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Arthur Darby Nock

Essays on Religion and the Ancient World

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Bibliography of Nock's writings,
and Indexes, by*

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I



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THE MILIEU OF GNOSTICISM

DR. JONAS has set himself to the study of a wide range of religious development under the Empire, bringing under the rubric of Gnosis not only Christian Gnosticism but also the *Hermetica*, the literature of the mysteries, magical literature, Neopythagoreanism, some later parts of the Avesta, and Neoplatonism; he makes no exception of Plotinus, and promises to justify this point of view in a second volume which is still to appear. He finds over this extensive field certain general features. They are, in particular, the idea of the cosmos as an evil thing and the visible expression of an evil order from which man needs deliverance; the statement of this evil in terms either of planetary fate or of a Creator God who is different from God the Father and hostile to Him and to us; the escape of men from this evil by grace and gnosis (that is to say, the perception of truth not by reason but by illumination); the mythical figure of the Heavenly Man, who is now sunk in the sleep of captivity in matter but who is destined to be awakened and restored to his former glory; and certain novel ethical theories associated with this general point of view.

This is set forth in a detailed analysis which includes various good critical observations.¹ Nevertheless, J.'s real interest lies in an attempt to make a synthesis. He does this with concepts of Spengler and Heidegger. Frankly, I cannot understand what he does in this direction. He is a metaphysician trying to shake off the yoke of history and to lead us to a higher level of comprehension; I am left in a terminological fog, and I know that I am not alone in this situation. Is not his book an illustration of a fairly common dissatisfaction with the slow progress and manifest limitations of linguistic and historical scholarship? Is it not in a sense a parallel to the movements which it seeks to present? It is an expression of our century. Learning never has been and never can be wholly detached from the conditions of life and the general trends of thought, and all

¹ E.g. 25 ff. on Anz and Bousset; 64 f. against the notion that hard times account for the rise of Gnosis; 182 on ἐναρμόνιος δαῖλος in *Corp. Herm.* 1, 15; 218 ff. on Gnostic 'inverted allegory' as applied to myths.

attitudes towards investigation involve an element of emotion. Those of us who cling hardest to the older ways may have to admit that our struggle for such approximation to objectivity as is possible is reinforced by a desire for escape. 'Nun sucht man aber an dem Arbeiter nicht mehr, denn daß er treu gefunden werde.' The historian of religion cannot, however, solve the riddles of the universe; his business is more pedestrian and has been wisely and well defined by Nilsson in this journal II, 1935, 177 f.

Let us come to detail. What does a man mean when he says «daß eine so spirituelle Größe wie das "Ev bei Plotin in einem ganz bestimmten, existenzialen Sinn auf den gnostischen Grundmythos der Entweltlichung rückbezogen in ihm fundiert ist» (89 f.)? We are promised the proof in vol. 2; it is to be philosophical «der von dem philologischen einer literaturgeschichtlichen Filiation durchaus verschieden ist»; meanwhile we may continue to believe that the One comes from the Parmenides of Plato, and it may well be through Moderatus.² What again of (247) «der Gott der Mandäer, Marcions und Plotins ist einer» or of the dogmatic assertion, slightly qualified by «wohl», that many Gnostic schools had borrowed the Indian doctrine of *karma* (236)?

Nevertheless, we cannot just dismiss all this as a modern syncretism and erect high barriers between these various phases of religious thought. I must beg leave to abandon detailed criticism of J. and to make a provisional attempt to set forth the broad lines of the problem as it appears to me. The situation could perhaps be represented by three concentric circles around Christian Gnosticism; the innermost representing some of the *Hermetica*, the *Chaldaic Oracles*, Numenius, and elements in the magic papyri; the next representing certain trends in popular philosophy and in Neoplatonism; the outermost representing habits of mind widespread among the educated.

(a) The phenomena assigned to the innermost ring have one significant feature in common—an element of Judaism. *Corp. Herm.* 1 quotes *Genesis* as sacred literature, and the influence of the LXX is seen throughout this tractate and the third, notably also in 13, probably in 5, possibly in 2, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14, and incidentally in the *Asclepius* and the *Kore Kosmou*.³ Numenius paid particular attention to Jewish writings, and knew something of Jesus, and his scheme of the universe is, if less complicated, parallel to some Christian Gnostic doctrine.⁴ The magic papyri have a strong Jewish strain; while the acquaintances which they show with

² E. R. Dodds, *CQ* 22, 1928, 129 ff.

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* 99 ff.; Scott, *Hermetica* 1, 54. R. Reitzenstein, *Stud. z. ant. Synkretismus* 31 suggested that *Corp. Herm.* 1 was written by an unorthodox Jew.

⁴ It is not clear to me that he must have been acquainted with writings of Christian Gnostics.

religions other than Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish, is almost confined to *nomina sacra*, the knowledge which they show of the Old Testament is such as to suggest Hellenizing Jews rather than Judaizing Gentiles.⁵ For the *Chaldaic Oracles* the case is less clear, but there are indications which seem to point to contacts with Judaism.⁶ Furthermore, although the magic papyri, as redacted, use not only terms of Christian gnosis but also a prayer from the *Hermetica*, there is otherwise very little even to suggest, let alone prove, any cross-relationship between these parallel non-Christian phenomena.⁷

Heterodox Judaism was a religious factor of the first importance. Philo knew and disapproved of contemporary liberals who, feeling, as he did, that they knew the inner meaning of the Law, concluded, as he did not, that they were emancipated from the obligation of observing the letter. They would drift out of the life of their community. This tendency must have been greatly strengthened by the hardening of religious rigorism after Roman arms had crushed the national hope.⁸ Jews thus unchurched would of necessity become more and more remote from the faith of their fathers. Instead of Judaism explained or illustrated by *x*, they would have Judaism + *x* or *x* + Judaism, whether *x* was Greek philosophy or Iranian myth and theory built around it.⁹ If *x* included Christian teaching, such men would view it with the freedom and individualism with which they had viewed Jewish teaching.

In the early generations the line between Judaism and Christianity was

⁵ For (a) the Biblical references extend over various parts of the O.T. while known Gentile interest seems to have been confined to the cosmogony; (b) PGM 4, 3019 ff. (on which cf. P. Wendland, *Fleck. Jb. Suppl.* 22, 752) emphasizes the crossing of the Red Sea and the fire ever burning at Jerusalem, which suggests a Jewish nationalistic point of view. The reference to Jesus is no obstacle in view of *Acts* 19, 13.

⁶ Cf. W. Kroll, *De oraculis Chaldaicis* 61, à propos of οὐδὲ τὸ τῆς ὄλης σκύβαλου κρημνὸς καταλείψει, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰδὼλῳ μερὶς εἰς τοῖον ἀμφιβάοντα (for σκύβαλον, cf. Julian 179 D) and ἐκτείνας πύριον οὐν ἔργον ἐπ' εὐσεβίας ρηυστὸν καὶ σῶμα σώσεις, which have been thought to refer to some sort of bodily resurrection of the righteous; perhaps the second implies a doctrine such as we find in Philo *Qu. Gen.* 2, 12, *si uero miseratus deus auertat uitiorum illuuiem et aridam reddat animam, incipiet uiuificare atque animare corpus mundiori anima*, which Goodenough, *By Light, Light* 134 n. 68, compares with *Rom.* 8, 11 (cf. *ibid.* 149 f., 179, 372, 407 f.—with his reference to Archyt. *ap. Stob.* 3, 1, 112 on man as not soul alone but body as well). But it is very hard to be sure of the meaning of anything in the *Oracula*.

⁷ I should welcome correction, but I have noted only Numen. fr. 53, p. 70 Thedinga [Test. 36 Leemans] (from Porphy. *ap. Stob.* 1, 49, 252), asserting that there are two souls in man, which is parallel to the doctrine quoted as Hermetic by Iamblich. *De myst.* 8, 6, p. 269 Parthey: *Corp. Herm.* 11, 21 'to be able to know (the divine) and to wish and to hope is the direct way', which has some affinity with the three great virtues of the *Oracles*, faith, truth, love (Kroll 26; Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*³ 383 ff.); I suspect that Paul (1 *Cor.* 13) and the *Oracula* both drew on Hellenistic Judaism. The metaphor ἡψατε Kroll 15, though parallel to *Corp. Herm.* 1, 27; 7, 1, does not prove relationship; cf. Liddell-Scott-Jones, s.v.

⁸ Some such Jews remained within Judaism.

⁹ Judaism was one of the chief channels by which Iranian ideas were disseminated.

not one high unbroken wall; then, even more than in the Protestant Reformation, there were various differentiations and various degrees of separation from the original basis. We know a little of the Ebionites and Elkasaites, and behind the late romancing of Clementine literature we can perhaps discern some memory of these transitional conditions.¹⁰ The Pauline Epistles, notably *Colossians*, show a wide range of experimentalism and adjustment; the Fourth Gospel is clearly subsequent to and in reaction against some early Gnostic development. May it not be that some of the Christian Gnostic schools owe their considerable independence to the fact that they were the result, not of reflection by outright converts to Christianity, but of approximations to Christianity by Jews of the liberalizing and sophisticated type and of contacts with Christian groups as slight and superficial as that ascribed in *Acts* to Simon Magus? While new varieties of thought multiplied, the early history of Christian organization and dogma, just as of Christian liturgy, is largely one of convergence.

(b) We come to our next ring—philosophic movements which show antithesis and at the same time kinship to Gnosticism. It is a commonplace that philosophy under the Empire manifests an increasing tendency to concentrate on the spiritual advancement of individuals and to use such terms as *soteria*. This could result in a workaday ethic for the masses, such as the Cynics produced. But it also led to an intensification of the early contrast between the philosopher and those who could learn his message on the one hand and the many on the other. A special quality of temper resulted. For many thinkers the universe was not, as for some Gnostics, positively bad and made by a hostile deity; but it was good only in a reflected way, only in so far as Becoming echoed Being. And while not bad in itself, it produced the effects of badness; it represented a constant source of distractions and temptations. Again, for these men there was not a redeemer, in the past or in the future; but man had in himself—or some men had in themselves—that divine element which was potentially both redeemable and redeemer.

Take the Valentinian definition of the content of Gnosis, 'Who we were, what we have become; where we were, or where we were placed; whither we hasten, from what place we are being redeemed; what is birth, what is rebirth.'¹¹ Subtract the concept of rebirth and the vigorous ἐνεβλήθημεν, and put the onus of redemption on the individual and you have something indistinguishable from Porphyry's contrast between men

¹⁰ We find in *Clem. Alex. Exc. Theod.* 27 an allegory of high-priestly dress and ceremony which is exactly what we should expect from a man whose antecedents lay in an atmosphere like that of Philo.

¹¹ *Clem. Exc. Theod.* 78.

in ordinary occupations and 'a man who has reasoned out who he is and whence he has come and whither he should speed'.¹² Porphyry proceeds to speak of shaking off sleep¹³—just as in *Corp. Herm.* 1 and 7 and in Gnostic myths; a little later (28) we read 'speaking to the man who has suspected the deceptiveness of our way of life here and of the home in which we live, and has seen his natural wakefulness and detected the sleep-inducing properties of the place in which he passes his time, we instruct him in the type of food appropriate to his suspicion of the place and to his knowledge of himself, bidding him leave the sleepers at ease in their beds'. τὸ γοῆτευμα τῆς ἐνταῦθ' ἡμῶν διατριβῆς at once suggests *Corp. Herm.* 13, 1 ἀπηλλοτριώσα¹⁴ τὸ ἐν ἐμοὶ φρόνημα ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ἀπάτης. τῆ αὐτοῦ γνώσει (cf. 1. 43, 55) suggests *CH* 1, 19 ὁ ἀναγνωρίσας ἑαυτὸν ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸ περισούσιον ἀγαθόν. The only difference, and it is significant, is the absence from Porphyry of the general missionary zeal of *Corp. Herm.* 1 (and there is no sign of that in *Corp. Herm.* 13).

This approximation is noteworthy, for Porphyry starts from Platonism and not from the special dualism of the two Hermetic treatises quoted. Their nearness of feeling is more important than their difference in theoretical outlook. Again, Bousset has distinguished two groups of writings within the *Hermetic Corpus*. In one of them fate and the cosmos are evil. God is super-mundane, and this lower world in which we live is different from the higher world of light and life, and evil *daimones* prey upon man. In the other group the cosmos is good, the Supreme Being is its maker and is continually active in it, and the general point of view is that of Stoic pantheism.¹⁵ Nevertheless, both groups are presented on the same basis as coming from revelation, and in 9, 4 we have the phrase 'those who are in gnosis' although almost immediately afterwards we find the common-place idea that the home of evil is the earth, and not the cosmos 'as some will one day blasphemously say'.¹⁶ Bräuninger, *Unters. | zu den Schr. des Hermes Trismegistos* (Diss. Berl. 1926) showed that the use of γνώσις and its cognates in a technical or semitechnical way occurred mainly in Bousset's first group, but he records exceptions in 14, 1 ἄρτι παρελθὼν ἐπὶ τὴν γνώσιν, and 11, 21 (to omit less clear cases). The exception in 14 is particularly significant inasmuch as it occurs in a tractate which polemizes against the idea that the Supreme

¹² *De abstin.* 1, 27. Rebirth has taken the place of 'the purpose of life' in the less specialized formulations compared by Norden, *Agnostos Theos* 102 ff.

¹³ And so does Plotinus 4. 8. 1, 3. 6. 6, with a precedent in Plato *Tim.* 52 B.

¹⁴ Cf. Philo *De ebrietate* 69 πάντων δσα γένεσιν εἴληχεν ἀλλοτριώσασθαι.

¹⁵ *CGA* 1914, 697 ff.

¹⁶ Bousset's suggestion, loc. cit. 708, that this remark is a redactorial insertion seems to me refuted by the parallel which he quotes from *Exc.* 11, p. 428. 17 Scott [p. 55. 10 f. *Fest.*]. *Ascl.* 22, *Exc.* 11, p. 432 S. [pp. 56 ff. *Fest.*] emphasize the paucity of the pious in the world, but are both 'pantheistic'.

God did not make all things. Furthermore, *Corp. Herm.* 5 clearly belongs to the Stoic group and yet very probably shows the influence of the Septuagint.¹⁷

(c) We come now to the outermost circle. Philosophy had since the time of Plato¹⁸ taught the need for some sort of escape. Now the mood had spread. It was not so much escape from this thing or that which men desired; it was escape. To Vettius Valens the recognition and acceptance of absolute determinism gave the same emotional satisfaction, the same sense of freedom which others of his contemporaries gained from mysteries which promised to them divine deliverance from the laws of that determinism. For him it was a way of salvation.¹⁹

We tend to think of anything like salvationism as in the main characteristic of the less educated and sophisticated. In the second and third centuries of our eras, however, it was characteristic of the more educated and sophisticated and filtered down from them to lower cultural levels. Cults and mysteries were used, but when an interpretation was given to them it was borrowed from philosophy. Orphism had set its mark on men's minds, but it continued to do so now only²⁰ because it was taken up into the Bible which Plato's writings had come to constitute. It seems to me quite wrong to think of the mystery religions or «orientalische Religiosität» as major factors in the development which we have been considering. So far as we can see, the Gnostics did not borrow or copy pagan rites. They did not, for instance, introduce a dramatic commemoration of the Passion of Jesus, and it would have seemed that they might have. Instead they borrowed ideas and interpretations, or (as the Naassenes) they created interpretations, showing that they knew the true and hidden meaning of paganism as of Judaism and of Christianity. In so far as their sacramental practice was peculiar, the peculiarity lay in modifications intended to give explicit expression to their soteriological ideas

¹⁷ Dodd 237 ff. So far as there is polemic in our extant *Hermetica* (and I do not regard 1, 21-2 as such) it is against the 'Gnostic' elements; it may well be that this element is earlier than the philosophic and pantheistic element in this literary category. (See, however, Bousset, loc. cit. 751.) Similarly Philo reacts against extreme hellenizing of Judaism, Plotinus by implication against Numenius for all his veneration of him, and I think the Fourth Gospel against early Christian Gnosis. M. Dibelius observed (in this journal 5, 1929, 164) that Philo and Paul show at various times the views of both groups on man's knowledge of God.

¹⁸ *Theaet.* 176.

¹⁹ 5, 9, p. 220 Kroll, 6 proem, p. 242; cf. 9 proem, pp. 329 f.—For Philo *De somn.* 2, 253 escape is from πόλεμος, ἀνάγκη, γένεσις, φθορά. In *Quis rerum* 85, it is from oneself. The oscillation in meaning of κόσμος in the Fourth Gospel (W. Bauer on 1, 10) is relevant.

²⁰ Apart from the use of Ἡρακλεῖος as an epithet of Dionysus (O. Kern, *Orph. Frag.*, p. 103 f.) and of Φάνης as an epithet of Mithras (F. Cumont, *Rev. hist. rel.* 109, 1934, 63 ff., with his discussion of the relations of Orphism and Mithraism in general).—What came from below consisted mainly of specific taboos.

and speculations, and to make what was done more exciting,—and in the creation of individual *μυστηρια*, which look at times like the translation into symbolic action of Philonic 'mysteries'.²¹ When we pass from the Christian Gnostics to the periphery which we have been considering, we find that the way of escape and the approach to the divine depend on asceticism, purification, knowledge, virtues. In the main, apart from the new ritual of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, ceremonies were a second best way for second best people—till we come to Iamblichus; and he was mainly concerned with the new theurgy and not with the old worship of the masses.²²

The dominant note in all this, the factor sharpening curiosity, is anxiety about *animula uagula blandula*. The new mythical cosmogonies are largely psychological and revolve about the soul and its supposed parts, about desire and a fall, about opposition to the body, about emanations²³ designed to bridge the gap between the corporeal and the incorporeal. Gnostic thought may seem to us a travesty of intellectual processes, but it is a form of thought in an atmosphere of religious emotion and not a rationalization of piety; hence its new artificial myths.

This same trend is seen in art. We know the individualism which emerges under Hadrian;²⁴ the spiritualization of the human face noticeable in the art of Parthian Dura and of the later Empire;²⁵ the psychological tension in Roman portraiture of the third century (apart from the Greek revival under Gallienus);²⁶ the sarcophagi on which the soul is shown as entering the body with reluctance.²⁷ Art corresponds to the mood of the creator and of his patron. The really poor had not time for so much introspection; it belonged to a higher social stratum.

²¹ The Ophite Eucharist, described by Epiphanius, *Pan.* 37, 5, was perhaps partly inspired by ancient rites of serpent-feeding—or even by their representations in art. G. Anrich, *Das antike Mysterienwesen* 76 suggests the cult of Sabazios as a source; this is possible, and certainly, as we know from the pictures in the catacomb of Vincentius, his cult had a power of fusion.

²² For Sallustius 12, p. 24. 10 N. *θεοτα* are only one of the many things which the gods have given man to aid him, and not the first on the list.

²³ Here Judaism had, by reason of its ideas of divine transcendence, been a forerunner.

²⁴ J. M. C. Toynbee, *The Hadrianic School* 161 ff.

²⁵ M. Rostovtzeff, *Yale Classical Studies* 5, 257 n. 131, etc. Cf. E. Pfuhl, *Die Ernte*, 1935, 60 on a mummy picture of the middle of the second century, and the spread from that time of «psychologische Vertiefung des Ausdruckes».

²⁶ H. P. L'Orange, *Studien zur Geschichte des spätantiken Porträts*; G. A. S. Snijder, *La critica d'arte* 1, 1935, 31. L'Orange notes the stylistic kinship of this with Flavian portraiture; but Dr. G. M. A. Hanfmann remarks to me on the difference of ethos; we miss the vigor of the well-known bust of Vespasian, and find instead what seems clear marks of an introvert and other-worldly point of view. To be sure, the men of this time had plenty to trouble them apart from their souls.

²⁷ Cf. C. Robert, *Sarkophagreliefs* 3, 3, 431; on the short side of one of these we see busts of Plato and of another thinker.

This is one aspect of the time. The traditions of the Stoics, the Cynics and the Epicureans retained power and continued to emphasize thought and ethics without flummery. The ancient ideals of self-sufficiency and public spirit were in radical opposition to anything remotely approaching the Gnostic; the service of mankind here and now did not so commonly give place to concentration on another world. Local worship, regarded in the matter-of-fact way which was usual, were maintained, and devotion to them sometimes deepened. Further, the demands of public and private business absorbed many of the élite.²⁸ Introspection required *otium*. Now there was probably more *otium* in the ancient world than in ours and *otium* at a much lower financial level than is found today except of necessity; *otium* was in a far larger measure regarded as an ideal. This did not apply to the social milieu in which Christianity won most adherents, but such were the circles in which currents of thought akin to Gnosticism might start.

A phenomenon such as Gnosis can be studied in a vertical section or in a horizontal section. The work of Dr. Jonas should be of value to those who are looking at Gnosis in the second way and wish to follow a topic through the different related movements. But they should not regard it as in any sense superseding Harnack, de Faye, or Burkitt. These names represent different lines of approach; they are all valuable. *uno itinere non potest perueniri ad tam grande secretum*.

²⁸ Cf. Porphyry's list, *De abstin.* 1, 27, of those to whom he did not address his exhortation.