physical* version. But gnostics did not. They continued to venerate and to acknowledge only the spiritual journey.

Today, many scholars conclude that the gnostics secondarily *allegorized* the Exodus event, and that they did the same with so much else in the Old Testament as well. This, however, is backwards. As it turns out, the gnostics were faithful to the original spiritual, abstract, and allegorical content of ancient gnostic traditions. It was the writers of Jewish (and later Christian) scripture who transformed the inner spiritual journey into a narrative that takes place on the material plane. It is my view that with the Exodus crossing, the crossing of the Jordan, and the baptism of Jesus we are dealing with invented events that have no foundation in *history*. However, each of these events does have deep meaning if treated allegorically, that is, as representing *spiritual* transformation:

From not-being lead me to being,
From the darkness lead me to light,
from death lead me to immortality. (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.3.28)

“Crossing over” in Buddhism

Detering then considers the view (p. 14) known as the “*stream* of becoming.” Buddhists call this *samsâra*, literally “perpetual wandering” (Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*). This concept, of course, is altogether negative. What of the equivalence that I have occasionally proposed on this website, namely, that the *stream* of water = gnosis? Elsewhere I will make the case that we witness this concept as far back in history as ‘history’ goes—that is, back to the Sumerians and even to the Indus Valley civilization. In fact, two ancient water traditions existed side by side—one positive, one negative.

The Buddhist view of water is predominantly negative. While Buddhism is a 'gnostic' religion (after all, its goal is 'enlightenment'), to my knowledge nowhere is water equated with gnosis. Also, in Buddhism there is no sacrament of water immersion as we find in Christian baptism, nor is there any sacred Ganges as we find in Hinduism. There is, on the other hand, the 'stream of becoming/samsara,' the 'floods of ignorance,' of suffering, and so on. This shows that—while the concepts may be similar—we simply cannot expect uniformity of imagery from one religion to another. Nor can we impose specific technical meanings across the board.

While the imagery is very different, I maintain that basic Buddhist teachings are remarkably similar to basic teachings of later gnostic systems in the West. I have already tabulated **extensive similarities between Buddhist teachings and many logia in the New Testament gospels**. Those similarities between the teachings of the Buddha and of Jesus apply especially to ethical and sapiential teachings. The similarities are less applicable to the imagery of the parables, and the contrasting cultural milieux are, of course, very different in India and in Palestine.

Indeed, the similarities between the teachings of the Buddha and Jesus are so many and profound that a case can be argued that western gnostic systems emerged historically *out of* Buddhism. The core Buddhist concept of karma is especially well represented in Jesus' teachings. But we also find in Buddhism teachings of the narrow way, the way of innocence, chastity, sacrifice, the uselessness of riches, unattachment, spirituality over materiality, realized eschatology, etc. Often overlooked is perhaps the most astonishing similarity: the founders of both religions were homeless, itinerant, male preachers. What a coincidence! Finally, in both religions is a pronounced emphasis on gnosis: 'seeking and finding' hidden truth.

Historically, too, multiple pathways exist for Buddhism to have influenced Christianity. King Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries to the West already c. 250 BCE. We know Buddhists were in Egypt from that time forward—they may well have been the ‘gymnosophists’ alluded to in some ancient texts. (On early Buddhism in the West, see discussion [here](#).) Later, overland routes from India brought ‘Mahayana’ strains of Buddhism westward.

As in Christianity and other world religions, Buddhism is a layered, complex amalgamation of influences that took shape over many centuries. The concept of *samsâra* was indigenous to Indian thought from primordial times, and Buddhism assimilated the ‘stream of becoming’ from Hinduism and Vedic spirituality. The same can be said for allegorically crossing a body of water ‘to the other shore.’ This, too, was old (as we see in the above excerpt).

Conceptually speaking, we must be careful to distinguish water and *crossing over* water. While water could allegorically be positive or negative (gnosis/destruction), crossing over water is almost always an allegory for liberation or conquest of ‘death.’ Detering points out (p. 15) that Jainism knows the [tirthankara](#) (“the one who crosses over”). In Buddhism, specific meanings attach to crossing over: the attainment of understanding/gnosis (*moksha*, liberation) and the ceasing/extinguishing of passion (*nirvana*). Both these concepts appear in the following Buddhist verse:

The follower of the Awakened One
well **understands** desires,
how they arise and **how they cease**.
Self-controlled and aware,
Yearnings’ end he can clearly see
He thirsts no more
and is truly set free. [Ittivutaka 3.1.3, emphases added.]

In Buddhism, yearnings/desires are the stream of becoming (Detering, p. 16). One crosses over by controlling, mastering, and ridding oneself

of desire—by cooling oneself down, as it were. In turn, the only way to master desire is to understand it. In Buddhism, to understand and master desire is to understand and master life itself. *This specifically Buddhist view seems to have migrated to the West before the turn of the era and seeded what we know as Gnosticism—with its ascetic, encratite, and world-denying themes.*

Detering confirms the above with the following words (p. 18): “Only through the aid of saving knowledge concerning the origin and the end of wish and desire is it possible to cross the stream.” In illustration, he cites from the Buddhist **Anguttara Nikaya** (“Collection of Sayings by Number”):

Brethren, these four persons are found in the world. What four? The one who goes with the stream, the one who goes against the stream, the one who stands firm, and the one who has crossed over, has gone beyond, who stands on dry land—a brahmin.

And of what sort, brethren, is the person who goes with the stream? Here in the world, brethren, one indulges his passions and does wrong deeds...

... And of what sort, brethren, is the person who has crossed over and gone to the far shore, a brahmin who stands on dry land? He it is who, with the destruction of the taints in this very life, enters and dwells in the spotless liberation of mind—liberation by wisdom—having by direct knowledge realized [liberation] for himself. (A.N. IV.5)

Crossing over... destruction of the taints... liberation by wisdom... Is this not *gnosticism*?

Part 24

Buddhism, Christian origins, Alexandria, Odes of Solomon

Buddhism and the Odes of Solomon

Dr. Detering dedicates a large section of his article to Buddhism (pp. 14-26). While I find some of his arguments more persuasive than others, here I will only examine points that are relevant to our main subject: 'crossing over' in Buddhism and possible links with Christianity. In the process, I will also present material not mentioned by Detering that adds support to his main argument. The first part of the this post continues the discussion on the Odes of Solomon (pts. 18-20).

Detering (pp. 19-20) signals a short passage from the Digha Nikaya in which the Buddha and his monks miraculously cross the Ganges: "And then the Lord came to the River Ganges. And just then, the river was so full that a crow [on the lower branches] could drink out of it. And some people were looking for a boat, and some were looking for a raft, and some were binding together a raft of reeds to get to the other side. But the Lord, as swiftly as a strong man might stretch out his flexed arm or flex it again, vanished from this side of the Ganges and reappeared with his order of monks on the other shore" (DN 16.1.33; M. Walshe translation). The miracle is typically furnished with a closing teaching: "When they want to cross the sea, the lake or pond, people make a bridge or raft—the wise have crossed already." Detering (p. 21) finds remarkable similarities between the Buddhist miracle and the 39th Ode of Solomon. I demur, however, by noting that the ode, while generally concerned with crossing "raging rivers," has important elements not found in the Buddhist passage: the waters are made

obedient, “the Lord” crosses the river on foot, and others who cross over after him adhere to his path (vss. 8, 9, 13). Nevertheless, Detering may have another interesting Buddhist passage in mind, as signaled by his footnotes—namely, the Sanskrit **Catusparisatsutra**. One of its sections indeed offers striking parallels to the 39th Ode, and also to the canonical crossing during the storm, Mt 14:22 ff. (See M. Lockwood, *Mythicism*, 2014:108-09; N. Klatt, *Walking on the Water*, 1990:30; J. Derrett, “Walking on Water in Christian and Buddhist Perspective,” 204.)

In the 39th ode we read that “raging rivers” obstruct the unholy but are crossed “in faith” by the elect (vss. 1-6). The Lord bridges the waters “by his word, and he walks and crosses them on foot, as his footsteps stand firm upon the waters” (vss. 9-10). Of course, one is immediately reminded of Jesus’ walking on the Sea of Galilee during the storm (Mt 14:22 ff & pars). The motif of ‘standing firm’ in water repeats in Ode 39:11, and one is also reminded of the priests standing firmly in the middle of the Jordan as all of Israel crosses over (Josh 4:17).

One wonders at the enduring scriptural emphasis placed on this rather strange motif—as if standing on water or in the middle of water (cf. baptism) had special meaning. And, indeed, previous posts in this series have suggested a meaning: standing in water was once allegorical and signified standing in *gnosis*.

The all-important stones taken from the middle of the Jordan River (Josh 4:3) are a perpetual memorial (v. 7) to *that which endures in the middle of the river/water/gnosis*. It appears that gnostics knew this standing motif well, for it colored their view of the Exodus event and also of the crossing of the Jordan. In gnosticism, stones were a symbol of the eternally enduring gnosis itself, that is, of the immortal Word of

the Lord (OdeSol 10:2; 15:9) that stands firm in the turbulent waters of life.

In this light we can understand the "Standing One," that is, Simon Magus. Simon's genetic relationship to Simon Peter now also emerges, for Peter ("rock/stone") is the foundation "upon which I will build my Church" (Mt 16:18). Of course, in the Gospel that foundation rock is no longer gnosis but is now the invented figure of Peter, the first Pope.

The concept of standing in the middle of water apparently lies at the very roots of Christianity. I have pointed out that *amad*, the Aramaic term for "stand," also means "baptize." This astonishing overlap cannot be mere coincidence. The "Standing One" is also the "Baptizing One"! Thus, the figure of John the Baptist also must enter our discussion. Could it be that Simon Magus was a precursor both to Simon Peter and also to John the Baptist? After all, the Magus is a first century figure, while Peter and also John inhabit the canonical gospels and thus are *second* century figures.

According to the chronology found on this website, the Odes of Solomon belong to a pre-canonical stage. The foregoing discussion, including Buddhist influence, thus belongs to a "pre-Christianity." This is precisely the view of Stevan Davies, who has written an important article, "The Odes of Solomon—Evidence for a Pre-Christianity." I possess an unpublished version of his article, though I understand it appeared in revised form at the end of Davies' 2014 book ***Spirit Possession and the Origins of Christianity***. While Davies does not mention Buddhism, he concludes: "The Odes represent the Jewish religious movement out of which Christianity arose so that the Judaism of the Odes (not the specific texts of the Odes themselves) lies at the root of Pauline Christianity and Johannine Christianity..." In my own schematic framework, "the Judaism of the Odes" corresponds

to **Stage II Christology** (the indwelling spiritual Jesus). That stage dates to 1 CE.

Buddhism and the gospels

In tone and content, two other passages in the vast Buddhist literature are strikingly similar to both Ode 39 and the gospel accounts of Jesus miraculously crossing the Sea of Galilee. Influence from the East seems eminently possible. The first passage I wish to signal is in the Commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya:

Queen Anojâ, surrounded by a thousand chariots, reaching the bank of the Ganges and seeing no boat or raft brought for the king, by her own intuition concluded: "The king must have crossed by making an Act of Truth. But this Teacher was reborn not for them alone. If this Teacher be the Supremely Enlightened Buddha, may our chariots not sink into the water!"

She caused the chariots to spring forward on the surface of the water. Of the chariots not even so much as the outer rims of the wheels was wetted. The second river also, the third river also, she crossed by the same Act of Truth. Even in the act of crossing, she saw the Teacher at the foot of the banyan tree. [E. Burlingame, *Buddhist Parables*, 1922:175]

This citation turns on a declaration of faith: "If this Teacher be the Supremely Enlightened Buddha, may our chariots not sink into the water!" Queen Anojâ's faith bears fruit in her passage across the surface of the waters. Her faith is confirmed by the careful mention that she kept the Teacher ever in mind: "Even in the act of crossing, she saw the Teacher at the foot of the banyan tree."

The above is highly reminiscent of Peter walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee (Mt 14:28-33). Peter's faith wavers and he sinks. "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'O man of little faith, why did you doubt?'"

The Anguttara Commentary (AC, also known to Pâli scholars as the Manorathapurani) apparently dates to the time of Buddhaghosa in V CE. A leading authority, however, has noted that the AC contains much older material (O. Hinüber, *Pâli Literature*, 1997:112 & 121). Is it possible that the Buddhist tradition is older than the Christian version (which, [as I have argued elsewhere](#), dates to II CE), and that the Buddhist story influenced the more complex version in the Gospel of Matthew?

Even more reminiscent of the Matthaean story is a Jataka tale. The numerous [Jataka tales](#) mix Buddhism, folklore, and magic. They were immensely popular among the people of the Indian subcontinent and probably spread far beyond strictly Buddhist circles. (In Buddhism, the Jataka tales are somewhat analogous to the very popular non-canonical Acts of the Apostles in Christian lore.) Scholarly opinion is that some Jataka tales were very early, perhaps as early as the fourth century BCE. Jataka 190 includes the following passage:

This noble disciple, we are told, possessed of faith and serenity of mind, set out one day for Jetavana monastery. At eventide he reached the bank of the river Aciravati, after the boatman had beached his boat and gone to hear the preaching of the doctrine.

Not seeing a boat, he had recourse to the practice of meditation, concentrated his thoughts on the Buddha, attained the Ecstasy of Joy, and descended into the river. His feet did not sink into the water. He walked along as though he were walking on the surface of the land until he came to mid-stream. Then he saw waves. Then the Ecstasy of Joy, the result of the concentration of his thoughts on the Buddha, became weak. Then his feet began to sink. But he concentrated his thoughts anew on the Buddha, strengthened the Ecstasy of Joy, walked on the surface of the water as before, entered Jetavana monastery, bowed to the Teacher, and sat down on one side. [Jataka 190:ii.111; in Burlingame p. 186.]

This Buddhist story has the same sequence of details as does the Matthaean story:

- (a) the noble disciple/Peter has faith and walks on the water;
- (b) the noble disciple sees waves/Peter sees the wind;
- (c) both lose faith and sink;
- (d) the noble disciple renews his faith (concentrates his thoughts) on the Buddha/Peter calls out to Jesus for help;
- (e) the noble disciple walks on the water as before/Peter does not sink but is saved by Jesus;
- (f) the noble disciple bows to the Teacher/Peter confesses "Truly you are the Son of God."

The Buddhist and Christian stories ultimately deal with *faith*. In both the eastern and western traditions, however, a strong case can be made that the religion of faith was late and replaced the religion of personal discovery through gnosis. For example, the Gospel of Thomas is not concerned with faith but with gnosis—"find the interpretation of these sayings" (L.1). This is one clue that GTh is an early text. Later, however, 'Paul' is all consumed by considerations of faith, which he holds as superior to wisdom (Rom 1:22; 1 Cor 1:19-25). This suggests that either (1) Paul is relatively late, or (2) later Catholic hands have heavily redacted 'Paul.'

In Buddhist history the way of gnosis was also supplanted by the way of faith: liberation by individual discovery (e.g. the [Kalama Sutta](#)) gave way to following the path of *the Buddha*. Thus, in the above story the noble disciple concentrates his thoughts *on the Buddha*. For him, is no longer a question of finding gnosis, but of following a founder figure.

Together with faith came the miraculous. Both are late. Again, miracles are conspicuously absent from the Gospel of Thomas. In the East, the

miraculous is also absent from the [Sutta Nipata](#), generally considered the earliest collection of Buddhist dogma.

The above parallel between the Jataka tale and the Gospel of Matthew is thus already *late*—both passages contain the miraculous and in both cases gnosis has been superseded by faith. We can surmise that, in its present recension, the Jataka tale is not one of the earliest of the 547 that are extant.

On his p. 21, Detering offers an astonishing quote that captures the later stage of the tradition and the inverse of the earlier theology: faith leads to gnosis! That claim would have been strenuously rejected not only by proto-gnostics in the West but also by the Buddha. Yet it well reflects a later and more modern mindset (both in the East and West)—a mindset that accompanied the birth of Christianity as the religion moved from gnosis to faith.

The gnosis → faith trajectory is rank heresy and also admitted by few scholars today. Consider the words of the Scottish indologist Berriedale Keith, who views the the Buddhist “Walking on water” simile from a *late* and all-too-familiar perspective:

“Faith is the root of correct knowledge [!]; man does not think out the doctrines of the Buddha by the independent light of reason; he must hear them taught and explained. Faith is the means by which man may cross the depths of the river of existence to the safety of Nirvana; the teaching of the Buddha saves him who has faith, but destroys the faithless...” (A. B. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy*, 1923:34f.)

For Dr. Keith the way of gnosis never even existed. Furthermore, his words are diametrically opposed to the Buddha’s own exhortation as expressed in the Kalama Sutta and elsewhere: ‘Do not follow me. Follow your *own* revelations!’

We recall that water (= gnosis) symbolically both destroys and saves (as in the account of the Flood). According to Keith’s view, however,

only *faith in the teaching* of the Buddha saves. The difference may appear slight, yet therein lies salvation or slavery. The proverbial wide way is easy—it supposes someone *else* has done the hard work for us. The narrow way, by contrast, is difficult—it knows that no one can save us, but that we *ourselves* are the source of our liberation.

Dr. Detering closes his section on Buddhism and 'crossing over' (p. 25) with some bold, unprecedented assertions:

In closing, we conclude that the idea of a "spiritual Exodus" doubtless was a genuine product of the Indian conceptual world and derived from it. The idea goes back from (Mahayana) Buddhism to the early Vedic literature and the Upanishads. In its developed, worked-out form it finds no complement Jewish, Greek, or Roman literature. This means that the most significant parallels to the Gnostic interpretation of the Exodus are entirely to be found in Indian and Buddhist religious traditions. The Gnostics used Old Testament models and themes, but they infused them with spiritual content from Indian and Buddhist traditions.

The deciding question now is: Where do the two lines meet—Jewish tradition/Hebrew bible on the one hand, and Buddhist/Indian spirituality on the other? At what point do they intersect?

The answer is straightforward and requires only a glance. In fact, we have already discussed the point where the two lines intersect—it is in Alexandria. More precisely, the lines intersect with that enigmatic sect discussed by Philo Judaeus: the Therapeutae on Lake Mareotis.

Part 25

Buddhism, Christian origins, Yeshu ha-Notsri' Philo, Therapeutae

The Therapeutae

Part 5 - The Therapeutae, a new chronology, and Yeshu ha Notsri

(For the previous post on the Therapeutae, see [here](#).)

Dr. Detering begins a fairly lengthy section of his paper (pp. 26–42) with a review of the sect of the Therapeutae as reported by Philo. The sect holds a special importance for Detering, for he places it not only at the very heart of Christian origins—that is, at Alexandria—but also at the crossroads between Buddhism and Christianity. In other words, Detering concludes that the Therapeutae were a critical lynchpin between Buddhism and the gospels. Though we have already discussed the Therapeutae at length (posts 5-8), we will here attempt to place the sect within the wider historical perspective.

We may wonder that Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa* is the *only* surviving report on the Therapeutae. One cannot summarily assume that the Church suppressed knowledge of this important sect. After all, the early Church considered them ([pace Eusebius](#)) to be *early Christians*. We actually owe it to the Church for having preserved what we know about the Therapeutae. On his p. 28 Detering discusses this and points out that only in the 19th century was doubt cast on the Therapeutae as an early Christian sect. Doubt even extended—particularly in Protestant scholarship—to Philo's authorship of *De Vita*.

However, in an in-depth investigation of vocabulary, syntax, and tone, F.C. Coneybeare detected no signs of extra-Philonic authorship. He convincingly reaffirmed that *Vita* was an early work by Philo, one dating to the first quarter of I CE.

★ A new chronology and Yeshu ha-Notsri

According to accepted New Testament chronology, dating the Therapeutae to the generation of Philo and of Jesus conveniently disqualifies them as early “Christian” monks. Thus scholarship disregards (or at least downplays) this alexandrian sect of ascetic meditators *cum* voluntary paupers. At the same time, the tradition also removes an important clue to Buddhist influence on Christianity, as we have seen in prior posts and will see again in the next post (no. 26).

But the long-accepted chronology of Christian origins is now breaking down. The first major crack in this breakdown is the dating of ‘Jesus’: mythicists are now coming forward with various convincing arguments (including the **bogus archeology of Nazareth**) that the Nazarene did not exist until he was invented *in the first half of II CE*—an entire century later than the standard dating. A second major crack is that the New Testament gospels and the Acts of the Apostles are also proving to be second century writings.

A third fissure in the breakdown of New Testament chronology is barely known and has to do with the thesis that ‘Christianity’ *in fact goes back to the early first century BCE*. This relates to my own work on **Yeshu ha-Notsri**. The most extensive data on Yeshu has been collected in my book **NazarethGate** (chapter 14). Yeshu died c. 75 BCE at the hands of the Sanhedrin, perhaps by crucifixion. As far as I know, the Yeshu-founder-of-Christianity thesis is the only one that chronologically accommodates the Therapeutae as early ‘Christians.’ In my opinion, the very existence of the Therapeutae—and their

unambiguous and critical dating by Philo to the early first century CE— is powerful evidence that *the origins of Christianity indeed must go back to the first century BCE.*

Of course, dating Christianity from early I BCE puts an entirely new complexion on the first century CE. That century was not the *incipience* of the Christian religion, as has always been thought. Rather, I CE was already a full century *after* the death of the founding figure. What I am proposing, then, is nothing less than a wholesale revision of early Christian chronology. I am, of course, also proposing much more: that the religion goes back to Yeshu ha-Notsri and, before him, to Buddhism.

In this new chronology, I CE emerges as a time of ripe development, an era already several generations after the founding figure. Accordingly, it was a time when divisions in the fellowship *would by then be expected.* After one hundred years, the early unity of a small band of followers would naturally give way to the fracturing pressures of a growing fellowship. And that is precisely what history confirms: in the first century CE the Hellenists broke away from the Judaists.

No eye witnesses to Yeshu would have survived into I CE. By the turn of the era, it appears certain that already a great deal of biographical data regarding Yeshu had been lost. He was already a mystery figure quickly receding into the fog of myth. Soon, he would be made into a God and given an entirely new biography.

In this new chronology, a great amount of accumulated data relative to I CE make a great deal more sense. Not only does the extension of Jewish Christianity into the gentile world become more understandable, but the appearance of 'Paul' (or, at least, the appearance of some of his epistles) and the activity of 'Simon Magus'

take their rightful places as leaders of breakaway movements from an earlier proto-gnosticism.

We have examples of that proto-gnosticism—the Gospel of Thomas being the outstanding representative text, a text that does not know Jesus of Nazareth, the cross, or miracles.

Obviously, the new chronology affects everything.

The name “Therapeutae”

On p. 31 of his article, Dr. Detering summarizes Philo’s information on the Therapeutae. The Alexandrian author derives the name either from the Greek *therapeuein*, “heal,” or from their worship of “the living God” (*Vita* 2). Modern scholarship has come up with various theories. Celia Deutsch points to resonance with what Philo writes elsewhere regarding the Levites: “the fountain of contemplation of the only wise being... inclined to minister to him” (*Sacr.* 119).

For me, a suspected Levite-Therapeutae connection has immediate interest. My ongoing research suggests that the deprecated Levites were guardians of proto-gnostic/esoteric traditions in Old Testament times. Interestingly, according to the still unpublished **Acts of Mark**, the apostle Mark was a *Levite* follower of *John the Baptist*. Also, according to that text, Mark hailed from *Alexandria*.

Buddhism was known in Egypt since Emperor Ashoka sent Buddhist monks/missionaries to the West c. 250 BCE. Detering notes that the **American scholar Zacharias Thundy** in 1993 proposed a derivation of *Therapeutae* from Pâli *Theravada*, literally “way of the elders”—the designation for one of the earliest and most enduring schools of Buddhism, still extant in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma. (*Hinayana* [“Lesser Vehicle”] is a pejorative term for the Theravada movement. It

is used by adherents of the later *Mahayana* ["Great Vehicle"] to disparage the earlier religion.)

Another proposal derives *Therapeutae* from Pâli *Theraputta*, "Son/Scion/Disciple of the Elder." Michael Lockwood discusses this derivation in his 2010 book *Buddhism's Relation to Christianity* (Tambaram, India, p. 99):

The Buddha's knowledge, then, was to be passed down generation after generation of monks, under the guidance of leading Elders ('mahâ-thera-s') who had attained a thorough knowledge of the doctrine. It is in this sense that the term 'theraputta' came to be applied to Buddhist monks in a monastery under the leadership of a Mahâ-Thera ('Great Elder'). 'Theraputta' (Pâli) is a compound of the two words: *thera* = elder, and *putta* = son(s).

Phonetically, *Therapeutae* and *Theraputta* match perfectly in every respect, both as to consonants and also vowels. Now, if the Alexandrian sect indeed called itself "Disciples/Scions of the Elders," that would indicate that the *Therapeutae* self-identified as a western *Buddhist* sect, and that they did so already at the turn of the era. Detering accepts something along these lines when he boldly concludes (p. 33): "The *Therapeutae* were Jewish Buddhists!"

Detering then considers the fuller title of Philo's essay, which reads: "On the Contemplative Life or Suppliants" (Yonge translation). It has been proposed that the word *hiketwn*, "suppliants" (gen. pl.), references the Sanskrit/Pali concept of beggar, *bhikkshu/bhikkhu*. In Buddhism, the *Bhikkhu* is the standard term for monk—because the monk asks/begs his food from the laity (i.e., he is a "suppliant"). If valid, this suggests that the *Therapeutae* were related to *bhikkhû* (pl.), Buddhist suppliants/monks. Yet, it must be admitted that Philo nowhere indicates that the *Therapeutae* begged for their food.

Gk. *hiketwn* has also been translated as "those imploring refuge" (Ger. *Shutzflehenden*). Detering apparently relies upon Celia Deutsch for

this interpretation (p. 31, cf. 34). If valid, it opens the door wide to Buddhism, a religion that has traditionally seen itself as the one and only true “refuge.” The problem here is that, according to my Liddell-Scott Greek Lexikon, *hiketeuein* does not mean “to implore *refuge*” but simply “to beseech, supplicate.” The difference is substantial, for Buddhists are not typically beseeching or supplicating—they are actually quite proud of their abilities, independence, and accomplishments on the spiritual road towards *earning* their way to nirvana/enlightenment. In sum, one must be extra-cautious when seeking out linguistic parallels between widely separated languages and cultural spheres.

According to Philo, the Therapeutae existed throughout the known world; shared possessions in common or gave them up entirely; ate, dressed, and lived simply; and spent most of their time in solitary meditation. Remarkably, *all* of these traits are Buddhist! The last makes one wonder if the Therapeutae were implicated in the early history of monasticism in the West. After all, there is absolute certainty that Buddhism rightly claims to be **the first monastic religion**.

Among the Therapeutae, both men and women came together every seventh day for a sacred supper. Every 49 days they not only had the sacred supper together, but then spent the entire night in song and holy celebration (cf. the pentecost, or eve of the 50th day—**discussion here**). Their sacred nocturnal mystery celebrated the passage of the Israelites across the Red Sea (or, **as we have seen**, across the *Yam Suf* —“Sea of the Ending”) through ecstatic concerted singing. We may suppose this singing was largely improvised through the night and akin to many independent voices raised in exaltation. Nevertheless, Philo writes that it made “a truly musical symphony” and perhaps certain hymns also figured in their nocturnal celebration (cf. **my suggestion relative to the Odes of Solomon**). Philo describes the

goals of their nocturnal mystery: “imploring tranquillity and truth, and acuteness of understanding” (i.e. gnosis).

Details of Therapeutic ritual that are not yet understood include their sacred use of bread, salt, and springwater. The last reminds one of the ancient gnostic equivalence made [elsewhere in these pages](#): (running/living) water = gnosis. Philo also tells us that the Therapeutae interpreted scripture allegorically (as did Philo himself), in which the “express commandments seem to be the body, and the invisible meaning concealed under and lying beneath the plain words resembles the soul” (De Vita 78). This reminds one also of the hermeneutics at Qumran, and suggests that the Therapeutae held esoteric views.

Philo closes his account noting that the Therapeutae are “citizens of heaven and of the world” and that they live at “the very summit and perfection of happiness.” The motifs of perfection and already being a “citizen of heaven” echo the doctrine of realized eschatology and even suggest theosis—partaking with God in his being (if not his activity as creator). The motif MAN → GOD is one hallmark of gnosticism, a path that led to the predictable accusation from the Church Fathers of “arrogance.”

In conclusion, innumerable threads—some demonstrable, some only suggestive—link the Therapeutae with earlier Buddhism on the one hand and with later Gnosticism on the other.

Part 26

Buddhism, Therapeutae

The Therapeutae

Part 6 - The Therapeutae, Buddhism, and Gnosis

On pp. 34 ff. Dr. Detering lists some parallels between Buddhism and the Therapeutae, as described by Philo of Alexandria. He notes certain outward, visible characteristics, such as the makeup of the Buddhist order (e.g. men and women living separately), and the posture, dress, and ranking of monks. Such elements can be valuable in drawing parallels between East and West, but it should be noted that they concern a stage of Buddhism where the order (**sangha**) had already attained a certain level of organization and settled protocol—namely, the onset of the **Mahayana** from about the turn of the era. The somewhat longer list of parallels between Buddhism and the Therapeutae that I furnished in a prior post, on the other hand, largely deal with inward, invisible characteristics (i.e. doctrine and ethics) and probably reflect an earlier (**Theravada**) stage in Buddhism (prior to the turn of the era), a stage when Buddhism was still largely composed of **a multitude of sects** and also of itinerant, **unaffiliated monks and nuns**. Both lists of parallels are thus complementary.

Dr. Detering notes:

- 1) **The Buddhist fellowship (sangha) was composed of monks and nuns, and the Therapeutae of both men and women.**
- 2) **Males and females were strictly separated (Vita 33), as they are also in Buddhism (a monk can never be alone with a female,**

for example).

- 3) **The Therapeutae and Buddhism employed songs and poems;**⁸
- 4) **The Therapeutae held prayers at sun down and sun up.**⁹
- 6) **The Therapeutae voluntarily rid themselves of possessions. This is also required for Buddhist ordination, including pabbajja ("going forth," i.e. homelessness).**
- 7) **The Therapeutae limit themselves to two garments. Among Buddhist monks, also, there are two garments: an over garment (worn in winter) and an undergarment.**
- 8) **Both the Therapeutae and Buddhist monks rank themselves not by age but by experience. Those who joined young and have many years in the order receive precedence in rank.**
- 9) **Philo describes the customary appearance of the Therapeutae, "keeping their hands inside their garments, having their right hand between their chest and their dress, and the left hand down by their side, close to their flank" (Vita 30). Detering points out that this is also the customary appearance of the Buddhist monk. The gesture/pose is attested in iconography from Gandhara, the area between present day Pakistan and Afghanistan. This was the domain of the Hellenistic Bactrian kingdom, known to be a Buddhist link between East and West. Detering endorses a theory (first proposed by Holger Kersten) that Buddhists from Taxila, the capital of Bactria, found their way to Alexandria at a very early date.**
- 10) **Neither Buddhists nor the Therapeutae had slaves. Instead, the novices served the elders among the Therapeutae, as also is**

⁸ I consider this a questionable parallel. One of the ten Buddhist precepts is to avoid dancing, singing, and music.-RS

⁹ Detering suggests that such praying is also "generally attested" in Buddhism, but I am not aware of this. It is possible, however, that the Therapeutic all-night singing/ceremony has a parallel in the Buddhist communal recitation/chanting of the Patimokkha (the 227 rules of monks). This chanting takes place every fortnight, at the new and full moon, or sometimes weekly. Accompanying the Patimokkha reading was the public confession of transgressions by monks. There is evidence that the **Uposatha** ritual (including Patimokkha reading, confession, and prayer) was a critical element in keeping the *sangha* together and is very ancient, probably predating Ashoka's sending of monks to the West c. 250 BCE. Though the evidence is elusive, I suspect that in the earliest tradition the Uposatha took place *at night*. If true, this would constitute a possible parallel with the Therapeutic nightlong vigil.-RS]

customary in Buddhism.¹⁰

- 11) **Philo reports that, among the Therapeutae, scripture readings were slow, sober, and without ostentation. So also Buddhism rejects reputation, ostentation, and the desire to impress.**

Some of the above parallels are stronger and more significant than others. In the aggregate, however, they are persuasive. To the foregoing I wish to add perhaps the most obvious (and overlooked) single parallel between Buddhism and the Therapeutae: monasticism. In Buddhist countries, the regular coming together by monks for the Uposatha (no. 4 above) developed into the **vihara** (resting place), at first only for the rainy season, and then later on a more or less permanent basis. This is the true beginning of the monastery, and Buddhism rightly claims to have invented the practice of monasticism.

Detering closes his list by mentioning an idea suggested by **Kersten and Gruber**: that the Therapeutae were voluntary mendicants/beggars. Those authors suggest that Philo does not overtly mention this telling point because he wished to present the Therapeutae in the most flattering light, and begging did not conform to this wish.

Detering writes (p. 39):

“Now back to the decisive question: Were the Therapeutae Jews, Christians, or Buddhists?” His answer:

[The Therapeutae] were a little of each. They were Jews, insofar as they observed Jewish holy days, rituals, and held the Old Testament as the basis of their beliefs. However, they were also Buddhists, insofar as they interpreted the Old Testament Buddhistically. And finally, they were (Proto-)Christians, insofar

¹⁰ When one becomes a monk or nun in Buddhism one loses one's caste. Thus, Buddhism was and is casteless in a land (India) long inured to the caste system. Similarly, with the Therapeutae one gave up one's former status (and even one's possessions), effectively producing equality among community members. One senses that *dualist* tendencies underpin this equality: this world and its goods are of little worth; what matters is spiritual progress.-RS

as their interpretation of the Old Testament laid the groundwork for the later development of Christian teaching.

This view helps us solve the problems that arise if we consider the Therapeutae only from one of the three angles. Who sees the Therapeutae as only alexandrian Jews must explain how their asceticism and mode of scriptural interpretation developed from purely Jewish ground. To see them merely as Buddhists is impossible, for their Jewish elements cannot be ignored. Who holds them to be Christians must ask himself why, in Philo's time, they were not only in Egypt but already spread throughout the known world and could look back on a long history.

But if one views the Therapeutae as proto-Christians—in the sense that they represented a new synthesis of Jewish and Indian-Buddhist traditions—then all contradictions are resolved in the best Hegelian fashion.

Detering notes the emerging significance of Bactria as a critical religious and cultural link between East and West. At the turn of the era Bactria was Buddhist and also Hellenist.

Detering writes,

“Especially, the Mahayana school of Buddhism must now be carefully examined, for it was developing in this very time and place. As will be shown below, Mahayana exercised a strong influence on the genesis of the Christian theology of the incarnation” (p. 40).

In the conclusion (p. 41) to his extensive section on “The Therapeutae, Buddhism, and Gnosis,” Detering observes:

“Second century Christian Gnosticism is a continuation and further development of the Alexandrian wisdom tradition. Gnostic exegesis is properly viewed as a combination of Old Testament, Alexandrian wisdom, and Indian/Buddhist spirituality... Even the origin of the Jesus cult, along with the associated role and

meaning of the savior, are the result of Alexandrian exegesis of the Old Testament influenced by Indian/Buddhist conceptions.”

If you did not feel the ground move under your feet, then I suggest you re-read the last sentence above.

Part 27

baptism, Buddhism, Gnosticism

The Therapeutae

Part 7 - A turning point

Dr. Detering concludes on page 42 of his article: “The alexandrian/ gnostic exegesis of the Exodus theme, as we have seen, was dependent on Indian-Buddhist traditions from the very beginning.”

This conclusion is stunning. If Detering is correct, we can infer two important chronological consequences. Firstly, Indic influences entered into *Jewish* exegesis prior to the rise of Christian gnosticism (the Naassenes, etc—see below).

Secondly—and more controversially—we can be sure that those Indic influences occurred *prior to the formation of the Christian tradition itself*. One need only connect the dots regarding the Therapeutae: they were long considered ‘Christians’ by the Church; they flourished already at the turn of the era; and (as Dr. Detering has now shown) *they were influenced by Buddhism*.

The pieces of the puzzle come together in a different way when one adopts the ‘new chronology’ alluded to elsewhere in these posts (see [here](#) and [here](#)): according to Jesus mythicists, ‘Christianity’ as commonly understood (i.e. centered on Jesus of Nazareth) *is a second century CE invention*.

We are now at a great turning point in understanding Christian origins. The way forward—according to the facts of history—must acknowledge

the following: (1) vital and formative influences upon Christian origins emanated from faraway India; (2) earliest Christianity was 'gnostic' and influenced by Buddhism; and (3) the religion centered upon Jesus of Nazareth is based on the exploits of an invented figure—it is “fake news”—dating from the second century CE. Of course, today only Jesus mythicists are in a position to appreciate all this. As a result, we have now reached the point in New Testament scholarship when only mythicists are able to proceed in a meaningful way.

The Levites, baptism, and Jewish influences

Detering's contribution to deciphering the Indian influence on early Christianity is signal. In his article under discussion, he has explored Indic influence on the Peratae, on the Naassenes, on the author of the Odes of Solomon, and so on. Yet, I would like to add another critical influence on all these 'Christian' groups and writers of antiquity. That influence came from within Judaism itself. I would characterize it as a *Jewish* proto-gnosticism. Clear evidence of such a movement has been documented. My own research suggests that the Levites were carriers of that Jewish proto-gnosticism. They carried on esoteric, ancient wisdom traditions ultimately linked to the Mesopotamian gnostic water religion of Ea/Enki and the Abzu. In the Iron Age the Levites were dominant (e.g. Moses was a Levite) country priests who were eventually usurped by, and then subordinated to, the Aaronide temple priests of Jerusalem. If we consider that Judaism, at the turn of the era, was an Aaronide-High Priest-Temple religion, then the Levites were the non-temple priests scattered about in the towns who once represented the dominant proto-gnostic religion of the people. In the Old Testament—which is largely an Aaronide production—the Levites are accorded nominal status in service to Aaronides and are restricted to menial duties in the Temple: “They are subordinate cultic officials,

the *clerici minores*, who have charge of the lower duties of the sanctuary (Num 1:50; 3:28; 32, etc—IDB 1962 III:879ii).

Early Christianity reflects age-old tensions between Temple and people, between Jerusalem and countryside. After all, Jesus draws his disciples from the simple country folk. He disparages scribes, hypocrites, and those who make a pretense of much holiness. Most revealingly, Jesus is killed by the Temple establishment. In addition, much of Jesus' teaching has esoteric, quasi-gnostic meaning. All this suggests that the figure of Jesus—though invented in II CE—originated in the old Levitical side of the dispute. This suspicion receives confirmation in clues and anomalous data not in the mainstream of present-day scholarship, e.g. that John the Baptist was a Levite (Lk 1:5, descendents of Aaron being also Levites) and even that **the apostle Mark was a Levite**. Interestingly, in the Acts of Mark he hailed from *Alexandria*.

While this is a new field of study that must be fleshed out, I personally suspect that the Therapeutae were heirs to old and suppressed Jewish Levitical traditions specifically related to salvation through gnosis.

An Alexandrine-Levite tradition does not, of course, exclude influence also from India and from Buddhism—the Therapeutae could have been influenced from both directions, Levitical (Jewish) and Buddhist (Indian).

Such dual-influence on the Therapeutae would explain the contradictory views of water found in Christian texts. Baldly phrased, a question can be posed: How is it that water is both (1) a negative entity to be crossed over (the stream of *samsara*/becoming/passion) and also (2) a positive entity to be dipped into (baptism)? While Detering considers the former negative view, I would also add the latter positive view. Cultically dipping into water for religious purification is known in Hinduism, in ancient Mesopotamian religion,

and—I would suggest—in suppressed Levitical strains of Judaism (below).

Baptismal overtones are also present but veiled in the Old Testament account of the Jordan crossing—for example, the priests dipping “into the edge of the water,” standing in the middle of the Jordan (Josh 3:15, 17), and the enigmatic gathering of stones from the middle of the river (4:3 f). These are also present in early Christian history: baptism, the ‘stone’ (cf. Peter/Rock), and ‘standing’ (cf. Simon Magus ‘the Standing One’).

Buddhism and metaphorical water

In Buddhism, water symbolism is both positive and negative. On the negative side, one figuratively crosses the stream of *cravings*, e.g.: “In whom there is no clinging, in the bhikkhu who has cut across the stream and has given up what is to be done and what is not to be done, no fever is found” (Sn 715). In another passage, the stream is actually in the domain of Mâra (the Buddhist equivalent of Satan): “By breasting Mâra’s stream, they have gotten safely across to the further shore” (MN 1.226).

At the same time, however, Buddhism can also view water/the stream positively, as we see in the important concept known as *stream entry*. A long discourse from the Samyutta Nikaya is entitled “Connected Discourses on Stream Entry” (*Sotâpattisamyutta*, SN 55). The discourse identifies the stream with the Noble Eightfold Path (V.347). Another passage describes the “fruits” of stream entry (MN 1.325). In fact, Buddhism had a term for the “stream enterer”: *sotâpanna*, defined as one who has “confirmed confidence in the Buddha, in the teaching, in the community, and possesses the virtues dear to the noble ones” (SN V.347). In this sense, the ‘stream’ is Buddhism itself.

In my opinion, only the negative view of water would have reached the Therapeutae from Buddhism. In other words, any notion of 'baptism' did not come from Buddhism but from elsewhere. My reasoning is that conceptions such as 'stream enterer', 'fruits of stream entry', and even the 'Noble Eightfold Path' are products of advanced analysis and organization of the *dharma/dhamma* (teaching)—something that had not yet taken place at the turn of the era.

In any case, we still are left with the negative view of water as something to be crossed over (samsara/ignorance). This coheres with both the OT Exodus motif and with the Jordan crossing. In this sense, Jewish gnostics may well have borrowed their conception of crossing over from Buddhism. This negative water symbolism seems subsequently to have been absorbed both by the Therapeutae and by the evangelists. When Jesus crosses the water, walks on water, and stills the storm he is transcending and dominating that which is viewed as negative. All Buddhist associations would have long been forgotten (and/or suppressed).

In contrast, the Christian sacrament of baptism indicates an opposing tradition—the tradition of sacred water. While this tradition may not yet have existed in Buddhism (see above), I have argued elsewhere that there existed in the Levant—from very ancient times and long before Buddhism—a theology of sacred water. It goes back to Enki, the Babylonian god of water and the friend of mankind. As far back as the thired millennium BCE, Enki's realm was the **Abzu** (lit. "Deep Water," i.e. "Lower Watery Realm of Truth"), his underworld domain. By the Iron Age, the Abzu had become universalized throughout the Levant. Enki's watery domain—the domain of gnosis—came to be represented by the sacred cauldron of water found in many temples (including the great bronze cauldron in Solomon's temple). Of even more interest to us is that this tradition of sacred water may have been perpetuated

through the centuries within Judaism itself—namely, but the denigrated ‘proto-gnostic’ Levites.

The Levites and Christian beginnings

The age-old theology of water = gnosis was apparently despised and suppressed by the Aaronide priests, who replaced that theology with obedience to Yahweh, his temple, and priesthood (that is, *themselves*). Aaronide hegemony dates from the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. Even before their return to Israel, those Second Temple power brokers conceived the historical books that form the backbone of Jewish scripture, books that laud the “descendants of Aaron” and subordinate the Levites at every opportunity.

The Levitical priesthood experienced a reversal of fortunes. In pre-exilic times, the Levites were the old, de-centralized, and indigenous priesthood. After the exile, however, they became landless and were compelled to live on alms—this by fiat of (Aaronide) legislation embedded in the new Jewish scriptures.

It is my contention, however, that the Levites continued their proto-gnostic traditions as a Jewish heterodoxy and that they largely went underground. Clues to their now esoteric traditions are understandably scant due to widespread Aaronide suppression. Nevertheless, much-maligned Levitical traditions briefly and obliquely insinuate themselves into Jewish scripture, where the Levites and their stand-ins usually appear in an unflattering light. Such negative scriptural passages include those relative to the enigmatic and bumbling **Sons of the Prophets**, to the ‘hanger-on’ Elisha, and to the Levite Jonathan (the disparaged founder of the Danite priesthood in the Mt. Hermon area—Judg 18:30).

If my analysis is correct, then the Levites inherited the baptismal, proto-gnostic symbolism water = gnosis. This very positive water

symbolism and accompanying gnostic theology infused suppressed traditions in Judaism in the centuries preceding the common era. That theology survives in the sacrament of baptism, and the conception water = gnosis is made explicit in ('gnostic') Christian apocryphal literature, where dipping into water is dipping into hidden knowledge, gnosis, enlightenment:

This is the hidden knowledge of Adam, which he gave to Seth, **which is the holy baptism** of those who know the eternal knowledge through those born of the word and the imperishable illuminators, who came from the holy seed: Yesseus, Mazareus, Yessedekus, the Living Water. (The Apocalypse of Adam, 85)

... **If one knows these things**, he has washed **in the washing of the Hidden One**. (Zostrianos 23:18)

It appears that the suppressed pre-Christian Levitical traditions venerated Joshua-Jesus, the hero who supplanted Moses as God's agent. In turn, the mythological crossing of the Jordan superseded the mythological crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus). It is from the suppressed proto-gnostic tradition of Joshua/Jesus and of veneration of the Jordan/water that we must look for the eventual emergence of Christianity.

The succession Moses -> Joshua/Jesus in Jewish tradition is also noted by Detering in his discussion of the Therapeutae -> Naassenes and their mutual interactions with Buddhism (p. 42):

Jewish-Buddhist circles of Alexandria attempted to interpret the [Buddhist] crossing of the Stream of Becoming in terms of the Old Testament. They found the key in the Exodus account. For them, the one who crossed over was Moses. In their nocturnal mystery ritual, the Therapeutae re-enacted how the people of Israel were led through the water of the Red Sea into the Holy Land. In their [allegorical] exegesis, this was out of the material realm into the spiritual, immaterial realm.

While the exegesis of the Therapeutae oriented itself mainly to interpreting the Book of Exodus, the Naassenes and other Christian Gnostics substituted Joshua/Jesus for the central

figure of Moses. Clearly, the Naassenes quite deliberately had recourse not to the Book of Exodus but to the Book of Joshua. In their view, Joshua had surpassed Moses in every way, as manifested by the fact that it was Joshua who succeeded (where Moses failed) in bringing the Israelites across the Jordan and into the promised land—a prefiguration and surety of entry into future life. At the same time, Joshua usurped the traditional role of liberator of the Israelites from Egypt, a role previously held exclusively by Moses.

In this development we see a progression, one beginning with an interpretation of the Exodus and ending in the gnostic-Christian mystery of baptism.

If Detering is correct, and if my foregoing analysis in this commentary is also correct, then the Therapeutae were mediators into Christianity of suppressed gnostic traditions from Buddhism on the one hand, and from the Levites on the other. As Detering affirms, the Therapeutae were “Jewish Buddhists.”

Also, the figure of John the Baptist clearly betrays association with this hidden, proto-gnostic tradition of water = gnosis. After all, the Baptist was a Levite (Lk 1:5). Jesus’ baptism by John indicates that Jesus was on some level (or perhaps originally) viewed as the disciple of the Levite John. In any case, the very moniker ‘the Baptist’ immediately signals John’s adherence to the ancient and suppressed water tradition of immersion into gnosis.

Part 28

B.C.E. times, Christian origins, water Joshua

Jesus, Joshua ben Nun, Dositheus, and the "True Prophet"

Dr. Detering begins this section of his paper (pp. 43-48) with consideration of Dt 18:15—"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed." Detering notes the import of the verse for the *Yachad* (fellowship) at Qumran, e.g., QS IX 9-11: "And you shall not stray from any rule of the Law... until the coming of a prophet and of those sent of Aaron and Israel" Other passages in the DSS write of a "Teacher of Righteousness" and a "Teacher of Truth," both placed in apposition to Moses.

In Samaritanism, Moses assumed an exalted role and was 'the divine Light.' Like the later figure of Jesus, the Samaritan Moses is pre-existent, already divine, and ascends to heaven after death.

Elijah also fulfilled the role of True Prophet, to appear before the Messiah (according to Mal 3:1 and 23 f). The most important OT figure in this connection, however, was Joshua ben Nun ("Son of Nun"). In the Septuagint, of course, "Joshua" appears in the Greek as Ἰησοῦς. Now, in Samaritanism the belief was prevalent that Joshua/Jesus was the prophet foretold by Moses. (Detering references here: H. Kippenberg, *Garizim und Synagoge*, de Gruyter, 1971.) In the Clementine Recognitions, Dositheus claims to be the True Prophet instead of Jesus. Detering notes that a late Church Father, Eulogius (d. ca. 607 CE) divided the Samaritans into two camps: those who expected

Joshua, Son of Nun as the True Prophet, and those who expected Dositheus.

Schematically, then, we have the following:

Septuagint	Joshua (Son of Nun) = Ἰησοῦς
Samaritanism	Joshua/Ἰησοῦς = Prophet foretold by Moses (Orthodox Samaritanism)
<i>Recognitions</i>	Dositheus = True Prophet (Heterodox Samaritanism)
Eulogius	Divides the Samaritans into two camps: (1) Joshua/Jesus = True Prophet (2) Dositheus = True Prophet

Viewing the foregoing synoptically, Detering draws a parallel: Joshua ben Nun = Jesus, the True Prophet. An additional point: Dositheus was held to be the True Prophet for some 'heretics' who rejected Jesus (of Nazareth) as the True Prophet.

Then, on p. 48, Detering offers an astonishing conclusion:

The Jewish-Christian Jesus—as certainly seen in the oldest surviving gospel texts—refers to none other than Joshua ben Nun. With this recognition we approach the very earliest Jesus belief, in which no 'Jesus of Nazareth' exists, but rather the Old Testament figure of Joshua ben Nun.

The foregoing is one of the highlights of Detering's paper, and is an absolutely remarkable insight.

ΙΧΘΥΣ—The meaning of the fish symbol in early Christianity

[The following is a verbatim translation, *in toto*, of pp. 48-51 of Detering's article, with some emphases added.-RS]

The fish is numbered among the oldest and most widespread symbols of Christianity. In the second century we find it on house doors, funereal inscriptions, tombs, rings, amulets, and ornaments of all sorts, where it functioned not only as a (secret) sign to recognize a Christian, but also as a symbol to ward away evil spirits. The fish symbol is found throughout the Roman world.

Often, the fish symbol is associated with the eucharist. Many early depictions link it with the bread and wine of the evening meal. Presumably this has to do with a combination of eucharist and meal traditions (cf. Mk 6:35-44). In some cases, the fish actually symbolizes the eucharistic bread, the body of Christ.

**The question of the origin of the fish symbol is often answered by signaling that the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ (= fish) can be interpreted as an acrostic employing the first letters of a declaration of faith—
“Jesus Christ, God’s Son (is our) Savior”:**

I = Ι = Ιησους (Jesus)

X = Χ = Χριστος (Christ)

Θ = Θ = Θεου (God’s)

Υ = Υ = υιου (Son)

Σ = Σ = Σωτηρ (Savior)

However, it is unlikely that the fish symbol originated from an *acrostic*, one confessing the faith. Much more likely is that the symbol with Christian associations already existed, and that it was subsequently applied as an acrostic in the above manner to Jesus.

So, we are left with the question regarding the genesis of the fish symbol, and in what way it was originally associated with the figure and name of ‘Jesus.’

Several answers have been proposed. [I number the 'answers' for clarity.-RS]

[1] **Most preponderant is a parallel drawn to extra-Christian ritual-cultic scenes involving the eating of fish. [Franz Josef] Dölger has pointed out that many pagan cultures (particularly in the Eastern part of the empire, in Syria) venerated fish-gods, sacred fish, and offered fish in sacrifice. Thus, the *cena pura*, or sacred meal involving fish, could have entered Christianity via Jewish synagogues in the East.**

NOTE: The 'sacred meal' need not have entered Christianity via synagogues (which may not have existed before III CE in the Galilee—cf. the work of H. Kee). Nevertheless, Eastern Syria was certainly a center for the worship of Atargatis (literally, "the fish goddess Atar"). At her temples at Ascalon, Hierapolis Bambyce, and Edessa, there were ponds containing fish that only her priests might enter (Lucian, *De Dea Syria*. Malicious Church Fathers later suggested that the 'fish' in question were sacred prostitutes.)

[Detering continues:]

[2] **Robert Eisler gave the simplest and at the same time most plausible answer. Unfortunately, his provocative works have not received the attention they deserve. In his article, "On the Origin of the Early christian Fisherman and Fish Symbolism," Eisler shows that the solution to the riddle lies in the link Joshua = ben Nun. In Hebrew, *ben nun* means "son [of] fish; fish-son." It can, however, be translated simply by "Fish" (as, for example, *ben baqar* simply means "Ox"). Jesus ΙΧΘΥΣ, then = Joshua (ben) Nun.**

Eisler does not go so far as to assert that the historical Jesus owed his origin to the Old Testament hero Joshua. For Eisler, Jesus' name merely received a particular coloring on account of the

patronym, for Jesus and Joshua were “doubles of the hero Moses, who was raised from the water [in a floating crib] and also split the water [of the Red Sea].”

Furthermore, Eisler cites a Rabbinic saying: “Only a man called ben Nun [could] lead the Jews through the water into the Land of Promise.” Eisler closes: “Therefore, the Joshua or Jesus of the end times must once again be a ben Nun.”

In Eisler’s view, the cognomen *ben Nun* could be the reason that, in later speculation, the messiah would be born in the sign of the fish [Pisces]. Only by understanding the background *ben Nun* = fish is it possible to explain the statement of 4 Ezra chp. 13–colored by the babylonian Oannes myth—that the messiah will rise “out of the heart of the sea.”

[3] In another article, Eisler points to an obscure Rabbinic passage in which the sons of Ephraim (later Samaritans) made a failed attempt to flee from Egypt even before the successful exodus under Moses. Writes Eisler: “And it was under the leadership of the foremost Ephraimite by the name of *Nun* [= Fish]. We naturally identify this man (who is not mentioned again in the Old Testament) with the ancestor of the ephraimite Joshua. Because of his abortive scheme, he was killed by the Egyptians. The suffering savior of the end times could thus be viewed as a reincarnation of that long ago martyr, ben Nun, who gave his life for the freedom of his people.”

COMMENT.

“The suffering savior of the end times” was the (now obscure) failed messiah tradition in Judaism. This ‘other’ messiah was a precursor to the cosmic, Davidic messiah. C. Torrey’s important article on this failed messiah tradition is found complete on this website in five parts,

beginning [here](#). Of course, deep resonances exist between it and the New Testament Jesus, a crucified messiah who gave his life to save his people. That this Rabbinic failed messiah tradition relates also to Ephraim, the ancestor of the northern Samaritans/Samaritans (Ephraimites) suggests that we must look first to the Samaritans/Ephraimites/Samaritans for the failed messiah tradition. The northern locus of this tradition is also suggestive: *Samaria and Galilee*. **Torrey concludes: "The conception of the suffering messiah = the Son of Ephraim led directly to the conception of the Christian messiah, Jesus."**—R.S.

[Detering closes:]

It is not necessary to follow Eisler in all his speculations. The essential is to recognize that the Christian fish symbol clearly relates to the cognomen of the Old Testament Joshua, and that this relation was firmly anchored in the earliest stratum of the Christian tradition.

Part 29

B.C.E. times, Egypt

The Egyptian background–Part 1

Eisler's perceptive observations, chronicled by Dr. Detering in the preceding post, open the door upon great vistas. We must now follow those observations back into great antiquity. In Egyptian religion, **Nun (also Nu) was a major god**—the “father of the gods” and the god of the watery abyss. (We discuss Nun more fully in the next post.) Nun was the counterpart of the Mesopotamian god **Enki**—the god of wisdom/gnosis and also of the watery abyss. In later times Nun became associated with the upper waters of the sky. But we should not forget his earliest association with the deep, which still survives in the Coptic word NOUN, “abyss, deep.” (See E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 1904, I:284.)

This adds an important dimension to the appellation Joshua *son of Nun*. We are permitted to make the link between the biblical figure and Egypt because the rabbis themselves did so. We have seen (in the preceding post) that it was under the leadership of the foremost Ephraimite by the name of Nun that the Israelites made their *first* attempt to escape from Egypt. This Ephraimite leader failed in the attempt and was killed. In Jewish lore, the Egyptian Ephraimite Nun's descendant, Joshua/Jesus, became **the failed messiah—the first messiah—who preceded the successful Davidic messiah**. Thus, we have a parallelism:

- there were two attempts to leave Egypt: the first a failure under (the Egyptian Ephraimite) ben Nun, the second a success under Moses

- there were two messiahs, the first a failure (he was killed), the second a success (the Davidic messiah will come at the end times to judge the world).

There is more to be said by linking Jesus/Joshua with Nun, the Egyptian Father of the gods. In short, 'Joshua the son of Nun' is no less than 'Jesus the Son of God'—*precisely as we read in the New Testament*. Furthermore, the Egyptian god in question was not a lesser god: he was the "father" of all. He created the other gods, even the great Osiris, and it was also from Nun that "the world was created" (Budge). Nun came *first* in the Egyptian pantheon (Budge, *ibid.*, 283) at the head of all the gods.

The foregoing lends great weight to the theory that Early Christianity was deeply linked to Egypt. We have clues of this in the early sources: in the New Testament, Jesus (inexplicably) spends his early years in Egypt. Historically, too, we know that the earliest Church was somehow linked to Egypt. In Christian tradition, does not the first evangelist, Mark, hail from Alexandria? And now we see—according to Dr. Detering's provocative theories as revealed in these posts—that the Therapeutae of Alexandria were likely *among the earliest Christians*.

Out of Egypt

Detering has linked the Therapeutae with Buddhism, and also with Judaism. He calls them "Jewish Buddhists." I agree with that assessment. However, I am here adding a further layer of influence upon Early Christianity: the influence from Egyptian religion. This influence was strong and it particularly informed the figure of Jesus as the *Son of God*. This occurred through a process: (1) the Egyptian principal god, Nun, was credited with a son. (2) That son was identified by some Jews with the hero who entered the Promised Land: Joshua, "the son of Nun." This identification apparently took place while in Egypt and far prior to the writing of the Old Testament, where Joshua

appears as the “son of Nun.” Thus, we cannot ignore *very early* Egyptian influence upon Jewish religion.

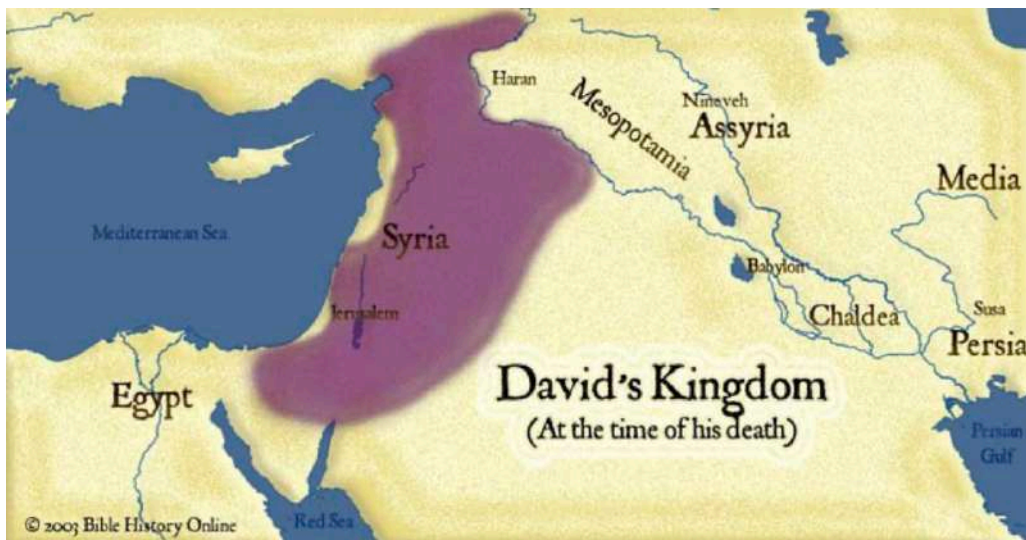
When could such influence have occurred? The answer is not far to seek: it occurred in primordial times, when the Israelites were still in Egypt. This lends credence to the thesis that a movement of Jews from Egypt to Israel indeed took place in the Iron Age (if not earlier). The account in the Bible is certainly embellished, yet it preserves the memory of an actual historical migration—a migration that occurred after the Jews had organized into a distinct people—an organization that took place *in Egypt*. They did not originate in Palestine (Abraham), go to Egypt (Joseph), and then return to Palestine (Moses-Joshua). The Hebrews were born in Egypt. The patriarchal narrative is so much priestly revisionism concocted to obscure the origins of the Hebrews in the land of Egypt, a hated land that came to be a symbol and mantra of imprisonment.

We now come to a key consideration: the nature of the Egyptian god Nun. Why is this critical? It is so because heterodox Jews—and later the Christians—claimed sonship to *that* god. In Judaism, this tradition was ‘heterodox’ because it recognized Joshua as the great liberator *instead* of Moses. Indeed, we know this exalted view of Joshua was held in Samaria and among the ‘tribe of Ephraim’—whose great ancestor was the liberator Joshua/Jesus himself. It would appear that Christianity, in turn, was somehow linked to this heterodox Samaritan movement, for it also venerates Joshua (= Jesus) the Son of God (= the all-creator, Nun).

Ancient Jewish revisionism

In the Old Testament, Joshua is clearly subordinate to Moses. Yet clues exist where Joshua is particularly exalted:

In some of the notices in the book of Joshua, he is almost a second Moses. he has the presence of Yahweh, as Moses did (1:5); he is obeyed, as Moses was (1:17); he sanctifies Israel before Yahweh's wonders, as Moses did (3:5; cf. Ex 19:14). The miraculous crossing of the Jordan (3:7–4:24) has many reminiscences of the crossing of the Red Sea (cf. the explicit connection in 4:23). When the angel accosted Joshua before Jericho, he spoke to him precisely as Yahweh addressed Moses at the burning bush (5:15). Joshua, like Moses, wrote the law on stones (8:32; cf. 24:26). Yahweh "hearkened to the voice" of Joshua (10:14), as he had to Moses (Deut 9:19; 10:10). Finally, when Joshua brought the tribes to Shechem for the covenant ceremony, he gave them a summary of Israel's history (24:2–13), perhaps parallel to the summary of Deut 1:6–3:29, though Josh 24:2–7 begins farther back than does Deut 1:6. [Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962, "Joshua."]



The vast kingdom of David, completely unattested except in Jewish scripture.

Normative Judaism was centered in *Jerusalem/Judah* and on the figure of *David*. However, archeology is showing that Jerusalem was actually an unimportant village in the Iron Age ([T. Thompson](#), [T. Bolin](#), [K. Whitlam](#)). It appears that the mythology surrounding David and Solomon, as well as the grandeur of Jerusalem (and the exaggerated extent of David's empire, from Egypt to the Euphrates)—that all this was

largely a reaction to the more imposing (though still comparatively small) Northern Kingdom of Israel, centered in Ephraim/Samaria.

So it is that the Jerusalemite Aaronide priests of the Second Temple countered the already-existing northerly traditions regarding Joshua, son of Nun. They did this by—wherever possible—emphasizing Jerusalem, the Temple, David—and Moses. They exercised their pens mightily, and concocted the pseudo-history that we read in Jewish scripture. The Aaronides co-opted Joshua and made him into a Yahwist. One clue is that their great Yahwist hero, Moses, named him: “Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua” (Num 3:16).

The name change is revealing. *Hoshea* (הושע) means “Salvation,” pure and simple. That name was *far too exalted* for the authors of the Old Testament history, and hence it was not satisfactory. They had their hero Moses change it to *Joshua* (יהושע), pronounced *Yehoshua* (with Masoretic pointing), and now simply meaning “Yahweh/Yehu Saves” (BDB 221, 448).

Samaritans: Heirs of the northern traditions

Samaria was the center of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) in the so-called Divided Monarchy. Before proceeding, however, two similar words must be distinguished, for they overlap and have caused much confusion: Samaritan and Samarian. Technically, inhabitants of Samaria (the province) are *Samaritans*. Their capital is the city named Samaria (from which the region receives its name). On the other hand, *Samaritan* is a religious term. Even in scholarship, the terms are confused and used indiscriminately.

The tribes that inhabited Samaria were Ephraim and Manasseh, the former being the more prominent. Now, the father of Ephraim was Joseph. In Samaritanism we encounter a Josephite or “King Joseph”

(*Joseph Malka*) tradition. This is of some interest in connection with Christianity, for Jesus was also the son of a certain Joseph.

Very little is known of Samaritan history. This largely owes to the fact that their own religious documents are comparatively late and are productions of the priests writings well into the common era. Yet it is clear that from early times Samaritanism was not monolithic. It had two major historical factions. The first and apparently original faction was associated with Dositheus, a nebulous prophet who lived around the turn of the era. Indications point to quasi-gnostic tenets among the dositheans, including a veneration of water: "However, **Dositheus** charged that no one was to come near these pieces of paper **his sacred writings** until after that person had gone down into this pool and dipped himself in it.." (Bowman, *Samaritan Documents*, 164). In these posts it has been intimated that the 'pool'/water = gnosis.

The Dositheans exalted Joshua/Jesus and his forebear Ephraim. The rise of Dositheanism about the turn of the era, the gnostic undertones, their veneration of Jesus/Joshua 'son of Joseph,' and the locus of Samaritanism in the north should give us pause, for these all have enigmatic echoes with early Christianity. It is not possible here to flesh out the connections between Samaritanism/Dositheanism and Christianity. Though the historical links are still buried, I date Dositheus to the early first century BCE and identify him with Yeshu ha-Notsri—as those of you who have read the final chapter of my book *NazarethGate* know. I also agree with some specialists on Samaritanism and date the Dosithean 'heresy' *before* what became normative (priestly) Samaritanism. I contend that the Christian savior descends directly from the Dosithean tradition.

Another aspect of early Christianity resonates with Samaritanism: the violent opposition to Jerusalem and its priesthood. The gospels are replete with this opposition. In tone, the canonical Jesus embodies a

deep anger towards Jerusalem which is at home in the northerly province of Samaria. Josephus places this anger in contemporary context with his descriptions of the back-and-forth massacres between Samaritans and Jews (**Wars II.12**. For varying points of view, see S. Huller, *The Real Messiah* and [here](#); L. Einhorn, *A Shift in Time* 57 ff.)

We have now delineated a heterodox religious movement, or 'thread,' that spans over two thousand years. It reaches from ancient veneration of the Egyptian god Nun, through 'underground' Jewish veneration of that god's son Joshua, down to the Christian Jesus, Son of God. The thread was proto-gnostic and stubbornly repudiated by the religious establishment in every era. We will consider that theology in the next post, including the critical consideration that originated the entire esoteric thread: the nature of the god Nun.

Part 30

B.C.E. times, Gnosticism, water, Egypt, Joshua


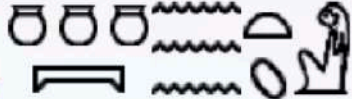






The Egyptian Background

Part 2 - Nun and the Egyptian pantheon

A seminal scholar

The great Egyptologist **E.A. Wallis Budge** (1857-1934) bequeathed to posterity massive tomes on ancient Egyptian religion, volumes filled with an equal mixture of primary data (facsimiles, translations, diagrams) and expert commentary. I happen to possess two of Budge's most important works, **The Gods of the Egyptians** (1904/69), and his translation of/commentary on the enormous Papyrus of Ani, better known as **The Book of the Dead** (1920/60).

To call Budge a mere "Egyptologist" does not do him justice. The scholar's knowledge was encyclopedic, as witnessed by his first official position as Curator of *Assyrian* antiquities at the British Museum. Astonishingly, Budge was also familiar with little-known Christian gnostic literature from the Levant, literature that first came to light during his lifetime (see below).

 <p>Nu</p>	 <p>Nut</p>
 <p>Hehu</p>	 <p>Hehut</p>
 <p>Kekui</p>	 <p>Kekuit</p>
 <p>Qerh</p>	 <p>Qerhet</p>

The early Egyptian divine ogdoad in hieroglyphics.

Wallis Budge was quick to note that the religious pantheons of both Mesopotamia and Egypt were virtually identical. In comparing the **Enuma Elish**/Seven Tablets of Creation with Egyptian pyramid texts, he finds the same pantheon of gods in both East and West—a **divine ogdoad** composed of pairs of divinities, four male and four female. At the head of the Egyptian pantheon is the divine pair Nu(n) and his consort Nut. Nun was closely associated with the substance *water*. His divine sign includes three vases of water (conveying the sound), together with the substantive for water (three wavy lines one above the other). Nu “has been compared with the Coptic word NOUN, ‘abyss, deep’... Nu was the inert mass of water matter from which the world was created” (*Gods* 284).

Budge observes: “Apzu-rishtu and Mummu-Tiamat are the exact equivalents in the Babyonian cosmology of Nu and Nut in the Egyptian...” (*Gods* 289). Apzu-rishtu (lit. “Deep-Water-First One”) is the progenitor of **Ea/Enki**, the father of hidden truth whose home was the deep water (Abzu/gnosis) and whom **we have already met** in these

posts. Tiamat is “the name of the female counterpart of Apzu-rishtu” (*Gods* 288). Budge continues:

... Now up to this point the three pairs of gods of the Assyrians agree exactly with the first three pairs of gods of the oldest Egyptian company of the gods, and the points of resemblance are striking... It is surprising therefore to find so much similarity existing between the primeval gods of Sumer and those of Egypt, especially as the resemblance cannot be the result of borrowing... We are therefore driven to the conclusion that both the Sumerians and the Egyptians derived their primeval gods from some common but exceedingly ancient source. (*Gods* 289-90).

As Budge surmised, the identities of the divine ogdoads in East and West betray not only a shared origin but show that man’s earliest common spirituality predated civilization and went back even earlier—that is, to Stone Age times. This was a proto-gnostic spirituality, one in which the element of water had a central significance, eventually symbolizing gnosis itself. This earliest religion of man reflected a substantially different worldview from the one that obtains from the dawn of civilization to this day. Belief that truth is immaterial, unseen, veiled, and somehow ‘other’ certainly goes back at least to the Neolithic era. This is compatible with what we call ‘gnostic dualism.’ In short, gnosis was man’s first religion. And it makes sense: in the Stone Age the environment had not yet been tamed and the world was a very brutish place. Materiality was merely the source of pain and confusion. In those long-lost eons before history, however, the goals of life were the same as those enunciated in later historical times by Christian Gnostics: *understanding, escape, and transcendence*.



A reconstruction of the brazen sea (Abzu) in Solomon's Temple.

The association of gnosis with water is also primordial. In Neolithic Britain, for example, burials were often made in water and Stonehenge

is situated next to the sacred river Avon. The gnostic spirituality associated with water was so old, and so well entrenched, that it is reflected in the first and most important 'water' gods (Nun and Ea/Enki). This theology, though soon eclipsed (see below), survived well into the Iron Age and even later. Thus we find in Solomon's temple, and in temples throughout the Levant during the Iron Age, **a great brass cauldron** filled with sacred water. According to the Old Testament (1 Kings 7:23-26; 2 Chronicles 4:2-5) the cauldron was capable of containing two or three thousand baths of water and stood on the backs of twelve bulls facing outward. The bull, as we have seen, symbolized the moon and the lower realm of gnosis (attacked by the sky-bird). This shows that as late as the early first millennium the religion of gnosis *still* obtained in many sacred precincts. It also shows that *the first religion of the Israelites and of the First Temple was not yet the Torah, but was linked to the old and universal theology of water/invisible gnosis.*

However, the Middle Bronze Age (later 3rd millennium BCE) witnessed a coup d'état in the pantheon, as sky gods replaced water gods, upper replaced lower, and (as discussed [here](#)) the seen replaced the unseen. Religious mythology and literature reflected this great revolution in the heavens: **Marduk** (lit. "Lamb of the Sun") replaced his father Ea/Enki in the pantheon; Marduk dismembered **Tiamat** in the heavens; and from Tiamat's body Marduk formed the earth. The change in spirituality coincides with the Aryan invasions of the Levant. From that time onwards, civilization was essentially materialistic, pragmatic, and patriarchal.

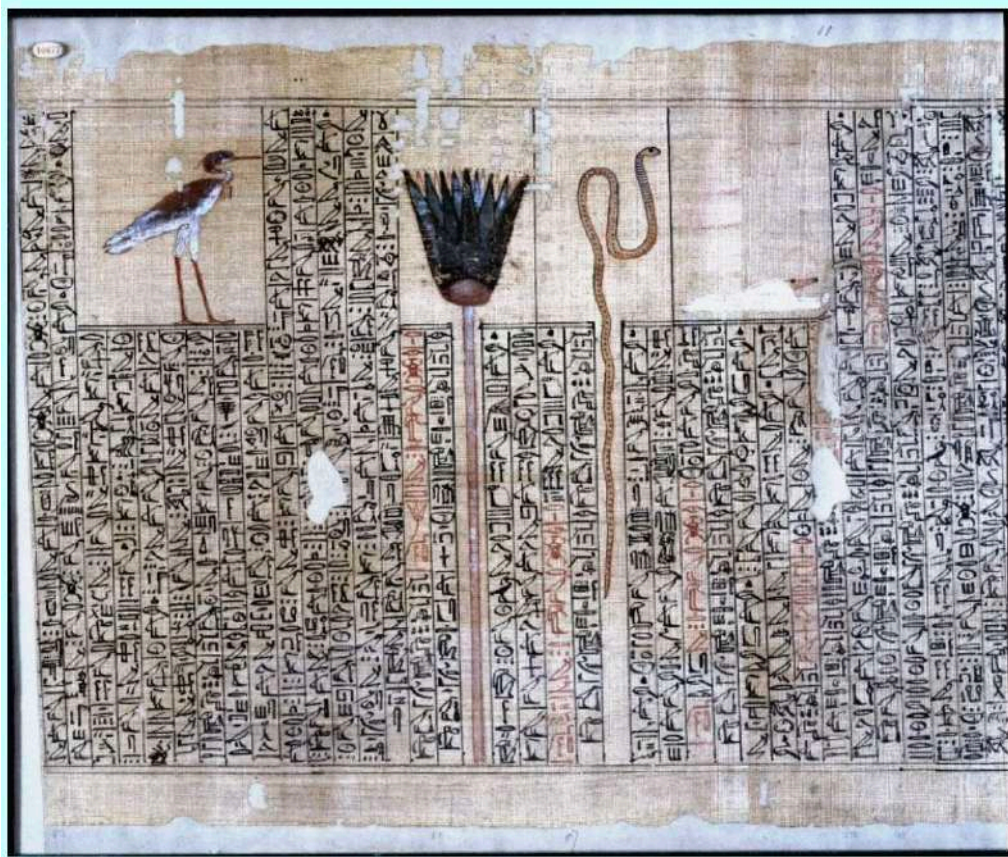
After the ascendancy of the Aryan sky gods in the Middle-Late Bronze Age, the gnostic worldview became esoteric. It continued but went underground and no longer belonged to the common folk. Henceforth the gnostic water cult is found only on the fringes of civilization and in esoteric traditions—except when it erupts in the most

surprising ways, such as in the Christian sacrament of baptism, in Mandaeism, and in the innumerable baptist cults that flourished around the turn of the era.

The god Nun

In reviewing Budge's observations concerning the god Nun, it becomes clear that this god was somehow linked to the distant, foreign, even 'absent' god of the Gnostics. While Nun was creator—thus apparently assuming the role of the later Demiurge—he is “an inert mass” (*Gods* 302) yet at the same time all-powerful (or all-pervading). It is clear that, for the ancient Egyptians, Nun was the passive aspect of the godhead and simply too exalted to be actively involved in the shoddy world of materiality. Only by means of a series of emanations from Nun does matter come about. In the first instance, “Shu and Tefnut were raised up from out of Nu wherein they had been” (*Gods* 303). Man is created not by Nu(n) but indirectly by another god (Khepera, Ra, Shu, or Tefnut) or even “by accident” (*Gods* 305).

Budge summarizes:



The Papyrus of Nu(n)

The Egyptians thought that a self-begotten and self-existent god [Nun] lived alone in a primeval watery mass, which was itself part male and part female... and that the mass was of unlimited extent, and was eternal, and was enveloped in thick darkness. The self-existent god, at some unknown time and for some unknown reason, uttered his own name as a word of power, and he straightway came into being under the form of the god Khepera. He next roused the soul of the watery abyss out of inactivity, and then having brought some influence, probably by the utterance of certain words, to bear upon his heart, he produced some material place, probably the earth, whereon he could stand. From this place he produced the gods Shu and Tefnut, which act resulted in the immediate creation of light and in the dispersion of darkness, and in the formation of the sky or firmament. These acts were followed either by the creation of men and women, or by the creation of vegetation and creeping things and reptiles of every kind... (*Gods* 306-07)

The resonances with later Gnostic Christian thought are striking. We note: (a) the distant, uninvolved god; (b) who is also male and female (androgynous); (c) who produces intermediate emanations; (d) that ultimately lead to the creation of man, woman, and of other life forms.

Budge signaled two large-scale Christian Gnostic works that especially betray influences from ancient Egyptian religion: the **Pistis Sophia** and the (even less known) two **Books of Jeu**.

The scholar writes:

In Pistis Sophia we have the Virgin Mary asking Jesus, her Lord, to give her a description of 'outer darkness,' and to tell her how many places of punishment there are in it. Our Lord replies, 'The outer darkness is a great serpent... [etc]' It is quite clear that in the above extract from the famous Gnostic work we have a series of chambers in the outer darkness which has been borrowed from the twelve divisions of the Egyptian *That* already described, and the reader has only to compare the vignettes to Chapters 144 and 145 of the *Book of the Dead* with the extract from *Pistis Sophia* to see how close the borrowing has been. An examination of another great Gnostic work, generally known as the *Book of Jeu*, proves that the Underworld of the Gnostics was nothing but a modified form of the *Amentet* or *Amenti* of the Egyptians, to which were added characteristics derived from the religious systems of the Hebrews and Greeks... (*Gods* 267)

An examination of the books of *Pistis Sophia* will show that many of the details of the 'mysteries' which are there described are based upon ancient Egyptian beliefs, and that the whole of the doctrine of spiritual light which is expounded therein only represents a spiritualized conception of the far-reaching character of the powers of the light of the sun upon both the living and the dead, which the dynastic Egyptians recognized and described centuries before the Christian Era. (*Gods* 281)

The groundbreaking work of Dr. Detering has opened the door to reconsider Budge's views with special attention now to the link between ancient Egyptian religion and Christian Gnosticism. It will take a specially gifted scholar—an Egyptologist who is also trained in

Christian origins—to resume the thread that Budge left hanging in so tantalizing a fashion and to continue along this path (one of many) that Detering has now opened. To my knowledge, no such Egyptologist has appeared. However, if 'Joshua Son of Nun' originally had any link to the great Egyptian god—as has been argued in the preceding post—then such an investigation is long past due. Furthermore, the door is now open to consider whether *the new Joshua* of Christianity—Jesus—was in some way the 'Son' of the remote gnostic Father prefigured by the great god Nun thousands of years earlier.

Part 31

The first century, The second century, Didache, Joseph, Joshua, Levite

The Didache - Part 1

Dr. Detering points out that the **Didache** ("Teaching of the Twelve Apostles") is a Church manual discovered only in 1873. "Majority opinion holds that it dates to the early second century," he writes, reflecting the somewhat more progressive European scholarship. (American scholarship largely dates the work to 1 CE.) Kurt Niederwimmer (Vienna), author of the 1992 Hermeneia commentary *The Didache*, writes (p. 53): "An origin around 110 to 120 C.E. remains hypothetical, but there are as yet no compelling reasons to dismiss this hypothesis." Also in agreement with Niederwimmer, Detering considers that the document is based on Jewish *Vorlagen* and was given only a superficial Christian veneer.

Detering (p. 54) cites three passages from the Didache, each with the "remarkable" (*auffallend*) phrase "Jesus, your servant" (Did 9.2, 9.3, 10.1). This occurs in the NT only in Acts (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30; regarding David 4:25). Detering finds, however, that it echoes the "servant Joshua" found in Jewish scripture (Judg 2:8; Josh 5:14; 24:29). Another link between the Jesus of the Didache and the OT Joshua is as "revealer of the vine" (Did 9:3). Detering sees a parallel here with Num 13:26, where Joshua and Caleb show Moses "the fruit of the land."

However, the Didachist seems to have redefined the 'promised land.' It is no longer a strip of terrain conquered by force. Joshua is the conqueror of a *new* Promised Land—and hence he is in some way a

different Joshua from the Old Testament hero. This new Promised Land is hinted at in the following verse:

[1] As this broken bread [i.e. manna] once lay
scattered on the mountains
and became one when it had been gathered,
So may Your church be gathered into Your
kingdom **from the ends of the earth.**
For glory and power are Yours,
through Joshua the Anointed One
[i.e. "Jesus the Christ"], forever. (Did 9:4)

Those in the church/kingdom come from "the ends of the earth."
Hence, the new Promised Land (= the "kingdom") is certainly not the Israel of old. In any case, this is evident from the use of "church" (*ekklésia*), which obviously does not mean "Israel."

"Joshua the Anointed One"

In the foregoing citation we also witness another re-definition—namely, the genesis of the moniker *Jesus Christ*. Today, no one ever thinks that "Jesus Christ" derived from "Joshua the Anointed One." Yet that indeed seems to be the earliest Christian (or, more correctly, *Jewish-Christian*) textual witness. Incidentally, the above is the only passage in the Didache where *'Iésou Xristou* occurs.

What can we say about such an anointed *Joshua*? Anointing with oil was a common occurrence in the Levant, used cosmetically and often daily in secular contexts. Anointing with oil, however, anciently also had religious meaning. Smearing with oil was, in fact, one way to remove an object or person from the secular realm and place it/him into the sacred realm—that is, to *sanctify* (IDB I:139). The king was anointed (Jud 9:15), as was the High Priest and priests in general (Ex 28:41 etc). By extension—and perhaps only metaphorically—the ancient patriarchs were "anointed ones," as also the prophets of Israel.

The most special—and most famous—religious usage of ‘anoint’ is messianic. Of course, the word messiah derives directly from ‘anoint, smear’ (Heb. MShH). Joshua in the above verse is clearly messianic, for he is “Joshua the Anointed One” = “Joshua the Messiah”—that is, *Jesus [the] Christ*.

At this point, it is important to recognize that multiple messianic traditions existed side by side in Judaism. The Messiah Son of David is well known through both Jewish and Christian texts. However, a second lesser-known tradition also existed. That is the northern tradition of the Messiah Son of Ephraim, also known as the Messiah Son of Joseph (for the OT patriarch Joseph was the father of Ephraim). On this website Charles Torrey examines this second tradition in detail (beginning [here](#)). It is from a fusion of both messianic traditions—Davidic and Ephraimite/Josephite—that Christianity arose.

Bethlehem

Before proceeding, it can be noted that the Old Testament historian may have been aware of these two traditions and attempted to fuse both Northern (Ephratite) and Southern (Judahite) traditions. The town of Bethlehem (an entirely mythical entity—see below) confusingly belonged to *both* traditions. At Gen 35:19 we read that Rachel was buried “on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem.” King David’s ancestors were “Ephratites” from Bethlehem of Judah (Ruth 1:2), and at 1 Sam 17:12 we read: “Now David was the son of an *Ephrathite* named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah.” This information was of critical importance to the Christian evangelists, whose hero Jesus “son of David” (Mt 1:1) was also from Bethlehem of *Judah*. It is quite certain, however, that in all these cases we are speaking of events in the mythic realm, if for no other reason than that Bethlehem of Judah did not exist at the time of David—nor even at the time of Christ! No archeological evidence of the settlement exists in the

ground until the era of Constantine the Great (See A. Oshri, *Archaeology*, Nov-Dec/05:42 ff).

Nevertheless, it is also clear that Bethlehem had an exalted position in religious mythology during Old Testament times—not only did King David and Jesus Christ hail from there, but so also did Jonathan, founder of the Levitical and heretical priesthood of Dan in the far north (Judge 18:30—see *NazarethGate* 452). I have discussed Bethlehem and Ephrath already at some length on this website (see especially [here](#) and [here](#)). The subject bears renewed scrutiny, however, due to the title of Detering’s article—“The Gnostic meaning of the Exodus”—and his thesis that the Exodus, in gnostic parlance, was a crossing over from materiality “to the other side” of spirituality, from the inferior to the superior—a *transcending*. All this has particular interest in relation to the all-important term “Hebrew,” as well as the toponyms “Bethlehem” and “Ephrath.” I wrote [in a previous post](#):

The etymology of Ephrath (אֶפְרַת) is of some significance. Its root a/e-p-r (אֶפֶר) corresponds to the Babylonian-Assyrian ebêru (אֶבְר) with the common exchange of labials beth and pe. Ebêru means “reach the other side, go across, through, or over.” This meaning conforms well to the ‘gate to gnosis’ that we have been discussing.

The nominal form of Hebrew eber (ayin-beth-resh) signifies ‘the other side,’ the place one reaches when one has ‘crossed over.’ In a gnostic context this is the place of enlightenment, rest, and immortality. Here, then, must be the root meaning of the place Ephrath. It is **the land of salvation on ‘the other side,’** to which Beit-Lahmu (Bethlehem) is the all-important gate of entry. (Emphasis added.)

Thus, the Hebrews were originally those who had “crossed over”! This adds a significant dimension to the Exodus theme. In [another post](#) I also wrote:

John’s teaching came from gnosis (water), out of Bethlehem (the gate to gnosis), and from Ephrathah (the land of salvation)—even as his ancient namesake, Oannes, the half-fish half-man of Mesopotamian legend, emerged from the sea to teach the Sumerians wisdom more

than two millennia earlier (according to the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the Mesopotamian priest of the third century BCE).

The Messiah in the Didache

According to [Charles Torrey's article on this website](#), the Messiah Son of Joseph was known as the *human* servant of God who suffers and dies, while the Messiah Son of David was *cosmic and divine* "God-appointed king of the end of time" (IDB 3.360). With this distinction in mind, we note that the Jesus/Joshua of the Didachist is clearly a human figure:

[2] We thank You, our Father,
For the life and gnosis
which You made known to us
through Joshua Your servant. (Did 9:3)

"Joshua Your servant" is a human being. This is not the cosmic Davidic messiah but, rather, the northern messiah Son of Joseph/Ephraim. Significantly, this human savior ("Joshua" means "Savior" in Hebrew) brought two paramount qualities: "life" and "gnosis." Furthermore, he lived in the not-too-distant past, for "You made **him** known to us." One might conclude, then, that the Didachist may himself have been an eye-witness to the Prophet who lies at the origins of Christianity. (But on this, see below.)

Though the Didachist certainly does not have the OT figure Joshua, son of Nun, in mind, that first Joshua may still be in the background, for the Didachist is considering a very *different* kind of conquest and a *new* Promised Land: "life and gnosis." The first Joshua conquered on the material plane. The second Joshua, however, conquered on the *spiritual* plane.

Nevertheless, we see from citation [1] above that Joshua the Anointed One revealed the "glory and power" of the Father. Thus, we perceive in the Didachist's conception of the messiah already a fusion of the

Davidic and Josephite messianic traditions. This is confirmed in other passages, e.g.:

[3] "We thank You, our Father,
For the holy vine of David Your servant,
which You made known to us
through Joshua Your servant.
To You be glory forever." (Did 9:2)

The Father here makes known "the holy vine of David" *through* Joshua. Hence, this Joshua appeared *after* King David. He is clearly not Joshua ben Nun, the patriarchal figure who lived at the time of the conquest and before the monarchy.

The Levites, the Didache, and Christianity

Furthermore, the new Promised Land is now available *to the whole world*, as we see from citation 1 above: "So may Your church be gathered into Your kingdom from the ends of the earth." We are now speaking not of the Jews as a chosen people, but of a "Church" (*ekklesia*). With the Didache there is also a new dispensation: all are potentially included in the kingdom ("from the ends of the earth"—cf. Mt 28:19)—including the gentiles! Again, one reads:

[4] Be mindful, Lord, of Your church,
to preserve it from all evil
and to perfect it in Your love.
And gather it **from the four winds**,
into the kingdom which You have prepared for it. (Did 10:5)

The kingdom will be gathered "from the four winds," i.e., from all nations. Obviously, the Didachist is no longer merely addressing Jews in the land of Israel. He has a much vaster landscape in mind. The fact that the Church already exists for the Didachist suggests some remove from the time of the Prophet (read: Yeshu ha-Notsri, died ca. 75 BCE). The author was probably *not* an eye-witness to the Prophet, as

intimated above. On the other hand, a I CE date for the Didache seems perfectly sound.

We can now attempt to locate the messianic conception of the Didachist in Judaism. In my opinion, the closest parallels to the above citations are surprisingly found in a little-known tractate dealing with the Levites and usually dated well into pre-Christian times:

[5] The Lord will raise up a new priest...
And in His priesthood **the nations**
shall be multiplied in gnosis on the earth,
and they shall be illumined by the grace of the Lord,
but **Israel shall be diminished by her ignorance**
and darkened by her grief. (Testament of Levi 18.1,9)

This citation now admits a priesthood of "the nations." They are multiplied "in gnosis." These are also the themes of the Didachist, and we have the same *Sitz im Leben* of a new "priest" and new dispensation to the world based in gnosis. Scholarship dates the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs to the third century BCE (OTP I:777). But the passage above—or elements of it—may be Christian interpolations, which are acknowledged in many passages of the Test12Pat. Consider the intervening verses 7-8 from the above passage:

And the glory of the Most High shall burst forth upon him,
And the spirit of understanding and sanctification
shall rest upon him in the water
For he shall give the majesty of the Lord
to those who are his sons in truth forever.

This all sounds very Christian to me and to be nothing less than an interpretation of the baptism of Jesus. I am not capable of parsing the original Jewish elements from the later Christian ones, but it is clear that "the spirit of understanding" resting "in the water" is precisely the water-gnosis doctrine that has been a recurring theme of this series of

posts. In short, I suspect there is more Christian substance in the Test. of Levi than is generally suspected.

In any case, like a pod that suddenly bursts in spring and scatters seeds everywhere, so the old conception of the Promised Land (Israel) in Christian times has suddenly burst open and now includes *the whole world*. Significantly, the author (or interpolator) of the Testament of Levi is already at some remove from his Jewish roots—he is able to condemn Israel “by her ignorance” (v. 9). Furthermore, the phrase “darkened by her grief” may even suggest a post-70 CE dating for those words.

In citation [2](#) above from the Didache we read of “life and gnosis.” This is the new gospel of Christianity. I believe that in the Didache and other marginalized texts we witness the vibrant transition from Judaism to Christianity. In Jewish-Christian eyes, that transition was effected by a second Joshua, a messianic figure who redefined the Promised Land by *spiritualizing* it. That redefinition led inexorably from one religion to another, from Judaism to Christianity.

Integral to this redefinition was also a new interpretation of ‘crossing the Jordan,’ which now meant to cross over from empty materiality into the fullness of spirituality. This water-crossing was a new Exodus—a *gnostic* Exodus—the overarching theme of Dr. Detering’s article under examination in these posts.

Part 32

The second century, David, Didache, Joshua

The Didache

Part 2 - Jesus/Joshua is not divine and not "Lord"

We recall that most scholars date the Didache around 100 CE—some towards the end of I CE, and others (such as Detering and Niederwimmer) to the early part of II CE. This dating has great significance for the issues raised below.

First of all, in the preceding post I pointed out that the Didache nowhere mentions 'Iésous "of Nazareth." This must strike the reader as astonishing, given that scholars universally assume the text to *be all about Jesus*. They are, of course, looking at the text through a later filter—and scarcely realizing that fact. It is perhaps a minor detail, but a 100 CE Christian with no knowledge of Nazareth is at least a clue that this text may have a different view of the 'Jesus' we know today...

The more one investigates the Didache, the more heretical the Greek text becomes. 'Iésous ("Jesus", "Joshua") is mentioned a few times in the 16 chapters—and *he is emphatically not divine*. To better understand the Didachist's religious views, we will briefly take a look at five of the text's critical terms: God, Lord, Father, Christ, and Joshua/ Jesus. The results are illuminating.

God.

Kurt Niederwimmer (who has written the standard commentary on this text) and Dr. Detering both assert that the Didache is essentially a Jewish work with but a thin veneer of subsequent Christian editing. One way to gauge exactly how “Jewish” and how “Christian” the text is, is to examine its view of God. In the Didache “God” (*theos*) occurs 14 times. We learn, above all, that God is creator of all. God made man and all the creatures (1:2; 5:2b). This, of course, coheres with the Yahweh of Jewish scripture. It also signals that the Didache is no Marcionite tractate—its God is clearly Lord of the material realm.

Lord.

Besides “God” being creator, we also read that “You, almighty Lord, created all things” (Did 10:3). This tells us that “Lord” (*kyrios*) and “God” are synonyms for the Didachist. That inference is buttressed by the fact that the “Lord” (26x in the work) has no evil in him (4:12), gives commandments that are to be scrupulously kept (4:13), is almighty (10:3), is the recipient of offerings/sacrifices (14:1,3), and is the source of all proclamation (*kerygma*). Again, this sounds quite like the Jewish God, Yahweh.

However, some distinctively non-Jewish elements are also ascribed to the Lord. These include baptism (unknown in Judaism) “in the name of the Lord” (9:5), the “gospel” (*euaggelion*, 8:1; 15:4), and the “Church” (10:5). Thus, we conclude that while the community of the Didache venerates Yahweh, it does so in distinctly new ways. This is confirmed at Did 14:1, where the community is directed to assemble “every Sunday of the Lord”—*not* on the Jewish sabbath (Saturday)! Obviously we are dealing here with a new dispensation, one in which the Didachist’s Jewish community is boldly striking out on a very *un-Jewish* path.

Christians traditionally believe that Jesus will come at the end times as judge. The Didache, however, does not convey that belief at all. In this text, it is *the Lord* (not His servant Jesus) who comes at the end times as judge (16:1 ff, and see below). Thus, the Didache does not seem to know the assimilation of Jesus to the Godhead.

Father.

This is a third term that the Didachist uses for "God" and "Lord." We are able to make the equivalence between those three terms for various reasons: the Father is in heaven (8:2), power and glory forever belong to him (8:3,4), King David is the servant of the "Father" (9:2), and glory is due to the Father forever (9:2). In certain cases these same attributes are elsewhere ascribed to the "Lord" (9:5; 10:3). Hence it is quite clear that, in the Didachist's mind, God/Lord/Father/and Yahweh are all synonymous.

Christ.

The term in Greek is Χριστός. It means "anointed one," and there is no denying that it directly translates the Semitic meshiach (discussed in the preceding post). Thus, use of the term is undoubtedly messianic: Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Did 9:4) means "[of] Joshua/Jesus the Messiah/Anointed One."

The term "Christ" and its permutations occur only three times in the Didache, and in three contexts: once as "Jesus Christ" (9:4), once as "Christian" (12:4), and once simply as "Christ" (12:5). Despite its rarity in the work, it is clear that the term was already well known: "Jesus Christ" is a title, and its use shows recognition of that title by a *community*. Use of the term "Christian" likewise shows that such self-designated individuals already existed. The term was not new when the Didachist was writing.

Because the term “Christ” draws on the entire Semitic tradition of the messiah, we must place Christianity within that tradition. This is obviously the Didachist’s point of view. “Christ” for him is a/the messiah *in the Jewish tradition*. This gives Christianity a long history even before the appearance of a founder prophet towards the turn of the era (whom I suggest was the renegade Pharisee [Yesu ha-Notsri](#)).

Joshua/Jesus.

The name *lésous* (which Greek uses for “Joshua” as well as “Jesus”) occurs 5x in the Didache. And here Christians are in for a surprise: that figure is emphatically *not* divine. Quite the contrary: he is repeatedly characterized as a “servant” (*paidos*: 9:2,3; 10:2,3). Interestingly, in the Didache *lésous* is *always* linked to the “Father”—never to “God” or to “Lord.” This may only be a preference on the part of the Didachist, for we have seen above that “Father”, “God”, and “Lord” are synonymous. Thus it would have been entirely correct for him to write “Joshua, God’s servant,” or “Joshua, the Lord’s servant.” But he doesn’t. In his text, Joshua/Jesus is always servant of the *Father*.

At Did 9:2 “*lésou* your servant” is in apposition to “(King) David your servant.” This shows us that, for the Didachist, both David and *lésous* were human. Indeed, that very verse explains the relationship between the two figures:

As for thanksgiving, give thanks this way.

First, with regard to the cup:

“We thank you, our Father,
For the holy vine of David your servant,
Which you made known to us,
through Jesus your servant.
To you be glory forever.”

And with regard to the bread:

“We thank you, our Father,
For the life and knowledge
which you made known to us

through Iésou your servant.
To you be glory forever." (Did 9:1–3)

Thus, we see that David brought "the holy vine" (that is, Jewish *ancestry*), but *Iésous* brought "life and knowledge." The former gift is physical, the latter gifts are spiritual. For the Didachist, King David and *Iésous* complement one another.

Nowhere in the Didache is there any reference at all to the crucifixion, or even that 'Jesus' suffered—much less that he died 'for our sins.' This strongly suggests *that the author was not acquainted with the passion narrative nor with the canonical gospels* (on this, see the next post #33). Nor is there any whiff of the doctrine of atonement or redemption. These generalities allow us to place the Didache in the same chronological stage as another work about 'Jesus' where we also find no crucifixion, no passion, and no vicarious atonement: the *Gospel of Thomas*. When we recognize that we are speaking of *the early second century CE* (on dating, see above and the preceding post), then the reality emerges: still in early II CE there was (at least for some 'Christians') no knowledge of the crucified Jesus, no knowledge of the passion of Jesus, no knowledge of vicarious atonement, no knowledge of Jesus as part of the godhead—in short, no core belief in the Pauline *kerygma* and in what *later* becomes normative Christian belief. All this coheres very well with the 'new chronology' espoused in these posts ([here](#) and [here](#)): 'Christianity' as we know it, centering on the biography of Jesus the Nazarene/of Nazareth, is emphatically a second century creation.

In the Didache, Jesus/Joshua is a conduit for all good things. *Iésous* "revealed the life and knowledge of the Father" (9.3), he made available to mankind the "glory and power" of the Father (9.4), and he made God's grace possible (10.3). But in no sense is he divine. Nor is there any intimation that he will come at the end time as judge. That

honor is reserved exclusively for the "Lord" (16:1-2), to whom *Iésous* is but "servant" (above).

In these and other more subtle ways, the theology of the Didache must shock mainline Christians. For example, at Did 9:5 we read of "baptism in the name of the Lord"—*not* in the name of Jesus!

In conclusion, one sees that the Didache portrays a *Iésous* figure who is thoroughly human. He is a prophet, a perfect "servant" of the Father/God/Lord of creation. His principle role in history as Messiah/Christ is to bring to all mankind "knowledge of the Father"—*gnosis*.

Part 33

The first century, Didache, Joshua

The Didache—Part 3

We have now arrived at page 56 of Dr. Hermann Detering's remarkable essay, "The Gnostic Meaning of the Exodus and the Beginnings of the Joshua/Jesus Cult." Detering breaks a great deal of new ground and, as in such cases, the points made in his piece will require testing and some will certainly require adjustment. Were an essay of equal significance written more friendly to the Christian tradition, I suspect that it would immediately find publication and would probably also secure a book contract with a mainline publisher. Like so much good mythicist work carried on today, however, Detering's works languish largely in obscurity, and he has long since accustomed himself to a scholarly career without conference invitations, major book contracts, or an academic teaching position.

This should give us pause when we reflect that Dr. Detering is arguably *the world's foremost Pauline specialist*, as witnessed by his bold Ph.D dissertation *The Pauline Epistles Without Paul?* (German: *Paulusbriefe ohne Paulus?* Peter Lang, Kontexte Verlag, 1992) and his *The Falsified Paul* (*Journal of Higher criticism*, 2003). Detering's technical mastery of the relevant issues and his acquaintance with the minutiae of the Pauline corpus are at least equal to those of anyone else. But Detering's greatest asset by far (and one could also say this for Dr. Robert Price) is that *he approaches Paul with no traditional preconditions*. As a result, while Detering easily matches his academic peers for erudition, his openness to nontraditional ideas places him

head and shoulders above them, for he is not constrained to embrace merely what society finds palatable.

Before the canonical gospels

Detering notes that in the Didache we find no hint of the (impending) death of Jesus, not even in the passage dealing with the Eucharistic Meal (“Last Supper”, Did 9:1-5). This is in stark contrast with the portrayal in the canonical gospel, where “the link with the death of Jesus is integral.” Detering continues: “It is hardly believable that, if the passion narrative existed, it would either have been unknown to the Didachist or ignored by him.” This recognition, in turn, leads Detering to the conclusion (p. 56) that *the passion narrative had not yet been created*. (The reader is reminded that the Didache dates c. 100 CE.) Hence, we are brought to the New Chronology, the stunning, non-traditional conclusion—arrived at so often in pages on this website, and from different paths (for example, see here and here)—that *the New Testament is a product of the second century, not the first*.

The Didache refers to an *euaggelion* four times. Dr. Detering asks whether the word refers to a canonical “gospel.” Of course, that would be very difficult given our discussion in the previous paragraph—for if the Didachist did not know the passion narrative, then it is hardly likely that he knew one or more canonical gospels. This skepticism is strengthened by Detering’s observation (p. 58) that the author’s “interest is nowhere in the life and works of Jesus—only with his *sayings*.”

That the Didachist knew no canonical gospel as text is reinforced by his use of *euaggelion*. We recall from [another post](#) that *euaggelion* (lit. “good news”) obviously could not have referred to a written text before such texts existed. Because the gospels—as written texts—are an entirely new genre of literature invented by Christianity, we can be

sure that—until those new texts became well known—the use of the word *euaggelion* was to its literal meaning of “good news,” and also figuratively as “teaching.” The term simply did not (and could not) refer to Christian gospels before that genre of writing existed.

Is it possible that one or more Christian gospels were already *well-known* when the Didache was written, c. 100 CE? The mythicist will emphatically say “no,” having concluded from several independent evidentiary lines that the canonical gospels are second century writings. On this website and in my Nazareth books I’ve argued that the canonical gospels are: (a) post-Marcionite (c. 140 CE); (b) they supersede the spiritual Jesus known in I CE; (c) they know Nazareth, which did not exist until II CE; and (d) they presuppose a gentile Church, and even a universal Christianity (Mk 16:15 and pars.), all incompatible with a I CE dating. In addition, it has been frequently observed that no first century writing (leaving the canonical gospels aside) knows the Nazarene Jesus.

In short: all four references in the Didache to “gospel of the Lord” are to be interpreted generally as “good news/teaching of God”—*not* as “written texts [referring to] Jesus.” This is confirmed by the following verse:

This is [the meaning] of what was said by the Lord: “to offer me a pure sacrifice in every place and time, because I am a great king.’ says the Lord, ‘and my name is held in wonder among the nations.’” (*Did* 14:3)

Here it is clear that “what was said” does not refer to a Christian gospel text, for the embedded quotations are from the Old Testament (Malachi 1:11 and 14). The “Lord” is God and what he “said” is Jewish scripture!

Detering gives considerable attention to the words *τροπους κυριου* (*Did* 11:8), which he translates by the German *Lebensweise(n) des Herrn*, literally “life-way(s) of the Lord.” Detering seems to interpret

“Lord” here as Jesus/Joshua, and he argues a point of Greek grammar, concluding that the meaning is more ‘the life-ways [endorsed by] the Lord,’ i.e., example-lessons of Jesus intended for the Christian prophets/disciples. In the former case, the implication would be that the Didachist knew a canonical gospel (chronicling the Lord Jesus/Joshua and his ways). In the latter case, the implication would be that the Didachist knew traditions associated with the Lord Jesus/Joshua—but not necessarily a written gospel.

I would suggest, however, that the foregoing is moot. **We have seen** that “Lord” (κυριος) in the Didachist’s vocabulary refers to the godhead and is always synonymous with the divine “Father” and “God.” This is reinforced by the above citation, where the Lord’s words = Jewish scripture. On the other hand, Jesus/Joshua (Ιησους) is emphatically not divine: for the Didachist he is God’s servant, is placed in apposition to King David, and is thus very human (as also was his namesake Joshua ben Nun). Hence, the phrase *life-ways “of the Lord” (κυριου) must refer to God according to the Didachist’s use of the word “Lord.”* Had he wished to indicate God’s servant, he would write τρονους Ιησου. But he doesn’t. All this is to say that *the divinity of Jesus is an entirely foreign concept to the Didache.* The divine Jesus—so integral to the oncoming Church—simply does not belong. Circa 100 CE, the divine Jesus is *still* not a part of ‘Christianity.’

This discussion reveals a great pitfall that we all face in reading these ancient texts: we are looking at them through a thick filter of subsequent history. We see “Lord” in association with “gospel” and assume the former means Jesus—even Jesus “of Nazareth”—in association with a written text. It completely escapes most of us that in 100 CE “Lord” in a religious context meant God, and god alone, while the written gospel as genre *did not yet exist.*

Detering finds a solution to the “evangelium” problem by concluding (p. 57) that the Didachist must have known a written source that lacked biographical details regarding Jesus, i.e., a *Logiensammlung* such as the putative Q, the Gospel of Thomas, or the “sayings collection of the Lord” signaled by Papias. This is surely correct. It is clear that the Didache belongs to the stratum of early logia collections and before the artificial ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ stratum reflected in the canonical gospels.

A second Joshua

Detering considers (p. 58) whether the word “curse” (*katathematos*) of Did 16:5 could possibly refer to the crucified Christ. He concludes, however, that it probably refers to the deceiver of the world, or perhaps the Antichrist. The eschatological passage reads as follows:

16:4 And at that time the one who leads the world astray will appear as a “son of God” and will work signs and wonders, and the earth will be given into his hands, and he will do godless things which have never been done since the beginning of time.

16:5 Then human creation will pass into the testing fire and many will be scandalized and perish, but those who persevere in their belief **will be saved by the curse itself**. [*sothesontai hup’ autou tou katathematos*; Niederwimmer translation, p. 221]

The way I read this passage, the “curse” may well refer generally to the times of tribulation that have just been described (i.e. “godless things” and “the testing fire”). Rather than the Antichrist, the Didachist may be looking back on the the loss of the Temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the great debacle of the Jewish War. In any case, Detering sums up as follows:

In all, it can be demonstrated that no trace of a “historical Jesus (of Nazareth)” is to be found in the Didache. The community that the Didachist has in mind indeed knows a Joshua/Jesus, but one present only in prophetic spirit and word. It knows a series of sayings that derive from and go back to the prophetic mouth, and

which have already been collected in an evangelium [= sayings collection] and thus have received an authoritative character. Furthermore, the community comes together on the "Day of the Lord" (Did 14:12), that is, on Sunday, to celebrate the "resurrection" of Jesus with a ritual communal meal. But a Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, died, and was buried—this the Didachist does not know. (Pp. 58-59).

Detering then writes (p. 59): "In the eucharistic ceremony we find no hint of [Jesus'] death, only the shared remembrance of the Old Testament hero Jesus/Joshua..." While I agree that the Didache certainly did not know Jesus of Nazareth, I find it problematic that "Joshua" refers to the Old Testament figure, Joshua Son of Nun. We find a clue that solves this riddle of "Joshua/Jesus" in the following verse:

As for thanksgiving, give thanks this way.
First, with regard to the cup:
"We thank you, our Father,
**For the holy vine of David your servant,
Which you made known to us,
through Jesus your servant.**
To you be glory forever."

We read here that through Joshua/Jesus the "holy vine of David" was made known. It is evident that this scenario can only obtain if Joshua/Jesus was chronologically later than King David. How otherwise can "the holy vine of David" be made known *through Joshua/Jesus*? And here we have the key to the enormous riddle of "Joshua/Jesus" in this text: the Ἰησοῦς of the Didache is not Joshua ben Nun. He is a theologically related figure: *a second Joshua!* I suggest that the view of the Didachist is as follows:

- the first Joshua/Jesus revealed the Promised Land to the Israelites
- the second Joshua/Jesus has now come and revealed the *spiritual* Promised Land.

In a sense, this second, latter-day Joshua *completed* the mission of Joshua ben Nun. And here, I believe, is also revealed the genesis of the name “Jesus” as regards the Christian savior. That name does not *refer* to Joshua ben Nun, though it ultimately does go back to him. The Old Testament figure lent his name—which, after all, means “Savior”—and also his prestige to a *second* prophet, a latter-day “savior” who revealed the *spiritual* Promised Land. This latter-day prophet must have existed in history. In my view, then, the Didachist’s “Jesus” is neither to be identified with Joshua ben Nun, nor does he have anything to do with the invented and altogether fabulous figure Jesus of Nazareth. The Didachist’s Joshua is an intermediary figure: a new Joshua, not yet the cosmic Christian savior, though very much a figure of history.

Part 34

Dositheus, John the Baptist, The first century, Yeshu ha-Notsri Joshua

The Didache

Part 4 - The spiritual Jesus

I have argued on this website that “Jesus” in the first century CE (before appearance of the canonical gospels) was spiritual, not material (see [here](#) and [here](#)). As so much in Jesus mythicism, the consequences of this thesis are far too provocative for mainstream scholarship. After all, a first century ‘spiritual’ Jesus strikes at the very heart of Christianity and gives the lie to the very existence of Jesus of Nazareth. So today this view of an early spiritual Jesus—graphically recorded in the Christian apocrypha and in some gnostic tractates—lives only in the outer reaches of the Internet. The great irony is that, while Christians are forever desiring to recover earliest Christianity, at the same time they blithely relegate the spiritual Jesus to the dustbin of history, ignore and effectively ‘kill’ it, favoring in its place a nexus of beliefs painfully codified in numerous Church councils and encapsulated in the [Nicene Creed](#).

So, two pathways lead to “Jesus.” One, described above, points to a prophet—a person of flesh and blood—a second Joshua who was given the name of the first Joshua (ben Nun) because *he completed the mission of the first Joshua*, opening up to the true believers the *spiritual* Promised Land, one no longer limited to Hebrews but now available to the whole world.

A second pathway leading to “Jesus” describes a spiritual, saving, and mobile *entity*. This entity does not ‘belong’ to any one person (read: Jesus Christ) but is accessible to all. The fact that ‘the Jesus’ of the first century CE is mobile gives a very interesting dimension to some early Christian writings and even to passages in the canonical gospels (cf. the road to Emmaus). One dramatic element of that early spiritual Jesus is the aspect of incognito: one could never be certain that the gardener, fellow traveller, or chance neighbor was not a “Jesus,” a great man/woman inhabited by the saving spirit. Some Christian apocrypha relish this aspect of disguise, and it cannot be simply by chance. There must be an explanation, and the “spiritual Jesus” thesis is the only one that seems to fit.

For example, the Acts of Pilate (part of the Gospel of Nicodemus) has a carefully constructed scene in which the spirit Jesus *takes possession* of Joseph of Arimathea while Joseph is in a locked room with no windows. The physical circumstances of the room seem contrived by the author precisely to demonstrate that Jesus is a *spiritual* entity.

The Church takes control

The early Christian view of the spiritual Jesus is complex and represents a *fusion* of god and man. One might say that Jesus of Nazareth represents a similar fusion. However, Jesus of Nazareth is a far simpler conception, one made to order for the masses. This is because Jesus of Nazareth is *God become man*. You and I are passive witnesses to this cosmic transaction, to the formation of a savior who is entirely at the initiative of God—and, in fact, who never ceased to be divine.

The early Christian conception of Jesus, however, was very different. In it, *man becomes god* by incorporating (or realizing) the divine Jesus within himself/herself. Here, you and I are the principal agents in a

deeply personal transformation, one which is entirely at the initiative of man. In this we perceive the true roots of Christianity as arising out of the mystery religions.

It appears that, in the earliest century or so of Christianity, *anyone* could become divine—a true Son (or Daughter) of God—if s/he incorporated the Jesus. Or, to put it another way, anyone could become divine if the Jesus ‘entered into’ him/her. This was the Christian religion *before* the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth in the mid-second century.

The scenario of a universal, mobile Jesus-spirit and of multiple, unpredictable Jesuses appearing randomly was a nightmare for the incipient Catholic Church. The only way to establish its control was to monopolize Jesus. And here is the true genesis of ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ That figure is a tool of propaganda and control, one created by the Catholic Church. The Church taught that the Nazarene is the only Jesus. There were, are, and will be no others. The Church also fixed Jesus within narrowly defined specifications carefully set forth in the gospels, parameters that benefited the Church *and no other organization/agenda*. The role of Peter (as representative of Jesus after the crucifixion) also plays an important role in establishing a lineage of authority going back to the one-and-only Jesus, founder of the Catholic Church.

To summarize the roles and purposes of the canonical gospels:

(1) The canonical gospels *redefine and limit Jesus*: he came once (and only once) as the Son of God, and he will not come again until the end times. He (and only he) was both God and man, born of a virgin and resurrected bodily from the dead. [In these ways, the emergent Church did away with all the ‘other’ Jesuses running around.]

(2) The canonical gospels *define salvation*: belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God ensures remission of sins and eternal life with Jesus/God after physical death.

(3) The Church *defines its own authority* and writes that authority into the texts: Jesus of Nazareth (in the canonical gospels) appoints Peter the foundation of the Church, and the Roman Catholic church then forever follows Peter via his authoritatively appointed successors, the infallible popes.

The above came into existence in mid-II CE, when the canonical gospels appeared. Before then, the Church did not yet exist. What we find in the first century are many 'Jesus' movements—disparate, more or less unorganized groups that believed a latter-day prophet had shown the way, had been 'anointed' (made a Christ, a messiah) by being indwelt by the spirit 'Jesus.' That anointed latter-day prophet was a second Joshua, one who opened up a *new* Promised Land. In this early Christianity, anyone could receive the spirit Jesus and become anointed. In gnostic terms, this occurred when/if one found "the meaning of these sayings" (Gospel of Thomas, 1). Whatever one's secular name, history, or occupation, one could become spiritually perfected, could follow in the footsteps of the founding prophet, and could join the family of Jesuses. It appears, then, that the earliest Christian movements were fellowships of aspiring Jesuses.

Yeshu

As regular readers probably know, my opinion is that the prophet at the incipience of Christianity—the second Joshua described above—was a renegade religious teacher whose life is documented in Jewish records and who lived towards the beginning of the first century BCE: Yeshu ha-Notsri. Rabbinical records report that he was a learned Pharisee who spent about twenty years in exile in Alexandria, Egypt.

There Yeshu had a falling out from Judaism and, essentially, became a gnostic—perhaps even one influenced by Buddhism. The Talmudic texts tell us that Yeshu returned to Israel after the death of the violently anti-Pharisaic Alexander Janneus. The prophet and ex-Pharisee Yeshu then had great success teaching gnostic and quite non-Jewish views. The clues that survive show us that he was arrested, put on trial, and killed by the Sanhedrin. Accused of blasphemy and making himself God, Yeshu was “hanged on the eve of the Passover” (Sanh. 43a; passage at Zindler 2003:238). Yeshu’s career has been reconstructed, *in extenso*, in the final chapter of my book *Nazareth Gate*.

What this renegade prophet’s real name was, we do not know. He made such an impression during and after his lifetime, however, that his Jewish followers regarded him as a second Joshua, “savior.” This latter-day Joshua revealed the spiritual Promised Land, as described above.

In my opinion, the pieces finally fit.

One reservation to an identification of Yeshu ha-Notsri with Joshua ben Nun is that the names are not identical: Joshua (יהושוע, “Yah[weh] is Salvation”—BDB 221) and Yeshu (ישו). After all, why would the Talmudic Rabbis call him Yeshu and not “Joshua,” since his namesake was Joshua (ben Nun) and not “Yeshu”?

The most obvious answer is that the Rabbis refused to honor an arch-heretic with the name of one of their most venerated ancestors, Joshua. Therefore they coined a banal corruption of the name: Yeshu, a name that is unique and otherwise unattested in Jewish scripture. In my opinion, use of the moniker “Yeshu” in the Mishna and Talmud strengthens the likelihood that the rabbis knew quite well that the name “Joshua” was applied to a heretic.

Though we cannot be sure, in all likelihood “Joshua” (a quite common name both in antiquity and today) was not the prophet’s real name. Is not the meaning “Savior” simply too coincidental? From the overlaps between John and Baptist and Jesus in the canonical gospels, and also from the role Dositheus plays in the Pseudo-Clementines and other marginalized writings, I suspect that the prophet’s name was somehow aligned with *Yonathan*. In Hebrew this name literally means “Yah Gives.” But if the prophet was born “Yonathan,” he would have jettisoned that Jewish name after abandoning Yahwism and embracing proto-gnostic views. And this brings us to the non-Yahwist Hebrew equivalent Nathan-el/Nathaniel = “God Gives.” The Greek rendering is *Dositheus*. It is possible to theorize, then, that Yeshu’s original name was Yonathan, and that when he broke with his pharisaic background he became known as Nathaniel/Dositheus.

Dating

In a [recent post](#), I noted surprising parallels between the Didache and the Testament of Levi, a Jewish work dating to II BCE but which has certainly undergone editing by Christians. I pointed out that both the Testament and the Didache share a general gnostic outlook, where “the nations shall be multiplied in gnosis” and “the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him in the water.” Here I would like to signal another link between the Didache and the TestLevi: chronology.

In TestLevi 16:1 one reads: “...for seventy weeks you will go astray and profane the priesthood and pollute the sacrifice; and you will make void the law...” Now, seventy weeks is generally understood as seventy weeks of years, that is, $70 \times 7 = 490$ years. Scholars date the beginning of that period from the Exile, i.e., 586 BCE. Accordingly,

490 years of (spiritual) exile are counted from that date, leading to an endpoint in 96 BCE. This is when the spiritual exile comes to an end.

As it happens, 96 BCE closely corresponds to when Yeshu ha-Notsri himself went into exile in Egypt, when he abandoned normative Judaism, and when he 'founded' the new gnostic-style religion that he subsequently preached (see *NazarethGate* 420) and that I believe eventually became Christianity. Is this dating mere coincidence? One might suppose so, yet the fact that the Testament of Levi figures in this discussion as to both content and dating suggests otherwise—at least to me.

Incidentally, the Testament of Levi exists in multiple copies from Qumran. However, the section (T. Levi 16:1-17:11) including the "seventy weeks of years" passage is lacking in the Qumran manuscripts. I am not able to comment on whether the post-Qumran dating of the passage in question also supports the thesis that the section comes from a later Christian—a Christian who was a disciple of Yeshu ha-Notsri. I have merely broached this issue that is entirely novel. It is for the next generation of scholarship to investigate this and related questions that have never been raised before.

Conclusion

Detering's final word in this exciting section of his paper: "The Didache constitutes early evidence for the existence of a Jewish Christianity in which the traditions of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth were completely unknown. The Jesus sayings that it contains did not come from the mouth of an historical Jesus [of Nazareth], but came from the mouths of prophets in whom the spirit of Joshua [ben Nun] worked."

I agree in the main with the foregoing. However, I would personally rewrite the second sentence as follows: "The Jesus sayings that [the

Didache] contains did not come from the mouth of an historical Jesus [of Nazareth], but came from the mouth of a prophet known to history as Yeshu ha-Notsri, a latter-day Joshua who led his people into a *spiritual* Promised Land."

Part 35

The first century, docetism, Joshua

The ever-present Jesus

In a brief section of his paper (pp. 59–61), Dr. Detering draws attention to the short Epistle of Jude, a second century pseudepigraphic writing claiming authorship by Jesus of Nazareth’s brother, Judas (cf. Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55). In the fifth verse, most manuscripts have “Lord” (*kurios*), others “God” (*theos*), and—most remarkably—a few manuscripts have *lésous*. The verse reads:

Now I desire to remind you, though you are fully informed, that *lésous*, who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.

Detering maintains that preference goes to the reading *lésous*, as above, for this is the *lectio difficilior*. If one goes along with this interpretation, then the Christian Jesus brought the Israelites out of Egypt! How could this be?

In the preceding post we saw that first century Jewish Christians conceived Jesus as a spiritual, universal, and mobile entity that indwells the true disciple. This was *before* the invention of Jesus of Nazareth in post-Marcionite times (i.e., mid-II CE). If one credits the above citation with correctness, then one must conclude that those Jewish Christians projected this spiritual Jesus onto the Old Testament: their “Jesus” was not only universal in place (it could indwell anyone), but also universal in time (it has existed since the beginning of time). After all, this makes sense: if the Jesus could

indwell them, then (as pure spirit) it could surely have indwelled the great Jewish figures of the past.

It is very likely that the Jewish Christians gave credit to the divine spirit Jesus—which they considered to be an eternal entity at one with the Godhead—as being responsible for the actions of Yahweh in history, including the Exodus under Moses and the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua. In Jewish scripture, the hand of Yahweh works *through* his prophets. The Old Testament is quite emphatic that it was not Moses nor Joshua who effected the miraculous events credited to them—it was the spirit of God working *through* them. And now we come to the nub, the essence of the Jewish Christian revolution in thinking: they identified the spirit of Yahweh with *that which crosses over*. Only in this light can we understand a text such as Ode 39 of the Odes of Solomon. And this view of crossing over has inescapable gnostic implications—which we have already analyzed. We also recall that the word *Hebrew* itself means “cross over” (BDB 716, 720). I won’t force the argument here by claiming that “a true Hebrew is a gnostic,” but I believe such a view was present in the first century CE.

That proto-gnostic view teaches that gnosis brings one to the other side, that gnosis saves, and that gnosis enables one to cross over. Such a view was not the teaching of Moses, nor of Joshua ben Nun, nor of the Tanach. In fact, it is not found anywhere in Jewish scripture. Whence then did it come? I have suggested that it came from the teaching of Yeshu ha-Notsri, a highly-placed ex-Pharisee who fled to Egypt in early 1 BCE and there converted to gnosticism—probably under the influence of Buddhism.

Once we have the theology of crossing over clearly in mind, then it is a short step to identifying the great hero of the early Christian gnostics: Joshua ben Nun, the one who crossed over the Jordan and led the Hebrews into the Promised Land. In other words, the hero of the early

Jewish Christians was ready-made. He simply needed to be interpreted metaphorically, for the crossing over that he accomplished was not of a mere body of water—now it was from death to life. This metaphorical interpretation, I suggest, was itself a result of the gnostic teachings of Yeshu, a contemporary prophet who was viewed by his Jewish followers as a *second Joshua*—and even as a more important Joshua.

Thus we have in early Jewish Christianity (1) the Jesus/Joshua associated with **Yeshu** (the name is itself a corruption of *Joshua*) **ha-Notsri** (a corruption of *Nazarene*), and (2) the Jesus/Joshua associated with that which enables one to cross over from death to life, i.e., the Spirit of God—reinterpreted as gnosis. We will look more closely at these two meanings in the next section (below). Examination of the Odes of Solomon, Testament of Levi (Christian additions), and Jewish Christian tractates from Nag Hammadi all bear this out: the saving hand of God is gnosis, esoteric knowledge (GTh 1, 3b, 39; OdeSol 8:8f, 11:4; 18:13-14; TestLevi 13:2 etc). Furthermore, there is every indication that water was a favorite metaphor for that saving gnosis, where “the spirit of understanding and holiness shall rest upon him in the water” (TestLevi 18:7; cf. v. 5 and OdeSol 6:8-18; 11:4-7; 30).

The quintessential heroes who crossed over were Moses and—even more importantly—Jesus/Joshua ben Nun, the one who brought the Hebrews into the Promised Land. If we read the last sentence metaphorically, we see that Joshua brought the Hebrews from death to life, from the *Diesseits* to the *Jenseits*, from ignorance to gnosis. After all, Joshua means “Savior,” and for a Jewish *gnostic*, the Savior needed to do these things.

Both man and God

The conception of Jesus/Savior as *the saving power of God* accords with normative Judaism: in the Old Testament, the power or hand (*yad*) of God frequently acts in history. Yet, Judaism has always kept man and God quite separate and distinct—there is no confusion between the two. Christianity, however, mingled the divine and the human. Jesus Christ is *both* God and man. These two facets of Jesus lent some confusion to early Christianity, for ‘Jesus’ could mean either element: (a) the power of God, or (b) the man through which that power acts. On this website I have argued that pre-canonical Christianity knew a mobile, spiritual Jesus. Yet, whoever embodied that Jesus, whoever expressed that ‘power of God,’ that person could also be referred to as ‘a Jesus.’ This is an understandable shorthand that permits some apocryphal Christian literature to claim ‘Here is a Jesus,’ ‘There is a Jesus,’ that Paul is a Jesus, Peter is a Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is a Jesus, and the like.

Notable in the early Christian literature was a certain dramatic aspect of this conception, namely, that one simply didn’t know who was “a Jesus.” Over and over, we encounter Jesus incognito—Jesus hidden in plain sight. This mysterious aspect of the revelation obviously fascinated early Christians. (See [“Jesus the shape-shifter.”](#)) This forgotten sense of ambiguity and drama survives in passages from the Acts of Paul, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and even the Gospel of Luke (the road to Emmaus, Lk 24:13 ff; cf. Jn 20:14). This is all a prelude and transitional stage *before* the invention of Jesus of Nazareth, who was also Jesus in spirit and body—but, critically, now he was the *only* Jesus.

As the crowning step in a fairly long process, Jesus of Nazareth thus did away with all competing Jesuses.

The conception of the power of God indwelling a human being did not come out of nowhere. My research suggests that it has esoteric

roots in Second Temple Judaism, roots tied to wisdom traditions—most especially to the tradition associated with the figure of Seth and perhaps also with the much-maligned Levites. The power of God indwelling a human being is surely the genesis of the mobile, spiritual Jesus that we find in the first century CE apocryphal Christian literature. In that literature, there is no question of a mixing of the human and divine elements. In the Acts of Paul, Pilate, Peter, etc, when the spirit enters a person, that person becomes a *vehicle* for the divine power. He does not become 'God'! But with the Gospel of Mark the barrier between God and man is sundered. With Jesus the Nazarene God IS man, and *that* man IS God. For this reason alone, the Gospel of Mark is no longer Jewish. Nor can one say that it is even 'Jewish Christian.'

With the invention of Jesus the Nazarene in the second century, two competing conceptions of Jesus existed side-by-side: the mobile Jesus, and the Nazarene Jesus. These two conceptions are mutually exclusive, and thus they were in tension with one another. This is the ultimate cause of the friction between the Hellenist camp and the Hebrew camp (Acts 6:1 ff, etc)—at bottom, we are dealing with incompatible views regarding Jesus. But the older conceptions of Jesus as the power of God, and of Jesus acting through Joshua ben Nun, these were assimilated by the Church. Thus, at Heb 11:16 we read that Jesus leads Christians into the (spiritual) Promised Land of eternal life—"a better country, that is, a heavenly one." The parallel between Jesus the Nazarene and Joshua ben Nun is also made explicit by Tertullian, in a citation that Dr. Detering offers in his paper (p. 68):

While Christ would lead his future people—that is, us, who were born into the desert of paganism—into the Promised Land that flows with milk and honey—that is, into the possession of eternal life, which is the greatest sweetness—so also this was not to happen through Moses, that is, not through obedience to the Law,

but through Joshua/Jesus, through the grace of the Gospel, and only after we have been tested on a sharp rock, that is Christ—for Christ was the rock who was even cut. Therefore, the man who symbolically prefigured this mystery of faith held the name of the Lord and was also called Joshua/Jesus. (Tert. Mark 3.16.1)

The Catholic Tertullian (c. 200 CE) is clearly a follower of the Nazarene—he knows and accepts the gospel Jesus, the man “who was even cut” (i.e. who suffered/was crucified). Passages such as the above belong to the vast patristic literature that was produced to defend the new faith, and that was assiduously preserved by the Church—while competing views were equally assiduously destroyed. Thus we easily lose sight of the spiritual Jesus—the Jesus that held the stage before c. 140 CE, before the invention of Jesus the Nazarene. We must look carefully and methodically to uncover evidence for that Jesus.

Today, only obscure texts witness to a gnostic stage before the invention of the Nazarene. One such text is the virtually unknown *The Repose of Saint John the Evangelists and Apostle*. This ultra-heretical text knows Jesus Christ but not Jesus of Nazareth. Interestingly, the work is not even mentioned in the standard scholarly reference, *The New Testament Apocrypha* (Schneemelcher, 2 vols). It is to be found in a 1913 British Museum publication (PJ 2197.B7) made by E.A. Wallis Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*. There we read:

[John speaks:] “My brothers, my fellow heirs, and my partners in the Christ Jesus, our Lord... He has never made himself manifest to you through the eyes of the body, neither have you heard him through the ears of the body, but he has made himself visible to you through the integrity of your heart, and by visions and by works that are holy.”

This is radical docetism: Jesus is categorically *spiritual*. He is emphatically *not* material and was never graced with a body. Of course, this is not to be confused with what passes for ‘docetism’ today: the strange belief that a bodiless phantom once roamed the

world. That belief never existed, anywhere. Rather, docetism is the view that the bodiless Jesus is the *spirit of God* indwelling the worthy human. That indwelling is a partnership, an association, accurately described by the author of the *Repose* as follows:

Strengthen yourselves, then, in him, and you will remember him at all times. Moreover, you will also remember the mystery and the association [or: partnership] which has come upon you, and which our Lord has fulfilled... Let him but repose **in your hearts**, and you are turned into beings who rejoice in holiness of life... [Addressing the Jesus spirit:] O you who has spoken your words in our hearts... O you who alone are the savior, the righteous one, **who exists in every place, who has existed from everlasting**. God, the Christ Jesus!... For we know your majesty which is invisible, and **which does not make itself manifest**...

This, of course, is a very different view of Jesus from the canonical gospels! It is the pre-canonical view that reigned among Jewish Christians in the first century CE. In the *Repose* above, Jesus is invisible, everywhere, and in the heart of the righteous person. In this way, the Jewish Christians were able to retroject the spirit Jesus back into Old Testament figures such as Moses and Joshua ben Nun, for they were also vehicles for the power/spirit of Yahweh.

In this connection, Dr. Detering presents a citation (p. 6) from Hippolytus, describing the view of the Naassene gnostics:

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.” This, according to them, is the spiritual generation. This, he says, is the great Jordan which, flowing on (here) below, and preventing the children of Israel from departing out of Egypt-I mean from terrestrial intercourse, for Egypt is with them the body,-Iésous drove back, and made it flow upwards.
(Hippolytus, Ref. V, end of chapter).

Here, the “great Jordan” prevented the Israelites from leaving Egypt. This is not an error in geography. It reflects Naassene theology whereby Egypt = carnality, and the Jordan = the boundary between carnality and the Promised Land (= gnosis and purity). Iésous is the

instrument for that passage out of carnality and into truth. This is what I mean by early Christian gnosticism. It is a proto-gnosticism that is not mythological, has no aeons, nor cosmogenesis. As Hippolytus observes, the Naassenes believed in "the spiritual generation." That is the generation of truth, i.e., gnosis.

In early Christianity, *Iesous* was the ever-present, eternal, mobile power of God working through history and *in and through man*.

Part 36

Buddhism, Gospel of Mark, Yeshu ha-Notsri

The Transfiguration

In a short section (pp. 62–64) of his paper, Dr. Detering reveals that the Transfiguration scene in Mk 9:2–8 primarily serves to answer the question: Who is the true prophet predicted in Jewish scripture (Deut 18:15)? Three candidates are at the top of the mountain: Moses, Elijah, and Joshua/Jesus. The answer that comes from heaven is clear: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”—and only Jesus/Joshua is seen to be still there, while the other two Old Testament figures have disappeared.

Consistent with the rest of his paper, Detering argues that the “Jesus” of the scene was, in the earliest stratum of the story, not “Jesus of Nazareth” but Joshua ben Nun—the successor to the prophets Moses and Elijah.

I have argued, however, that—while the Jesus/Joshua figure of the New Testament does ultimately go back to the Old Testament figure Joshua ben Nun—that allusion has been mediated and redefined: the Jesus/Joshua of the proto-Christians was a *second Joshua*, a latter-day prophet who taught a *spiritual* crossing over ‘to the other side’—that is, a form of gnosticism. I also identify that prophet with Yeshu ha-Notsri.

“Let us go to the other side” (Mk 4:35)

One encounters the expression “to the other side (eis to peran) astonishingly often in the canonical gospels: 4 times in Matthew, 5 times in Mark, and once in Luke—a total of 11 times. In

comparison, the expression occurs only 9 times in the entire Old Testament. Mark employs the phrase in three distinctive passages: at the stilling of the storm (4:35 f), at the crossing of the sea (6:45 f), and at the multiplication of loaves (8:13 f). [H. Detering, p. 64]

I have long been convinced that the repeated 'crossings over' of the Sea of Galilee in GMark are allegorical. As actual events they are immediately problematical, for no purpose is served in 'crossing over,' while the destination is unimportant. Detering also notes the ambiguity of Mark's language—in two of three 'crossing' passages, the evangelist does not specify a destination. "This is not about travel itineraries and geography," Detering writes, "but is a metaphor for reaching the world beyond [*Jenseitswelt*]."

I agree. There is something more to these transits than the simple desire to reach an unidentified destination. *Crossing over* may itself be the essence—as if the evangelist were trying to convey that Jesus/Joshua had done so in some profound metaphorical sense. This suspicion perfectly fits the thesis of these posts regarding a second Joshua, a prophet who taught a *spiritual* 'crossing over'—in contradistinction to the first Joshua (ben Nun). When read in this way, Mk 4:35 ff takes on very specific meaning: the apostles (and the rest of us) simply can not 'cross over' without Jesus' help. This is the doctrine of redemption *in nuce*. But we should not forget its original *Sitz im Leben*, which was gnostic and spiritual: the (second) Joshua/Jesus showed the way to cross over from ignorance to understanding. As it happens, this teaching is also the core of Buddhism.

Detering agrees. He continues:

In reference to the already-mentioned Buddhist passages, we have seen how the 'walking on water' motif is closely linked to the concept of reaching "the other/transcendent shore." It appears that the Buddha's walking on water was taken over by the early Christians, allegorically used in their interpretation of the Old

**Testament, and applied to the new 'Crosser-Over'
[Furtüberquerer] Joshua/Jesus.**

It appears that in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions, 'crossing over' transformed from an originally gnostic journey to a miracle contrived to impress readers. The original, metaphorical importance of 'crossing over,' however, cannot be overstated. In the Marcan case, if the evangelist constructed several scenes that act as metaphors for something *too deep* to convey straightforwardly, then we are dealing with a critical element of early Christian theology. In short, it behooves us to understand what Mark means by "crossing over."

In only one of the three above-mentioned Markan passages does Jesus walk on water—in the other two passages he crosses over in a boat. The constitutive element of all three passages, then, is *crossing over to the other side*, not the walking on water. In the Buddhist tradition the Master also walks on water, and there too it is miracle contrived to impress. If the Buddhist miracle inspired the scene in the Christian gospel, that would certainly constitute a link between the two religions. But far more interesting is if—on a deeper level—the Buddhist concept of "crossing over" inspired multiple scenes in Mark's gospel. In this case, we might be justified in considering the Gospel of Mark as a sort of crypto-Buddhist text. We might also be justified in considering Christianity an adulterated form of Buddhism.

As Detering states in the above citation, crossing over in Buddhism has to do with reaching "the other/transcendent shore." In Buddhism, the goal is to realize nirvana/enlightenment/a transcendent state of being *in this life*. The Gospel of Mark, however, conveys no such thing. Though it is the first canonical gospel chronologically, GMark already touts belief in "Jesus Christ, the Son of God," raised bodily from death (1:1; 16:6). The gospel is far removed from what I claim are its proto-gnostic roots. Nevertheless, it is critical that we understand those roots, for in doing so we understand the genesis of Christianity: *the*

Gospel of Mark uses the metaphors of gnosticism—including ‘crossing over’—in service to its new hero, Jesus Christ the Nazarene.

Buddhism in Christianity

The outlines of Christian beginnings now emerge: the evangelist Mark took pre-existing gnostic/Buddhist material and adapted it in stages to the purposes of his revolutionary Hellenistic doctrine, a doctrine based upon an invented Divine Man (*theios aner*) called Jesus the Nazarene. The material that Mark took was not directly from Buddhism. His material had already been mediated by Jewish Christians, fervent followers for whom a latter-day prophet (Yeshu ha-Notsri) was ‘a second Joshua,’ a Joshua who taught the *spiritual* crossing over from death to life.

The pieces fit not only doctrinally but also historically. We know, for example, that Buddhism had percolated to the West *before* the rise of Christianity. The fact of Buddhist (both Theravada and Mahayana) influence on earliest Christianity has been mooted for a long time (at least since the work of Albert Edmonds in the late nineteenth century), but the great extent of Buddhist influence is only now becoming appreciated. Dr. Detering’s work advances that appreciation. My own work has detailed extensive similarities in doctrine and ethics between Buddhism and Christianity (**Buddhist and Christian Parallels Compiled from the Earliest Scriptures**).

Surprising influence from India—sometimes outside of Buddhism per se—has also come to light. To this day there are ‘**Thomas Christians**’ in India. Their claim is very ancient. In the **Acts of Thomas**, the apostle Thomas is supposed to have gone to India, where (legend has it) he was martyred. Less appreciated is that the Acts of Thomas betray clear influence *from India*. Commenting on one passage (Acts 91 f) G. Bornkamm wrote: “The symbolic meaning of the dream is clear from

the context... But over and above this the whole scene is **an exact reproduction** of the Indian myth of the stealing of the food of immortality by the heavenly eagle Garuda, the sacred bird of Vishnu..." (NTA 1964.I:431, emphasis added).

Above, it was suggested that the Gospel of Mark drew not directly from Buddhism, but from an esoteric Jewish Christian tradition that *itself* was dependent on Buddhism. Thankfully, texts survive witnessing to that esoteric Jewish pre-Marcian tradition. Those texts include the Gospel of Thomas and others **found at Nag Hammadi** in 1945. The Nag Hammadi library does not know Jesus the Nazarene. However it does know a Jesus who is a gnostic teacher of the kind we have been describing. In the Gospel of Thomas 'Jesus' is still the voice of gnosis. The teachings of that early Jesus align much more closely with Buddhism than do the teachings of Mark's Jesus the Nazarene.

The Christian records include, at their core, Buddhist material now in a thoroughly original Western form. I don't believe such a development would have taken place on its own, that is, without a particularly strong stimulus. In my view, that stimulus was the career of Yeshu ha-Notsri—a Jewish prophet who taught a form of *Buddhism*. Yeshu lived in the early part of I BCE, spent many years in Alexandria, and then returned to Palestine to teach, gather disciples, and to be finally executed by the Jewish religious establishment. The coincidences are numerous, compelling, and simply too powerful to overlook: the prophet's name was Yeshu (cf. Jesus/Joshua) ha-Notsri (cf. Nazarene), and he was "hung on a tree" on the eve of Passover, c. 75 BCE. The principal accusation of the Sanhedrin against Yeshu was: "He made himself God" (**NazarethGate**, 422-23). Similarly, the Marcian Jesus is God in man, as we read at the climax of his trial when Jesus self-references himself as the Son of Man who will come at the end times in judgment:

And the High Priest stood up in the midst, and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" But he was silent and made no answer. Again the High Priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." And the High Priest tore his garments and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy!" (Mk 14:60-64)

Part 37

The second century, Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr

“For I have proved that it was Jesus who appeared to and conversed with Moses, and Abraham, and all the other patriarchs without exception, ministering to the will of the Father; who also, I say, came to be born man by the Virgin Mary, and lives for ever.” (Dial. Trypho 113)

Exegesis of Jewish scripture by the Church Fathers

In the penultimate section of his article (pp. 66–69), Dr. Detering highlights a faulty exegetical strategy of the Church Fathers: “The direction does not lead from the historical Jesus back to Old Testament figures, but the reverse: from an allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament to a historical Jesus.”

In other words, the starting point was not a historical Jesus—it was the copious fund of Jewish scripture, with its myriad narratives, figures both historical and invented, miracles, prayers, and wisdom. In his long and distinguished career, the mythicist scholar **Rev. Thomas Brodie** has analyzed the sequence of how the Septuagint informed first Matthew’s “logia,” then the early Pauline epistles, then (according to Brodie) GMark, and finally GJohn and GLuke-Acts.

Detering cites a remarkable passage from Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* (emphases added for subsequent discussion):

[Justin speaks:] “Moreover, in the book of Exodus we have also perceived that **the Name of God Himself which, He says, was not revealed to Abraham or to Jacob, was Jesus**, and was declared mysteriously through Moses. Thus it is written: ‘And the Lord spake to

Moses, Say to this people, Behold, ***I send My angel before your face***, to keep you in the way, ***to bring you into the land which I have prepared for you***. Give heed to Him, and obey Him; do not disobey Him. For He will not draw back from you; ***for My Name is in Him.*** Now understand that He who led your fathers into the land is called by this name Jesus, and first called Auses (Oshea). For if you shall understand this, you shall likewise perceive that ***the Name of Him who said to Moses, 'for My Name is in Him,' was Jesus***. For, indeed, He was also called Israel, and Jacob's name was changed to this also. Now ***Isaiah shows that those prophets who are sent to publish tidings from God are called His angels and apostles***. For Isaiah says in a certain place, 'Send me.' And that the prophet whose name was changed, Jesus [Joshua], was strong and great, is manifest to all. If, then, we know that God revealed Himself in so many forms to Abraham, and to Jacob, and to Moses, how are we at a loss, and do not believe that, ***according to the will of the Father of all things, it was possible for Him to be born man of the Virgin***, especially after ***we have such Scriptures, from which it can be plainly perceived that He became so according to the will of the Father?*** (Chp. 75.)

The above reveals some of Justin's views regarding Jesus in mid-II CE. We note the following in order:

(a) ***"the Name of God Himself*** which, He says, was not revealed to Abraham or to Jacob, was Jesus"

COMMENT: Elsewhere (and in many places) Justin equates Jesus with the Logos: "Reason (or the Word, the Logos) Himself, who took shape, and became man, and was called Jesus Christ" (**First Apology** 5). "Name" is a particular (though not exclusively) Semitic concept for "power, essence." The Hellenistic equivalent is the Logos, by which Justin means the potency of creation, the essence of all being, eternal, divine, and co-existent with the Father (cf. Rev 19:13). In stating that "the Name of God himself... was Jesus," Justin is summarizing the essence of the Christian faith. He expands on this in chp. 61 of **Dialog with Trypho**:

"I shall give you another testimony, my friends," said I, "from the Scriptures, that God begat before all creatures a Beginning, [who

was] a certain rational power [proceeding] from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos; and on another occasion He calls Himself Captain, when **He appeared in human form to Joshua the son of Nun...**

The Word of Wisdom, who is Himself this God begotten of the Father of all things, and Word, and Wisdom, and Power, and the Glory of the Begetter, will bear evidence to me, **when He speaks by Solomon the following:** 'If I shall declare to you what happens daily, I shall call to mind events from everlasting, and review them. The Lord made me the beginning of His ways for His works. From everlasting He established me in the beginning, before He had made the earth... When He made ready the heavens, I was along with Him, and when He set up His throne on the winds: when He made the high clouds strong, and the springs of the deep safe, when He made the foundations of the earth, I was with Him arranging. I was that in which He rejoiced; daily and at all times I delighted in His countenance... Now, therefore, O son, hear me. Blessed is the man who shall listen to me, and the mortal who shall keep my ways... But they who sin against me, trespass against their own souls; and they who hate me love death.' (Prov. 8:22-36.)

Thus, Justin inherited the concept of a pre-existent, universal, divine, 'rational power' from Judaism—which Justin above calls by many names, including "Logos." Gnostics had a similar conception, where the power of God is a spiritual agent, 'light': "Jesus says, 'I am the light that is in them all. I am the All, and the All has gone out from me and the All has come back to me. Cleave the wood—I am there; lift the stone and you will find me there'" (GTh 77). The Sethians held that a secret, *saving* (= "Ieshua/Iesous"), knowledge had been transmitted by God to Adam's son Seth, and then to posterity in an unbroken—and covert—lineage through all generations.

The Church monopolized salvation by limiting the Word/Logos to Jesus the Nazarene, the 'only Son of God.' This works only by cutting off the aspirant's *independent* access to the divine—as in the case of gnosticism, a form of Christianity that existed *before* the invention of Jesus the Nazarene. With the appearance of the canonical gospels in

mid-II CE, however, the aspirant now had to go *through the Church* in order to access the divine—which was, of course, the whole point. The Catholics replaced the independent search for gnosis with a prescription for salvation: *belief* in Jesus the Nazarene and in the Church as his designated representative on earth. The mechanism by which the Church did this was essentially literary: the canonical gospels. And though this very successful mechanism, the Church henceforth arrogated to itself all “truth.”

Another way of looking at Church origins is that the Hellenist ‘Christians’ took over a gnostic (and Jewish) view and hypostatized it: the universal Jesus/Word became flesh, *sarx*. Jesus the Nazarene was a *theios aner*, both man and the exclusive/universal potency (Logos) of God, the essence of all being—the divine “Word made flesh.” *That*, of course, is neither Jewish nor Gnostic. It is specifically “Christian.”

Justin certainly did not invent the “eternal logos” doctrine. Philo of Alexandria, one century earlier, knew a semi-divine logos which he also identified with the “Angel of the Lord.” Furthermore—as we have seen—the pre-Markan Jewish Christians knew the concept of Jesus/Joshua as the indwelling Power of God. This eternal Jesus/Joshua and the semi-divine Logos of Philo naturally and organically developed into the Hellenist Christian Logos doctrine:

And though the devil is ever at hand to resist us, and anxious to seduce all to himself, yet the Angel of God, i.e., the Power of God sent to us through Jesus Christ, rebukes him, and he departs from us. (*Dial. Trypho* 116)

The major difference between proto-Mark (primarily Hebrew) and post-Mark (primarily Hellenist) Christianities regarded the nature of ‘Jesus’: for the former, Jesus was a divine, universal *spiritual* entity; for the latter, Jesus was God *in the flesh*, an absolutely unique figure of history—Jesus the Nazarene.

(b) **“I send My angel before your face... to bring you into the land which I have prepared for you... for My name is in Him”.** For Justin, all the Jewish prophets were angels of God (see below, point [d]). At Prov 8:23 (cited above), however, Justin writes that the Logos/angel “calls Himself Captain, when He appeared in human form to Joshua the son of Nun.” The link between Joshua ben Nun and Jesus Christ is evident to Justin:

“Yet after this you made a calf, and were very zealous in committing fornication with the daughters of strangers, and in serving idols. And again, when the land was given up to you with so great a display of power, that you witnessed the sun stand still in the heavens by the order of that man whose name was Jesus [Joshua], and not go down for thirty-six hours, as well as all the other miracles which were wrought for you as time served; and of these it seems good to me now to speak of another, for it conduces to your hereby knowing Jesus, whom we also know to have been Christ the Son of God, who was crucified, and rose again, and ascended to heaven, and will come again to judge all men, even up to Adam himself.” (*Dial. Trypho* 132)

There is a long tradition in Jewish scripture of angels representing the Power of God and appearing in human form (cf. Jacob wrestling with the angel at the brook of Jabbok). Thus, we have identified three strands that preceded and informed the Markan figure Jesus the Nazarene: (1) the Jewish-Christian mobile, spiritual Jesus (‘Power/Wisdom of God’); (2) the Philonic Logos (also approximating Divine Wisdom); and (3) the OT concept of angels as God’s emissaries/representatives *in human form* (Gen 32:23).

(c) **“the name of Him who said to Moses, ‘for My name is in Him,’ was Jesus.”**—This bold statement makes Justin’s view quite plain: the “name of Yahweh” is/was *Jesus from primordial times*.

(d) **“Isaiah shows that those prophets who are sent to publish tidings from God are called His angels and apostles”.** This shows that, for Justin, the prophets (including Moses and Joshua ben Nun) were god’s “angels.” In his view, the Jewish prophets themselves were

God's emissaries/angels. Justin's conceptual mixing of the fleshly and spiritual has now *almost* reached the complete mixing of divine and human found in 'Jesus of Nazareth.'

Justin Martyr and the Alternate Chronology

Justin Martyr lived c. 100 to c. 165 CE. According to the Alternate Chronology presented in these posts, he was thus a contemporary of (a) Marcion of Pontus; (b) the invention of Jesus the Nazarene/of Nazareth; and (c) the writing of the canonical gospels. In this sense, the Alternate Chronology is a 'late' chronology—the canonical gospels are three-quarters of a century *later* than commonly held, and the beginnings of Christianity (as we know it) are a full century later. As we shall see in the next (and final) post in this series, however, in my opinion the Alternate Chronology is also an *early* chronology, in that the true beginnings of Christianity extend back to the early first century BCE—to the obscure prophet known to history as Yesu ha-Notsri.

Justin is one of the first witnesses to what we can call normative Christianity. He knows Jesus Christ *in the flesh*, and he also defends the resurrection of the flesh (cf. [On the Resurrection](#)). While he does not verbally quote from a canonical gospel, **Justin knows** the virgin birth (i.e. GMt/GLk), crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate, Jesus entering Jerusalem on an ass ([Mt 21:2 ff., cf. Dial. Trypho 53](#)), etc. Justin even refers to "scripture" in which "Jesus commanded to love even [our] enemies" (*Trypho* 85). But the concept of this scripture seems still unstable and not yet graced by the term *euaggelion*: in several places Justin refers not to a "gospel" but to "memoirs of the apostles" (*Trypho* 103, 106 etc).

Justin Martyr is a critical witness to Christian beginnings because he flourished during those critical decades of the second century,

decades that witnessed the birth of the Christian religion as we know it.

(e) **“according to the will of the Father of all things, it was possible for Him to be born man of the Virgin”**—This is the hypostatizing of the spritual Jesus discussed above in the first point above. Justin must have known the nativity stories in GMt and (or) GLk. My suspicion is that all four canonical gospels were penned in fairly quick succession in the decade 140-50 CE. This fits in well with the evidence we have from Justin’s writings.

(f) **“we have such Scriptures, from which it can be plainly perceived that He became so according to the will of the Father.”**—This shows that Justin, writing c. 155 CE, already knows two or more canonical gospels. This sort of data contributes to a *terminus ad quem* for canonical gospel formation. (The *terminus a quo* **was certainly Marcion**, early II CE.) Of course, Justin flagrantly engages in circular reasoning when he argues from the gospels themselves.

But Justin does not always argue from the latter-day gospels. He also sees Jesus virtually everywhere in Jewish scripture (cf. point [c] above) —bringing the Israelites out of Egypt (Moses), leading them into the Promised Land (Joshua), and even as synonymous with Israel (Jacob):

“He speaks therefore in the passage relating to Judah: ‘A prince shall not fail from Judah, nor a ruler from his thighs, till that which is laid up for him come; and He shall be the expectation of the nations.’ And it is plain that this was spoken not of Judah, but of Christ. For all we out of all nations do expect not Judah, but Jesus, who led your fathers out of Egypt. For the prophecy referred even to the advent of Christ: ‘Till He come for whom this is laid up, and He shall be the expectation of nations.’ Jesus came, therefore, as we have shown at length, and is expected again to appear above the clouds.” (*Dial. Trypho* 120)

Jacob was called Israel; and Israel has been demonstrated to be the Christ, who is, and is called, Jesus. (*Dial. Trypho* 134)

Part 38

Buddhism, Christian origins, Yeshu ha-Notsri, Detering, Eisenman

Conclusions

Dr. Detering's overall conclusion

[I translate his final section in toto below. Emphases are added.—R.S.]

[Dr. Detering writes:]

Beginning with the gnostic interpretation of the Exodus motif and the question of its origin, we have arrived at an element of critical importance: the metaphor of transcendence, expressed figuratively as [reaching] the “other shore”—which plays a central role in Indian/Buddhist spirituality. The question of where the two trajectories intersect—Jewish tradition/Hebrew Bible on the one hand, and Buddhist/Indian spirituality on the other—led us to the Therapeutae, about whom Philo of Alexandria reports in his *De Vita Contemplativa*.

Once the Buddhist origin of the Therapeutae is seen as plausible, it can be shown that their central mystery consisted of an interpretation of the Exodus, **an interpretation based upon Buddhist sources**. This interpretation, in turn, was the seed of the Christian sacrament of baptism. Early Christian gnostics, such as the Peratae and the Naassenes, transferred to Moses' successor Joshua what the Therapeutae (more strongly rooted in Jewish tradition) maintained for Moses. The old cult of Moses would be surpassed by the new, Gnostic-Christian cult of Joshua. The counterpart of Moses became Jesus/Joshua.

Seen in this light, the “historical” Jesus, that is, Jesus of Nazareth, was hypostatized in the second century of our era out of the Old Testament Joshua. The Christian savior Joshua/Jesus is nothing other than the result of Jewish-Buddhist exegesis of the Old Testament.

My conclusion to the commentary series

R. Salm

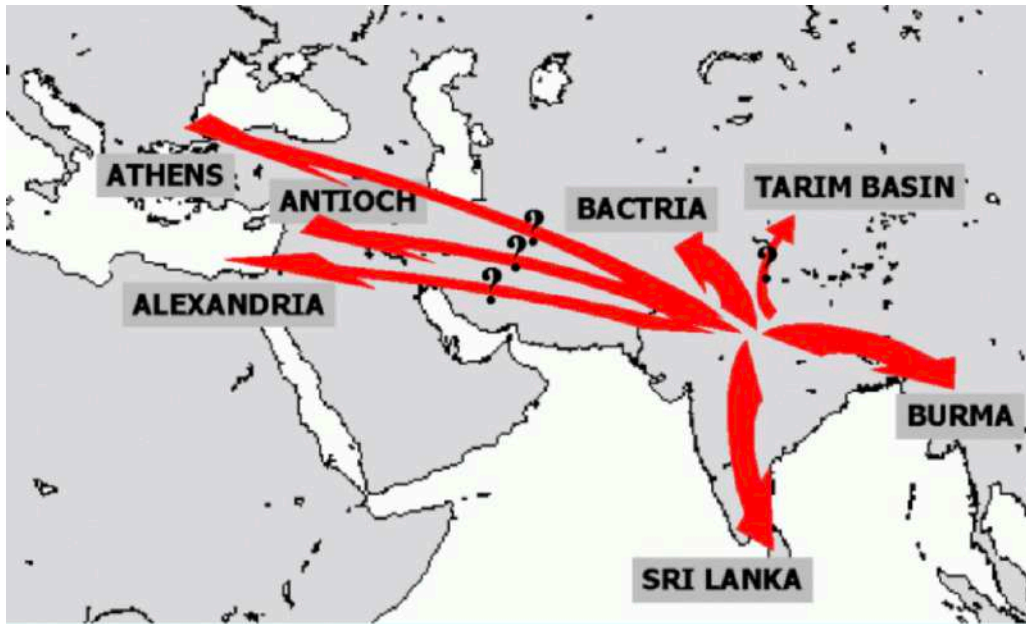
Dr. Detering has opened the door to a new way of viewing the origins of Christianity. It is no longer a phenomenon that began in the first century CE with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Already at the turn of the era the seeds of Christianity had been sown. Detering points to the Therapeutae as a critical link between Christianity and Buddhism. That sect is described by Philo Judaeus, who lived and wrote in the first decades CE. This indicates that the sect was already in existence *before* the alleged time of Jesus of Nazareth.

We have seen that ancient sources (including some Church Fathers) considered the Therapeutae to be Christians. Detering agrees. Furthermore, he proposes that Therapeutic teaching and praxis link on the one hand back to Buddhism, and on the other hand forward to Christian gnostic doctrine. The nub of this link derives from the sect’s view regarding ‘crossing over’—a critical concept meaning many things, but particularly the self-transformation from ignorance to gnosis (death to life, darkness to light, etc). For Detering, this central concept also links the Therapeutae with Joshua ben Nun and with a core event in Jewish mythology: the crossing of the Jordan River. That crossing, so vital in Jewish mythology, was reinterpreted by early Christian gnostics in a spiritual way. Their reinterpretation, in turn, was

known to the evangelist Mark. In Mark's gospel, Jesus *repeatedly* crosses the Sea of Galilee 'to the other side.' Detering's analysis and the foregoing discussions now open the door to an allegorical understanding of those Marcan passages.

According to the foregoing view, earliest Christianity was a religion of 'crossing over.' Both Dr. Detering and myself have argued that 'the other side' was originally a gnostic construct: the transformation from ignorance to gnosis. Of course, the gnostic way has long been marginalized in Christianity, yet in the 20th century it came to the fore once again with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library. The Dead Sea Scroll findings also support the notion of an early Christian—or 'pre-Christian'—proto-gnosis. After all, the Qumran writings include the tradition of Saving Wisdom, and even the concept that the Qumranites themselves (Essenes?) were 'Angels' possessing special divine knowledge (cf. the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, the Thanksgiving Hymns).

Once a proto-gnostic movement in Palestine about and before the turn of the era is admitted, then the door opens wide on possible influence from distant Buddhism. Detering boldly confirms such influence. Some of my own past writings also support this view. My book *Buddhist and Christian Parallels* (available [free online](#)) sets forth myriad ethical and sapiential similarities. It consists of 57 chapters and well over one hundred citations. They demonstrate, point by point, a conclusive relationship between the *original* Buddhist and Christian religions at a fundamental level.



The Buddhist missionary activities of Emperor Ashoka, c. 250 BCE.

It is also well known that Buddhist contacts with the West began no later than Emperor Ashoka's missionaries, sent out 'all over the world' c. 250 BCE. (On this see also [here](#).)

When one takes Buddhist influence seriously, and when one recognizes the Therapeutae as a western outcome of that influence, then the emergence of Christianity suddenly presents itself in an unfamiliar light:

(1) First of all, the traditional chronology must be substantially revised—Christian origins are no longer pegged to Jesus of Nazareth in the early first century but must antedate the *already-established* Therapeutae (at the very least). In short, the traditional Christian chronology is late by perhaps a century.

(2) Secondly, the *nature* of earliest Christianity radically changes: once one jettisons Jesus of Nazareth (as one must do, per point [1]), then the religion loses its focus on the Son of God born of a virgin, who preached and healed the sick, and who died for our sins and then

resurrected on the third day. In place of this late (indeed, mid-second century) Hellenistic romance, what emerges is a proto-gnostic religion in some way linked to Buddhism. That early religion is more closely tied to heretical Christian gnostic writings (e.g. the Nag Hammadi Library) than to Pauline/New Testament Christianity—which is *late*.

An overlooked prophet

The early chronology that results from Detering's views regarding pre-Christian Buddhist contact, the Therapeutae, and Joshua ben Nun are also fully compatible with my theory that a Jewish prophet, **Yeshu ha-Notsri**, fled to Alexandria ca. 100 BCE and there converted to Buddhism. If Yeshu (crucified c. 75 BCE) were actually at the root of Christianity, this would allow plenty of time for the Therapeutae to arise as an early Christian sect.

I consider the intersection of Detering's and my views more than fortuitous: it is a powerful indication that we are on the right track, for both he and I arrived at our conclusions by entirely different methods and quite independently. I have found Detering's non-traditional views to be remarkably correct at other seminal junctures (especially as regards the second century CE dating of the Pauline epistles). In addition, his scholarly credentials are unimpeachable. These facts bolster my confidence that we are indeed on the right track, that Detering's long article on 'crossing over'—presently under examination—augurs a sea change in the study of Christian origins, and that this extended commentary series is more than justified. In agreement with Dr. Detering, I have long suspected a link between Buddhism and Christianity. The fortuitous confluence of our views at a deep level explains my particular interest in Detering's ground-breaking article under consideration in these posts.

My research (detailed in *NazarethGate*, chapter 14)—largely dependent on obscure Rabbinical sources—reveals that Yeshu ha-Notsri was a well educated Jerusalem Pharisee, privy to the upper echelons of power in the time of Alexander Janneus (early first century BCE). This ruler, however, was in an adversarial relationship with the Pharisees—it was Janneus who infamously crucified 800 Pharisees in one day while looking on carousing. The young Yeshu (perhaps not his real name) had fled to Egypt with his mentor, **Joshua ben Perachiah**. Yeshu returned to Palestine after perhaps twenty years in Egypt. He preached among the Jews, was arrested, tried by the Sanhedrin, and “hung on a tree on the eve of Passover” (b. Sanh. 43a). In my opinion, Yeshu’s name, together with these other details of his story, constitute far too many parallels with the Jesus story in the gospels to be mere coincidence. I have proposed that Yeshu’s story reappears—with remarkable faithfulness, all things considered—in the canonical gospels.

The Talmudic records offer hints of Yeshu’s teaching—hints that point in a decidedly gnostic direction. Here, too, there are many Christian parallels. There are also Buddhist parallels. Buddhism is *the* gnostic religion par excellence: in Buddhism, gnosis is accessible to all and can lead the sincere seeker to enlightenment/salvation in this very life. The Buddhist aspect of Yeshu/Jesus’s teaching is particularly evident in the *Gospel of Thomas*. But it is also readily detectable in the canonical gospels, where the gnostic elements are often veiled in inscrutable parables and couched in pithy logia.

In short, my research has led me to the conclusion that Yeshu ha-Notsri was the actual founder of Christianity.

Qumran

Dr. Detering's work results in an alternate chronology of Christian origins with impacts in both directions—later (the Pauline epistles as well as the canonical gospels move forward in time to the second century CE) and earlier (the origins of Christianity move backward in time to the generations before the Therapeutae). As regards the earlier direction, this alternate Christian chronology also places the Dead Sea Scrolls/Essenes/Qumranites in a very interesting light: they could be an early manifestation of Yeshu's teaching.

Dr. Robert Eisenman has proposed, in several large tomes, that Christian elements are to be found in the Dead Sea Scriptures. Contrary to the consensus in DSS scholarship, Eisenman insists on dating some scrolls to the first century CE. This enables him to date the composition of some of the Qumran writings to about the traditional time of Paul, who (according to the consensus chronology) was writing his epistles during the 50s CE. However, the alternate chronology proposed here (going back to Yeshu ha-Notsri) makes such a one-century shift of DSS documents unnecessary. Eisenman's theory, in the main, can *still* be correct—but now without the awkward need to shift any scrolls to the first century CE.

Yeshu ha-Notsri was crucified c. 80-75 BCE. The Essenes could have been among his early followers. Indeed, the Qumran writings betray a gnostic tendency not otherwise found in Judaism, some also with Buddhist overtones. From the vantage point of this proposed alternate chronology, the sectarian DSS emerge as an early attempt to fuse Yeshu's quasi-Buddhist teaching with traditional Judaism. Of course, this vantage point is entirely new. I don't believe anyone else has proposed that we view the Dead Sea Scrolls from a perspective that includes Judaism, gnosticism, and Buddhism.

The priority of gnostic Christianity

Dr. Detering's work—particularly regarding the Therapeutae as “Jewish Buddhists”—not only impacts the chronology of early Christianity, but also its *nature*. The first casualty of the alternate chronology is, of course, Jesus of Nazareth himself. We recall, however, that Jesus of Nazareth—and the canonical gospels themselves—are secondary to the Pauline kerygma and are all Catholic efforts to illustrate that kerygma—to bring the ‘proclamation’ to the masses. (On this, see Tom Dykstra's book, *Mark: Canonizer of Paul*, reviewed on this website beginning [here](#).) In this regard, the gospels have been phenomenally successful.

The alternate Christian chronology proposed here shows that the Pauline kerygma, Jesus of Nazareth, and indeed the entire New Testament are all later developments in Christian history. Before the composition of the gospels (mid-II CE), a long 200+ years had already elapsed since the death of Yeshu ha-Notsri. That is a lot of time. It allows for many stages and movements, including the Essenes, the Therapeutae, and the prevalent pre-canonical view of ***‘Jesus’ as the mobile, spiritual Power of God*** that indwells the saintly person here below. That view of the spiritual Jesus is quite evident, even today, in many marginalized apocryphal Christian texts.

In place of the divine man of the gospels, what emerges is an early proto-gnostic religion in some way linked to Buddhism. That early religion is more closely tied to heretical Christian gnostic writings (e.g. the Nag Hammadi Library) than to Pauline/New Testament Christianity—which, like Paul himself, is *late*.

What Dr. Detering's work points to, in sum, is a completely new account of Christian origins.