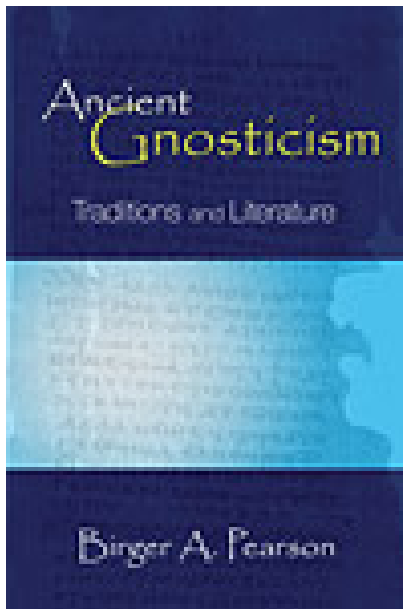


RBL 06/2008



**Pearson, Birger A.**

***Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature***

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. Pp. xvi + 361. Paper. \$25.00.  
ISBN 0800632583.

Philip L. Tite  
Willamette University  
Salem, Oregon

Over the past decade we have witnessed a proliferation of introductory textbooks on Gnosticism, the most notable being Alastair H. B. Logan, *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2003); and Riemer Roukema, *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999). To this impressive collection we can now add Birger Pearson's *Ancient Gnosticism*. The emergence of these books, along with various translations or anthologies of Gnostic texts, is a witness to the continued interest in Gnosticism within the English-speaking world.

*Ancient Gnosticism* is the product of nearly forty years of research and teaching by one of the leading scholars in the field. Pearson is currently Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. Unlike previous introductions to Gnosticism, Pearson sets out to engage the primary sources directly, placing his emphasis on introducing students to Gnosticism by presenting the sources to students rather than simply discussing sources within broader discussions of the ancient world or key themes that typify the various Gnostic systems. The only other introductory textbook that comes close to Pearson's approach is Bentley Layton's *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). Unlike Layton, however, Pearson does not present an anthology of

sources but rather points his audience to several standard English translations of texts discussed. His target audience is comprised of both nonspecialists and university students (evidently undergraduates without a background in early Christian studies).

Given the current debates over the heuristic value of the very category “Gnosticism,” Pearson opens with a brief discussion of what constitutes Gnosticism. In contrast to the growing number of scholars who are calling into question this very category (most notable being Michael Allen Williams and Karen King), Pearson still holds to the view that Gnosticism not only is a useful category but also designates an actual religious tradition that existed in antiquity. He sets forth his understanding of Gnosticism by listing a set of “essential features” (14–15): *mythopoeia* (“the construction of elaborate myths through which revealed gnosis is transmitted”); *theosophy* (“elaborating on the transcendent God and the divine world”); *cosmogony* (“how the world came into being”); *anthropogony* (“origins and imprisonment of human beings”); *soteriology* (“how the human self can be saved”); and innovative reinterpretations of biblical material (Jewish and Christian materials) and philosophical and Oriental sources (notably Platonism). These features connect through a radical dualism that is largely derived from Platonism and (especially apocalyptic) Judaism. As is well known from Pearson’s previous works, he closely ties the historical emergence of Gnosticism to Egyptian Jewish apocalyptic groups. Indeed, in *Ancient Gnosticism* not only are the roots of Gnosticism grounded in Judaism, rather than Platonism or Christianity, but the overwhelming presence of Platonic ideas in Gnosticism is mediated through Judaism, while Christian elements are typically (if not always) presented by Pearson as later additions to non-Christian systems.

After setting forth an understanding of the category “Gnosticism” as well as a brief discussion of some of the primary sources for the study of Gnosticism (church fathers; Nag Hammadi codices; Berlin Codex; Askew and Bruce Codices; and the recently released Codex Tchacos), Pearson walks through the various teachers or types of Gnosticism presented by the fathers: Simon Magus and Simonian Gnosticism; Menander; Saturninus/Saturnilos; Nicolaitans and Cerinthus; the Carpocratians; Justin the Gnostic (as presented by Hippolytus); Ophites or Ophians; and the Cainites (a sect that never existed, according to Pearson’s reading of the Gospel of Judas). Noteworthy is Pearson’s intriguing, although unfortunately overly brief, discussion of two Gnostic gems in connection to the Ophites (47–48; since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, studies of artistic representations of Gnosticism, such as the Gnostic gems, have largely been overlooked; it would have been helpful if Pearson had discussed the provenance of these gems, especially as these are in a private collection). Pearson questions the existence of a Cainite and Ophite sect (although not necessarily a type of Ophite gnosis). He supports, however, the view of an early form of Gnosticism connected in some way to

Simon, Menander, Saturninus, and Cerinthus and argues that the Nicolaitans, or at least Nicolaus, were not Gnostic.

The evidence for Gnosticism from the church fathers, however, is not to be trusted, and thus Pearson turns his attention to the sources for what he terms “Classic or Sethian Gnosticism.” After a brief discussion of the fathers’ accounts of Sethian Gnosticism, including so-called Barbelognosis (particular attention is given to Irenaeus and Epiphanius, although also Hippolytus and Pseudo-Tertullian), Pearson walks the student through the Coptic sources for Sethianism (i.e., Apocryphon of John, Apocalypse of Adam, Trimorphic Protennoia, Hypostasis of the Archons, Thought of Norea, Gospel of the Egyptians, Melchizedek, Three Steles of Seth, Zostrianos, Allogenes, Marsanes, the “Untitled Text” from the Bruce Codex, Gospel of Judas, and the Book of Allogenes). As with all Gnostic sects presented in this book, each of these texts includes both a discussion of the text, primarily a basic walk through the text, and references to where students can find an English translation, such as J. M. Robinson, ed., *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990); M. Meyer, ed., *Nag Hammadi Scripture: The International Edition* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007); B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987); W. Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972–74); and C. Schmidt and V. MacDermot, *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex* (Leiden: Brill, 1978). While these references are certainly helpful for students who may be working with different translations, there are almost no direct quotations in this book for students to read. For the Sethian Gnostic material, Pearson holds this type of Gnosticism to be the “classic” form of Gnosticism. Sethian Gnostics did not self-designate themselves as “Sethians” but rather as “Gnostics.” This “classic Gnostic” system is the basis for Pearson’s understanding of Gnosticism, including the extensive discussion of biblical interpretation in chapter 4 and the emergence of Basilidian Gnosis in Alexandria (ch. 5). Based on his understanding of this classic Gnostic tradition, along with their biblical interpretative moves, Pearson locates the origins of Gnosticism firmly within a Jewish intellectual milieu within Hellenistic Judaism, intellectuals who were “interested in making sense of their traditions ... thereby their ancestral traditions were given a radically new meaning” (132).

Pearson turns his attention in chapter 6 to the second great form of ancient Gnosticism: Valentinianism. Once again we are walked through primary sources following a discussion of Valentinus and his major successors (Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus, and Marcus). Pearson’s treatment is heavily influenced by Einar Thomassen’s recent work on Valentinianism, especially *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the ‘Valentinians’* (NHMS 60; Leiden: Brill, 2006) and the introductions and essay on Valentinianism in the *Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*; indeed, these are the only secondary

sources listed in the “further readings” for this chapter. Consequently, the chapter explores Valentinianism’s eastern and western branches along the lines set forth by Thomassen and does not consider further work on Valentinianism that has emerged (especially works pushing in the direction of exploring social and ethical aspects of Valentinianism or Markschie’s powerful argument that Valentinus should not be considered a “Gnostic”). After discussing the Valentinian teachers, Pearson turns his attention to the Coptic texts for Valentinianism (the Gospel of Truth is treated under Valentinus): Prayer of the Apostle Paul, Treatise on Resurrection, Gospel of Philip, Interpretation of Knowledge, Valentinian Exposition (along with the three “liturgical appendices”), and Tripartite Tractate.

In chapters 7 and 8, Pearson walks the student through various sects and texts that are Gnostic but not easily identifiable with the previous major groups. In chapter 7 diverse sects that held to a “three-principle system” are introduced (based on the church fathers): the Naassenes, Peratics, Docetists (though not engaging early second-century Docetism such as evidenced in Ignatius; rather, the Gospel of Peter and Hippolytus are addressed), Monoimus the Arabian (from Hippolytus), the Sethians from Hippolytus (not to be confused with Sethianism), and the Paraphrase of Shem (which Pearson sees holding close parallels with Manichaeism). In chapter 8 Pearson discusses those further texts that do not fit neatly into any particular sect, although he notes some possible connections that have been put forth: Eugnostos, Sophia of Jesus Christ, Apocryphon of James, On the Origin of the World, Exegesis of the Soul, Apocalypse of Paul, First Apocalypse of James, Second Apocalypse of James, Thunder: Perfect Mind, Concept of Our Great Power, Second Treatise of the Great Seth, Apocalypse of Peter, Letter of Peter to Philip, Testimony of Truth, Hypsiphron, Gospel of Mary, Pistis Sophia, and the Books of Jeu. Several of these works tend to be attributed to certain groups by scholars, such as the First and Second Apocalypse of James and Letter of Peter to Philip to Valentinianism, while others (such as Apocalypse of Paul and Eugnostos) are certainly far less certain (I tend to agree with Pearson that these two latter works are not Valentinian, though I am not fully convinced that Testimony of Truth is the product of an ex-Valentinian, while I would, like Pearson, see a likely link between Exegesis on the Soul with Simonian Gnosticism rather than Valentinianism).

The last four chapters and epilogue explore religious groups or movements that, in my opinion, challenge Pearson’s use of the category “Gnosticism.” Thomas Christianity is explored in chapter 9 by walking through the Acts of Thomas (albeit primarily limited to the “Hymn of the Pearl”), Gospel of Thomas (which receives the most attention), and the Book of Thomas the Contender (other Thomas texts, such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, are not dealt with). Pearson works with the assumption that we can speak of a Thomasine Christianity in the East (specifically Edessa and Mesopotamia) and claims

that, while scholars may read Gnostic elements in these texts, Thomas Christianity was not specifically Gnostic. In chapter 10 he turns his attention to Hermeticism, where strong parallels (and possible influences) are presented with Gnosticism. Particular attention is given to Poimandres within the Corpus Hermeticum, and he links three tractates from Nag Hammadi to the Hermetic tradition (Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, Asclepius, and Prayer of Thanksgiving), all of which he sees as emerging from a Hermetic fraternity in Egypt. Chapters 11 and 12 are the most unique in the book. Here Pearson introduces Manichaeism and the Mandaeans. Unlike previous chapters, these two traditions are treated holistically; that is, rather than simply presenting overviews of individual texts, Pearson offers a highly readable discussion of the historical sources, development, and decline (in Manichaeism's case) or continued existence (in the case of the Mandaean communities) of these groups. These chapters effectively present the Manichaean and Mandaean social and ritual structures and their interactions with other cultural, political, and religious elements, thereby giving students an excellent introductory overview of these two religious movements. My only quibble with the Manichaeism discussion is the focus on the Roman Empire, with little attention given to the more Eastern (especially Chinese). I would have welcomed an added section on the continuation of this world religion in the East, especially as it survived in the East for another thousand years after it was crushed in the West. Surprisingly, there is no treatment given to Marcion or the Marcionite church in this book. Pearson clearly does not view Marcion as a Gnostic and thus quickly glosses over him and his form of Christianity (see 20). While Marcion may indeed be a Paulinist rather than a Gnostic, the inclusion of other groups that are clearly not Gnostic (according to the treatment in this book)—such as Thomas Christianity, Hermeticism, Manichaeism, and the Mandaeans (these last two seemed forced into a “Gnostic” discussion)—or are questionable in their inclusion (specifically the Docetists; Is Docetism an essential feature of Gnosticism?) renders the exclusion of Marcion all the more striking. The book closes with an epilogue on the modern presence of Gnosticism (largely limited to a very brief discussion of the Ecclesia Gnostica in Los Angeles and the Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum in Palo Alto). Medieval dualistic traditions, such as the Paulicians, Cathars, and Bogomils, are only dealt with in passing. Recommended readings for each chapter and an index close the book.

While reading this book, I kept my eye on its pedagogical value and especially how it might work in one of my own courses. A textbook should not be evaluated for its contribution to scholarship as much as how it engages students. In setting out to write a very basic introductory textbook for undergraduate students, there are two major strengths that set *Ancient Gnosticism* above other potential textbook choices. Each of these strengths, however, also present challenges to the use of this work, challenges that

might be addressed in future editions. The first strength is the accessible writing style. Both Pearson's writing style and the book's physical layout renders this a very readable work. Given the esoteric and alien nature of the material, many students find Gnosticism both intriguing and intimidating. Pearson typically does not assume previous knowledge and strives to keep things simple. Unfortunately, this advantage carries the weakness of oversimplification at times. Larger issues in the study of Gnosticism, early Christianity, and ancient religions generally are glossed over or ignored. Indeed, there is no adequate history of scholarship on the study of Gnosticism. More significant, however, is the lack of evidence presented to support claims. For instance, Pearson's ongoing tendency to locate tractates in Egypt and especially Alexandria is given no substantiation, nor is the relevance of such a claim offered. In some cases discussions are so brief or undeveloped that one wonders about the value of their inclusions (e.g., the modern Gnostic groups, the reference to the "Myth of Er" on 257, or "the myth of the soul's descent and ascent current in Middle Platonism" and "Greek romances in the early Roman period" on 227), while in other instances interpretative decisions are obscured (e.g., the distinction between "*daimōn*" and "demon" on 288 or the implicit acceptance of Valentinus's authorship of the Gospel of Truth). Furthermore, on occasion Pearson slips, using terms that are not defined (e.g., "enchratic" on 247, "apocalypse" on 84 and esp. 228, and "theogony" on 57) and untransliterated Greek and Coptic terms that students would certainly not be able to read (e.g., 116, 202–3, 218). For the terminology, a glossary might be a useful addition, while the Greek and Coptic terms should be left in transliteration and explained (as it is on 265). I would also suggest that the few typographical errors (e.g., Tchakos should be Tchacos on 24) and gender-exclusive language (I believe only on 128–29) be cleaned up. If a second edition were produced, then discussions of the four tractates from Codex Tchacos should be updated now that the critical edition is available.

The second advantage of this book is the focus on primary texts. One of the weaknesses of other textbooks (e.g., Marksches and Roukema as well as the most comprehensive introduction to date, Kurt Rudolph's *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* [trans. R. McL. Wilson; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987]) is the distance created between broad historical presentations and enabling students to struggle with ancient texts. Like Pearson, I have been a strong advocate in having my students work through the primary texts in my early Christianity courses. In an introduction to Gnosticism, this emphasis is particularly valuable, as the diversity, nuance, and lack of continuity between the category "Gnosticism" and the actual texts is most effectively drawn out. By listing different options for translations along with the alternative renderings of the tractate titles (e.g., "Trimorphic Protennoia" or "Three Forms of First Thought"), the teacher is freed to use this work with several supplementary works (especially the *Nag Hammadi Library in English* and *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*). The disadvantage of Pearson's emphasis, however,

is the failure to locate these texts within their broader historical and cultural context. A clearly articulated synthesis of the various sources is necessary in order to fully appreciate the contours of, for example, “Valentinianism” and “Sethianism.” Sethianism in particular is undeveloped. John Turner’s influence is certainly present, as is evident when Pearson speaks of “Platonizing” elements in texts that suggest a late date (e.g., see the brief discussion on 99). Yet, without being familiar with Turner’s six historical phases of Sethianism as well as his typology of the ascent and descent patterns of the Sethian texts, students would not pick up this nuance nor likely grasp a “history” of Sethianism. While students using this book would likely gain some insights into specific texts, I am not convinced that they would fully appreciate “Gnosticism” or the various sects we tend to group under that category, nor would they fully grasp how these sects fit into the broader context of the Greco-Roman world and early Christianity. The chapters on Manichaeism and the Mandaeans, however, are excellent. Here we have a clearly articulated discussion of the sources, emergence, development, social and ritual aspects, and decline of these two religious movements. I would welcome such a chapter being added to the earlier sections of this book.

I also found the treatment of scholarship disappointing. While the lack of critical apparatus might be less intimidating, it renders the book less user-friendly. The recommended readings are extremely selective and limited (e.g., on Valentinianism and modern Gnostic groups). Rarely does Pearson directly engage other scholars by name (e.g., Turner and Hans-Martin Schenke on Book of Thomas the Contender), although their influence is certainly there to those familiar with the field (e.g., Thomassen on Valentinianism, Turner on Sethianism, Anne Pasquier on Eugnostos, and Louis Painchaud on On the Origin of the World, although, oddly, not on the Gospel of Philip). This lack of engagement is especially problematic when dealing with both the definition of Gnosticism and the origins of Gnosticism. With the latter, there is no presentation of diverse hypotheses on the question of origins, a topic that has been a perpetual point of debate in the field (leading several of us to discard the very search for origins). Rather, only Pearson’s view on this issue is presented and that usually indirectly in the presentation of the sources. On the former, the definitional issue, Pearson simply dismisses those who have challenged the continued use of the category “Gnosticism” as referring to a historical group. Rather than engaging what has become an emerging consensus on the constructed nature of “Gnosticism” (at least within North American scholarship), Pearson simply refers to such a view as something that is “fashionable among some scholars” (1). In an introductory textbook I would expect to see a balanced presentation of the diverse positions on this and other interpretative matters (e.g., Why is Interpretation of Knowledge simply referred to as homily when there have been several recent challenges to that reading?). An important part of a course is to give students not

only a basic knowledge of a religious tradition or topic but also to nurture critical skills by teaching new methods of analysis and engaging scholarly trends and debates. The richness of our field is arguably the most entrancing aspect to draw students into the field, and I believe Pearson's work would greatly benefit from more depth of treatment in this regard.

In *Ancient Gnosticism*, Pearson has given us one more tool for effectively teaching our students about one of the most fascinating religious movements of late antiquity. Such a textbook is certainly welcome, given the rising interest in the study of Gnosticism—an interest arguably spurred on by the controversial debates over the Gospel of Judas and the release of such films as *The Da Vinci Code*. While more advanced students will continue to benefit from Rudolph's classic introduction, for students early in their university education or unfamiliar with early Christian studies, Pearson's work will be of benefit.