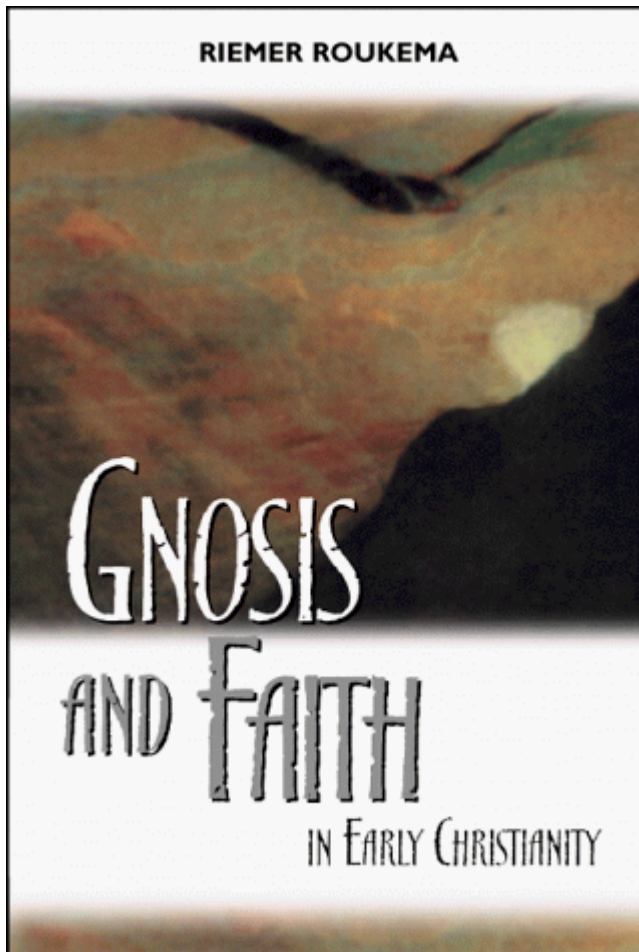


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**Roukema, Reimer**

*Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity: An Introduction to Gnosticism*

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*Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity: An Introduction to Gnosticism* is the English translation of Riemer Roukema's *Gnosis en geloof in het vroege christendom*. In this work Roukema presents both a basic introduction to Gnosticism and an investigation into Gnosticism's origins. Roukema divides his book into four parts: "A First Orientation"; "Backgrounds to Gnosticism"; "A Closer Look at Gnosticism"; and "Christian Faith and Gnosis."

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The first section gives an overview of Gnosticism, introducing works from the major heresiologists and the Nag Hammadi find. It also presents a generalized outline of gnostic cosmology. Roukema focuses on several sources that he claims provide a representative sample of gnostic views: accounts of Simon the magician, Mark the Gnostic, Saturnilus of Antioch, and the Ophites and the Nag Hammadi *Exegesis on the Soul*, *The First Revelation of James*, and *The Secret Book of John*.

The second and third sections of Roukema's book concentrate more on the question of Gnosticism's origins and constitute an extended argument that Gnosticism was an overly Hellenized form of Christianity. The second section begins with a chapter noting how a diverse group of late antique writers explored the question of life's origin and purpose. Roukema then dedicates several chapters to examining Jewish, Platonic, mystery cult, and early Christian responses to the questions of "Whence comes evil? Why is it permitted? Whence comes God?" Throughout Roukema notes the influence of Middle Platonism on each of the sources he examines.

This provides the background for his third section, where Roukema suggests that scholars should see Gnosticism as a radical form of Platonized Christianity. Roukema argues that gnostic cosmology is indebted to a number of Platonic motifs, such as distinctions between the high God and the creator, the use of "form" and "idea" to describe the creation of the first human, and the existence of a "spark" in a transitory body. Roukema sees these parallels as an indication that those who "could not give up their Platonic view of the world, integrated their philosophy into the Christian religion" (116). Gnosticism also attracted those not previously indoctrinated by Platonism because it provided "answers to the difficult questions about the Old Testament which Hellenistic readers could raise" (117). Roukema proposes that this understanding of Gnosticism's origins allows scholars better to define the term *Gnosticism*: "it is possible to use 'gnosis' and 'gnostic' as global (and modern) designations for those tendencies in antiquity which interpreted an existing religion in a Platonic sense" (123). Noting that Christianity was not the only religion to be influenced by Middle Platonism, Roukema further defines Christian gnosis or Gnosticism as "Platonism [that] has incorporated elements of Judaism and Christianity to a greater or lesser degree" (123). The last two chapters of this section return to the task of providing an introductory text and give brief summaries of nine gnostic teachers and of five gnostic texts.

Because Roukema realizes that Hellenistic philosophy influenced many early Christian writers that modern scholars rarely classify as gnostic, the final section of his book tries to differentiate between catholic and gnostic teachings. A very brief examination of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Evagrius shows that the catholic church had its own gnosis. Nevertheless, unlike the radically Platonized heretics, catholic Christians took Hellenism in “more moderate doses” (125), and because these authors did not dispute the goodness of creation, there appears to be room for them in the boundaries of orthodoxy. Roukema’s last chapter departs from the book’s primarily historical tone and tries “to arrive at an evaluation of some arguments for and against ancient gnosticism” (158). Roukema discusses the theological consequences of the “gnostic splitting up of God” (160), docetism, and many gnostic groups’ rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures. Roukema concludes his work by discussing gnostic elitism, against which “stood the church” (169). Unlike the gnostics, “[t]his ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’ Christian church is like the unruly masses who stream round Jesus in the New Testament Gospels, with room “for both the simple and those with knowledge, preferably without anyone referring to a supposed sense of superior insight” (170).

Roukema’s goal of using an exploration of Gnosticism’s origins as a frame for an introductory text to Gnosticism certainly is admirable. Unfortunately, for the uninitiated, Roukema’s exposition occasionally seems as confusing as Irenaeus’s own descriptions; Roukema’s text often reads like a list of various gnostic teachers, myths, and documents without enough direction or coherence to help guide the beginning student. Roukema’s selection of texts also seems far from representative of Gnosticism, especially given the little time he devotes to the Nag Hammadi works themselves when compared to his occasionally uncritical approach to the heresiologists. Roukema’s overarching argument that Middle Platonism strongly influenced many gnostic communities is an important one, but as Roukema himself admits, ever since Adolf von Harnack many scholars have seen Gnosticism as a Hellenization of Christianity. Additionally, Roukema’s almost pre-Bauer view of elitist gnostics versus orthodox Christians results in the homogenization of gnostic worldviews and the drawing of artificial distinctions between “gnostic” and “catholic” beliefs.

Roukema’s introduction states that *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity* should be read like a detective novel; it allows “the reader slowly to track down the identity of “gnosis and to conclude where it comes from” (11). Many, however, may find Middle Platonism too simple of a “whodunit” to explain such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as Gnosticism. Nonetheless, Roukema’s work provides a useful starting point for exploring the many factors that

influenced early gnostic communities. If combined with other primary and secondary sources, it also may be a helpful text for introducing beginning students to Gnosticism's relationships with other ancient belief systems.