

Adam, Eve, and Plato: “On the Origin of the World” and Its Due Context

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## I. Introduction

Gnostics and their beliefs are misunderstood in popular culture. Elaine Pagels brought public attention to the Gnostics in her commercially successful works, *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) and *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, The Origin of Satan: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity* (1988). In these works, Pagels's language and methodology concerning the Gnostics portrays a limited understanding of them. produced a one-dimensional analysis of the Gnostics. Pagels is partially responsible for creating these misconceptions that circulate in contemporary culture due to the vast circulation of her books. Pagels argues that the Gnostics were "heretics,"<sup>1</sup> groups of rogue outsiders, and entirely Christian-based groups who rarely used elements from other religious myths. Throughout her works, Pagels relies on Irenaeus's and Paul's readings of the groups and repeatedly refers to the Gnostics as "heretics" like the early Church Fathers did. Yes, the Gnostics were "heretics" in the eyes of the great Church that burned their books. They were not, however, outside the church, for the Gnostics participated in church services along with other members of the congregation. Despite Pagels's characterization, Gnosticism is a multi-dimensional intellectual movement whose history goes beyond Christianity. The Gnostic movement existed centuries before Christianity. Gnostics participated in philosophical conversations using themes and concepts from earlier philosophical and religious texts outside of

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<sup>1</sup> Heresy refers to any doctrine that varies from standards established by an authority. Heresy comes from the Ancient Greek αἵρεσις (*haireisis*) that means "choice." A "heretic" is anyone who decides to go against an established doctrine. "Heresy" and "heretic" are binary terms since one is either a heretic or not. However, the doctrine one chooses to go against is relative. For example, a Jewish perspective labels all Christians as Jewish "heretics." Since the term "heresy" is relative in this way, its usage may be problematic. In one way or another, everyone is a "heretic" to someone else. For the purpose here, it must be noted that Irenaeus used the term "heresy" to describe whatever behavior he decided went against "true" Christian doctrine before the Nicaean Council firmly established what Christian doctrine ought to be. In that sense, Irenaeus's usage matches contemporary usage of the term "heresy" in a Christian context.

Christian doctrine. These additional elements to the Gnostics are lost when their beliefs are only presented in terms of “heresies” in works that focus on one aspect of the group. In the following sections, additional evidence about the Gnostics demonstrates Pagels’s reading is incomplete.

Section II defines what Gnosticism is, who a Gnostic is, and then summarizes “On the Origin of the World” (“Origin”). “Origin” is a significant creation myth in the Gnostic movement. There is some dispute regarding the dating of “Origin.” Linguistic evidence and Egyptian symbolism puts the text as early as 150 BCE, while other make the case that “Origin” was completed as late as 250 CE (Painchaud, McDonald). “Origin” is a philosophical Sophia myth that best exemplifies the Valentinian school of Gnosticism. Pagels argues “Origin” and other Gnostic myths are responses to Genesis. They are not. In fact, “Origin” directly answers unresolved issues in Plato’s *Timaeus* in a narrative form. “Origin” personifies the figures of the Demiurge and the Young Gods in the *Timaeus* through the complicated relationship between Sophia and Yaldabaoth, as well as the other archons that appear in the myth. Since the *Timaeus* is outside the scope of Genesis, it follows that “Origin” is not merely a response to Genesis.

Section II offers direct textual evidence that Sophia and Yaldabaoth appear as responses to Platonist themes, and that these characters exemplify common features of many Gnostic texts. This allows us to see the Gnostics through a multi-dimensional analysis and not through the eyes of their enemies or incomplete readings by some contemporary scholars. The silenced Gnostics receive a voice in the retelling of their history, and Section II serves to put the Gnostics in conversation with those who came before them.

Section III provides necessary historical background concerning the Gnostics that Pagels ignores. Pagels views Gnostics as a Christian movement. To support this view, Pagels ignores the historical and intellectual developments that lead to the composition of “Origin.” “Origin” is a

continuation of centuries, if not millennia, of intellectual development that culminated during Middle Platonism and Late Antiquity. Section III shows where the ideas in “Origin” can be traced to and the definitions of its concepts within Plato’s work, as well as the surrounding discourse and the period’s general trends. Since these ideas are outside of Christianity, Section III demonstrates that the Gnosticism was an intellectual movement who incorporated aspects of proto-orthodox Christian beliefs into their texts, instead of a “heretical” movement that developed after Christianity. Without this evidence, Gnostics are, at best, partially understood.

Section IV analyzes the mistakes in “Origin.” Pagels presented Gnostic myths as coherent belief systems that hold together, and contends the Church silenced them merely because they were “heretical.” While it is true that Gnostic systems are mostly consistent within themselves section IV demonstrates that “Origin” contains logical impossibilities that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to teach in a church service. It is significant that creation myths are consistent within themselves in a way that other teachings do not have to be. Creation myths contain the structure of the universe by which reality is measured. Without a consistent method to determine what is real or not, it is impossible to assert or deny what may exist. So, while other religious doctrines may have some inconsistencies, like the orthodox Trinity, they can all be measured through the metaphysical principles outlined by the creation myth. However, without a consistent creation myth, these measurements are impossible to make. Therefore, a creation myth must be consistent, but secondary religious doctrines may have some room for inconsistencies. There could have been other reasons than “heresies” that lead to the rejection of Gnostic texts by the orthodox.

Finally, Section V identifies the main “heresies” in “Origin” with their due context and preparation established by the preceding sections. Gnostic “heresies” go beyond simply

incorporating multiple gods or arguing that women ought to be equal to men. “Heresies” in “Origin” go far deeper than these superficial issues. “Origin” removes any sense of oneness with God. In “Origin,” there are no necessary<sup>2</sup> metaphysical connections back to a single unifying god. In addition to removing the monadic, unifying god, “Origin” goes a step further by parodying the Jewish God. Yaldabaoth is a satire of God. Through ridiculing God, “Origin” claims that an evil creator made the Earth in ignorance. The greatest “heresy” of all in “Origin” and the core of its rejection by the proto-orthodox is the docetic Christ. “Origin” argues that Christ was the great deceiver and not the great redeemer. These “heresies” come from centuries of intellectual discussion and provide insight into the debates that occurred during the development of canonical Christian doctrines and scriptures. Pagels simply fails to mention the deeper meaning behind these “heresies” or address the metaphysical issues the texts bring forth. Instead, Pagels’s reading is shallow at best, and misleading at worst.

Now that the Gnostic roots are identified in Platonism, another avenue for interpreting their texts is available. Instead of viewing their texts in comparison with Genesis or the Gospels, threads in the Gnostic texts can be identified that trace back centuries to Plato. This allows for a fruitful exploration of their texts and view their ways of thinking in a multi-dimensional way. The Gnostics were not the only ones exploring these themes, however. They were in their cultural moment among a variety of other intellectual developments during Middle Platonism and Late Antiquity.

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<sup>2</sup> “Necessary” refers to a necessary and sufficient condition where *a* must relate to *b* in all possible worlds. For a more detailed exploration of the term as it appears throughout this interpretation, see Saul Kripke’s paper “Identity and Necessity.”

## II. What Gnostics Were

What follows are the significant details that are often overlooked, so the Gnostics and “Origin” may receive its due context. This section provides information that Pagels simply did not address in her explorations. Section II.a defines who a Gnostic was, and section II.b provides additional details on the term “Gnosticism” and its roots. Then, section II.c describes different Gnostic schools to demonstrate that the Gnostic movement was multi-dimensional and had few unifying factors. Afterwards, section II.d discusses how Gnostic texts are transmitted to show that there may be elements to these texts that cannot be explored through analysis, which Pagels only mentions tangentially. Section II.e presents the myth of Sophia’s context in Valentinus’s school. Finally, section II.f summarizes “Origin.”

### II.a Who were the Gnostics?

The most common misconception about the Gnostics is that they were a “heretical” group of “rogue” Christians who were active sometime in the mid second century CE until the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE ordered the destruction of all Gnostic texts. Where does this view come from? Viewing Gnostics as “heretics” is a product of the Church Fathers, particularly Irenaeus and Paul, who wrote extensively on Gnosticism. In their works, as well as Pagels’s, Gnostics are only viewed through their association with Christianity instead of on their own terms and through their own words. Pagels, through the *The Gnostic Gospels* and the newer work *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity* popularized this view of the Gnostics. Pagels views the Gnostics through the eyes of their enemies, primarily using Irenaeus’s critiques of the Gnostic movement to form her analysis. Although parts of Gnosticism are Christian, major elements of the movement are not. Gnostic texts existed before Christianity, and the philosophical developments during Middle Platonism provided the earlier foundation and

context for their texts. Certainly, some Gnostics reacted to Christian teachings, and later Gnostic myths incorporate “heretical” versions of Christ or other “heresies.” However, some Gnostics certainly did not do so as outsiders or rebels. They were devoted churchgoers who felt that what they were taught was simply inadequate.

## **II.b Defining Gnosticism: “Those in the Know”**

Who were the Gnostics, really? The name “Gnosticism” is an umbrella term that refers to groups of individuals with divergent beliefs without a central text or leadership. The group and its doctrines derive their name from *gnōsis* (γνῶσις) that means “knowledge” (Jonas 32). Gnosis is the highest form of knowledge that can be attained, and it is only attained through a mystical experience. “Gnostics” is a cognate of *gignōskō* (γινώσκω) which translates to “I know.” So, someone who is a “Gnostic” is “someone in the know.” To Gnostics, *gnōsis* refers to the type of knowledge of God which results in knowing that which is unknowable. This knowledge is not a natural condition. Gnostics separate this type of knowledge from rational philosophy because *gnōsis* comes with a revelation and reception of divined truth that allows the receiver to transcend the body, instead of the “mere” rational exercise discourse provides (Jonas 34-35). This is *Gnōsis* as the Gnostics thought of it, for they emphasized the mystical, spiritual experience that comes with the ability to discern Forms as described in Plato. *Gnōsis* puts a Gnostic in a special group of people who are “in the know.” Gnostics know what the Forms are through spiritual experiences and their own rituals. Gnostics elevated themselves above all others. Gnostics felt above the lesser people who could not attain this information and only had knowledge of icons and shadows instead of the Gnostic version of “truth.” Gnostics felt they had knowledge of the very First Cause: the creation sequence that occurred before this creation in the realm of Forms. A Gnostic felt like the philosopher who left the “Cave” from the *Republic* and

brings truth back to the people who are only concerned with mere shadows and refuse to leave. This likely made them difficult to deal with on an interpersonal level. The complex, multi-layered cosmologies present in most Gnostic creation myths demonstrate this tiered understanding of the world.

It is easy to characterize Gnostics as rogue outsiders to the Christian faith. In actuality, Christian Gnostics existed in the faith. Some Gnostics existed within Christian churches and attended the same services that other, non-Gnostic churchgoers did. There were also Gnostic churches. Gnostics considered themselves the spiritual elite of the churches. While they said the same prayers and partook in baptism, Gnostics believed they had a more accurate, secret understanding of the prayers and rituals in which they participated. In addition to whatever teachings were presented during services, Gnostics also prepared their own scripts and rituals to use outside of the services (Erhman 126). Gnostics were the faith within the faith, part of a variety of early Christian groups who existed in the early Church before any Christian beliefs became the orthodox doctrines.

### **II.c Different Schools of Gnostics**

There is some debate as to whether “Gnostic” is even a useful term since their texts are so divergent from each other and reflect varying interests and influences. Additionally, the term’s efficacy may be a matter of dispute because it implies some kind of unified group with a unified body of texts; the process of forming a canon never occurred during their activity (Layton 5).

Other than the Gospel of John, there are no canonical Gnostic texts. Groups of Gnostics all shared a common basic background in and borrow from Middle Platonism as discussed with more detail in sections III.a and III.b. The underlying interest in Middle Platonism and the denial of a good creator, as well as the insistence that there is a god who is alien to the Earth, sets apart



Gnostic texts from other philosophical myths of the time. The central idea behind the Gnostic movement is that *gnōsis* is the gateway to a higher place of existence. *Gnōsis* is outside the realm of Christianity, for Christianity does not emphasize knowledge as much as faith. Different groups of Gnostics formed various schools that approached what *gnōsis* is through different texts and philosophical methods.

Some of the different schools of Gnosticism are the Marcionites, Mandeans, the Sethians, the Valentinians, and the Sophia Gnostics who all had diverging viewpoints in most areas of Gnosticism. The Valentinian Gnostics are the most relevant to “Origin,” for they are the ones who incorporated Sophia frequently into their myths and used knowledge as the means to salvation. Valentinus was a successful teacher who taught between CE 135 and 160 and founded his own Valentinian school of Christianity. He amassed a significant following and incorporated Platonic teachings into his works, staying closer to the *Timaeus* than other writers. Valentinus’s system, and the one that occurs in “Origin,” is one where the creation of the world results from the Fall of Sophia in an otherwise perfect system. It is almost reminiscent of Pythagorean metaphysics<sup>3</sup> with a monadic and dyadic figure who is the highest Aeon of Light that produces Sophia without the aid of anything else (Dillon 385-386). The Demiurge (see section III.a) in Valentinian Gnosticism is not so much evil as ignorant unlike other versions of the Gnostic creation myth (Dillon 388).

Differences between the Gnostic groups were based on issues that are not related to Christianity. Genesis does not concern itself with the identity of various elements from the *Timaeus*. Genesis predates Plato, so it is not concerned with Platonic metaphysics at any level. This shows that these groups operated outside Christianity with different source materials and

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<sup>3</sup> Pythagoras put an equation at the center of the universe. See Copleston.

were tangentially related to orthodox Christianity. Now that some of the differences between the Gnostic groups have been addressed briefly, it is time to address how “Origin” and other Gnostic texts were discovered in the present day.

#### **II.d How Gnostic Texts Are Transmitted**

Information about the Gnostics is known from their texts and writings from concerned early Church Fathers such as Paul and Irenaeus. The Church Fathers erroneously maintained that the first Gnostics came from the area around Samaria and their teachings were mostly based on Judaism. Plotinus and Irenaeus also wrote about the Gnostics and included copies of their sources in their negative analyses (Rudolph 227). In his treatise *On Providence*, Plotinus wrote, “No one may find fault with our universe on the ground that is not beautiful...nor again quarrel with the originator of existence...because the higher being brought forth its likeness according to the law of nature” (Rudolph 61). This is a direct attack on the Gnostic belief that the world is inherently an imitation. It shows, however, that the church leaders and Platonist philosophers were actively engaged with the Gnostics and read their texts, if anything, to aid in their refutations during debates regarding what texts would eventually form the Old and New Testaments.

Instability during the Roman Empire at this period contributed to the destruction of Gnostic texts. In 303 CE, the Pagan emperor of the Eastern empire, Diocletian, ordered a persecution of Christians which was matched by the persecution carried out by Maximilian in the Western half. Later in 312 CE, Constantine attributed his military and political success to the Christian God and identified himself as Christian. Constantine became involved in the church and addressed controversies within it in an effort to unite the Church. In 325 CE, Constantine called the Council of Nicaea. The Nicæan Council decided which circulating texts would

become the New Testament and the council banned all Gnostic texts and related activities (Ehrman 249-251). Afterwards, the newly formed orthodox Church destroyed Gnostic texts.

Gnostic texts were unavailable in modern times until a recent archeological discovery. In 1945, peasants farming in Jabal al-Tarif near the Egyptian Nile discovered urns filled with texts that would eventually form the Nag Hammadi. The Nag Hammadi Library was buried in the city of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt near the second half of the fourth century, CE. The texts in the Nag Hammadi collection that contains "Origin" were written on papyri, bound into books, and preserved in large jars. Texts in this library were not in public circulation until the late twentieth century, after they were translated from Coptic (Meyer 2, McDonald 335). Gnostic texts are often marked by the inclusion of specific terms that are related to Plato's dialogues or other esoteric texts that does not appear in other scriptures (Layton 9). Modern translations of the Nag Hammadi Library into English were performed throughout the twentieth century, and more texts are becoming available to the general public. Most of the texts are fragmented in some way that distorts the lettering, so different translations may have minor textural variations (Painchaud). Another issue is the fact that these texts were written in Coptic thousands of years ago and scholarship concerning these texts is new. There may be connotative meanings behind terms in "Origin" lost to the ages, or passages that completely change the meaning of the texts which do not exist anymore. Any reading of Gnostic texts will be hampered in this way until new evidence that provides meaning for the terms in these texts can be attained. Most modern scholars do not directly address the limitations of studying the Nag Hammadi library directly. These interpretive limitations are significant to discuss so that an analysis is never taken with too much authority, specifically Pagels's, but others too. This same criticism ought to be applied to this paper as well if there is more information that provides additional insight into the Gnostics.

## II.e Myth of Sophia

Valentinian myth, which is of chief concern here since “Origin” exemplifies the most of school’s beliefs, incorporates and personifies parts of Plato’s Divided Line analogy and the Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic*, where the development of human mind is mapped on a line on its path from ignorance to knowledge. Sophia is the myth’s personification of *Pistis*, since she has knowledge of what appears before her, and yet does not have true knowledge of the forms for she cannot manifest them in the earthly plane. Adam of Light is the person who left the cave and does not return for he had some knowledge of the forms and is not interested in returning to the earthly world. Yaldabaoth is the personification of *Doxa*, for he is in ignorance and does not realize his state of being. The Pleroma, the space between the Aeon of Truth and this Earth, is the personification of the intermediary mathematics that separates this world from the higher one, for the Pleroma contains some universal principles from the higher realm which combine to form the particulars of human existence on this realm. Humans and most archons in “Origin” are in a state of *Doxa* (see section III.a) as well, since Adam and Eve in find themselves in complete unredeemable ignorance and error of the truth.

The Sophia Myth likely came from Valentinus’s school. Valentinus used Sophia to illustrate humanity’s fall from divine grace differently than what occurs in Genesis. Instead of Eve disobeying God or causing the world to fall from her own stupidity, Sophia serves as an even harsher condemnation of women. Sophia is the cause of all evil in “Origin,” since she produces Yaldabaoth, the ignorant creator who produces evil beings, including humans, other gods and angels, and animals. Valentinian myths depart from the Platonic tradition because in Platonism, perfection cannot ever generate imperfection. This is not an issue in the Valentinian system.

The myth of Sophia is found in the following texts in the Nag Hammadi Library: “On the Origin of the World,” “The Secret Book of John,” “The Hypostasis of the Archons” (which is sometimes translated as “The Reality of the Rulers”), “Eugenostos the Blessed,” and “The Wisdom of Jesus Christ.” The Sophia myths have distinct characteristics that separate them from the other texts in the Nag Hammadi. Sophia personifies wisdom and has the largest role in these myths. Yaldabaoth is her offspring and personifies the Demiurge in these myths (see section II.c). Sophia myths also incorporate Egyptian symbolism. Sophia myths are narratives, compared to other texts that are collections of phrases or prayers. Another feature of Sophia myth is the downward motion of humanity from spirit to matter, with matter as a yoke of existence. Sophia’s “fall” from the first light-realm, the Pleroma, and its consequences for the material world are also significant themes in these myths (Ehrman 123). Other texts in the Nag Hammadi library, such as “Thunder,” are poems or are not focused on identifying the creation of the world but rather sharing esoteric wisdom allegedly from Christ or Zoroaster himself in “Zostrinos.” Figures similar to Yaldabaoth, or other similar figures such as Barbēlō who serve to oppose various forms of goodness, sometimes do not appear in some Gnostic myths from different schools. What follows is a summary of the significant themes across “Origin” and the aforementioned Sophia myths, for these myths contain the same narratives with minor variations. For brevity’s sake, the themes in “Origin” that are not repeated across the other Sophia myths will not be summarized here since the text’s peculiarities are not as significant to the whole group. In Section II.f, the myth will be restated in chronological order for convenience although “Origin” is told out of order.

## **II.f “On the Origin of the World” Summary**

The myth opens with a truth claim that states the reader is about to receive true wisdom concerning the creation of the world. There is an infinite being, an “alien god” who is infinite and

contains infinite light; as a result of this infinite light, it also produces an infinite shadow (Rudolph 61, 62, 66; Jonas 42-43). Sophia flows out of the infinite light. The shadow produces chaotic matter. Sophia, with the intention to imitate the divine infinite light realm that bore her, creates her enemy Yaldabaoth out of the negative shadow matter. Yaldabaoth admires himself, and ignorantly claims he is the only god. He creates more evil archons (rulers) with the intention of imitating the higher realm and creates his own heavens. Jesus Christ is created by his own volition in other myths or by Sophia's son Sabaoth in "Origin," and exists in his own heaven as a docetic being ("Origin" 203-208). The Docetic Christ (see section V.c) appears here as a godly form nested in a cosmology that borrows from Middle Platonism and the *Timaeus*. Christ plays a small role in "Origin." When he appears as a god, Christ violates every principle that the orthodox church came to stand for based on Christ's reincarnation, since it is impossible for a god to die. What is also significant here is Christ's appearance in the creation myth, and not in subsequent writings. This shows that knowledge of Christ is second hand, and lower, and closer to *doxa* rather than true *gnōsis*.

An archon creates paradise that contains the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Sophia creates the first instructor, Molded Eve. Molded Eve has that name to differentiate her from Eve in Paradise. Molded Eve is called "molded" because Sophia creates Molded Eve by shaping water. Sophia's intention to create Molded Eve was to help her in the final battle during the apocalypse. Yaldabaoth, with the assistance of the evil archons, creates the first human, Molded Adam, in a body that resembled the evil archons, without a soul or any strength. Sophia tells her daughter, Molded Eve, to give Molded Adam strength, and she does so through the power of the Word (*logos/λόγος*). Yaldabaoth and the evil archons discover Molded Adam's power, and they rebuke him for it. Molded Eve leaves an imitation of herself, Eve in Paradise,

and the evil archons form a group and rape Eve in Paradise. Cain, Abel, and the generations of humanity are born. Molded Eve returns and instructs the humans to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge to set them free. Molded Adam and Eve in Paradise follow Molded Eve's instructions and eat the fruit. The evil archons cast Molded Adam and Eve in Paradise out of Paradise and shorten the lifespan of all humans as punishment ("Origin" 209-218).

Sophia will kill her creations and bring about the end of the world. All the souls return to the place where they came from and the cosmos is destroyed. The archons and realms collapse inward and descend into a void. All spirits return to where they came from ("Origin" 218-221).

### **III. Pre-Christian Gnostic Development**

Pagels's retelling of Gnostic history does not mention anything that happened before Christianity. Since there were intellectual developments that contributed to the formation and development of Gnosticism, a complete analysis of the Gnostics ought to address the intellectual and historical themes that influence Gnostic texts. This is another area where Pagels's work is incomplete. Section III.a starts with identifying Gnostic roots in Plato's Theory of Knowledge. Afterwards, Section III.b shows other historical changes that contributed to the formation of the Gnostic movement. These sections must be included so that the interpretive sections IV and V may have some context, the terms employed by the analysis can be understood, and the figures in "Origin" can be adequately traced to these concepts. Without section III, an analysis of Gnosticism would be one-dimensional because it ignores centuries of their development and views the text in a vacuum. Instead, "Origin" ought to be seen in conversation with what was done before.

### III.a Gnostic Roots in Plato's Theory of Knowledge

The Gnostic conception of knowledge in "Origin" borrows heavily from Plato's *Theaetetus* and the *Republic*, where Plato classifies types of knowing based on the involvement of the senses, and how close they are to the actual thing under discussion. In *Theaetetus*, Plato argues that perception is not the whole of knowledge, because what is known combines what is perceived with the senses with what is unperceivable. For instance, one hears a piece of music, but they cannot see the sound waves, so only basing musical knowledge on what is heard is incomplete. Therefore, what is only heard through the senses is not entirely knowledge, and the truth of what something is determined through abstract reflection (Copleston 145). Plato maintains an extreme position, where what is perceived through the senses is not a real object because real objects are stable, and senses are unstable. Plato does not really address how what is heard through the senses can still have some utility. Objects are only seen in a state of becoming, and not being. What separates being from becoming is that becoming is always changing, while being cannot change. So, what is real knowledge must be knowledge that is infallible and concerning what *is*; truth involves the being and not the becoming (Copleston 146). To give an account of what is through logos (λόγος) converts these beliefs into knowledge, but the account must be concerned with the object, and not about the object, or concerning the objects parts (Copleston 147-148). Understanding parts of something does not demonstrate understanding of the thing itself, for nothing is merely its parts and parts combine to form new things. "Origin" separates itself into two realms with the realm of the unchanging, beyond the Aeon of Light, one must ascend to a sense of true knowledge about the gods in the world of the unchanging forms; these accounts are kept secret from the common person due to the multiple separations between the heavens and people. This is where "Origin" derives its cosmology.



Plato divides knowledge into four categories, given in ascending levels of truth in *Republic*. *Doxa* (δόξα) concerns images and *pistis* (πίστις) about something and has no connection to the truth. It is the world of representations, shadows, and unfounded beliefs based on images. *Eikasía* (εἰκασία) is the second level of *Doxa*, which is concerned with iconography of what things are discerned through sense-perception instead of their true nature. That is, one examines images and types found in this reality instead of discovering them at first through the Forms; one cannot examine objects past what appears to be so, instead of what is so. *Pistis* is partial knowledge of what is through faith instead of reason; it involves blind judgements rather than the dialectic process. *Epistēmē* (ἐπιστήμη) is knowledge of archetypes<sup>4</sup>, and the intellectual knowledge that these archetypes refer to. At this level, one has ability to discern between what is a universal application, describe the application, and use discourse to determine to what degree it reflects the truth. *Epistēmē* involves knowing the universals which inform the particulars of something, and how to properly discern between universals and particulars to get closer to the true nature of something, and not its image. Mathematics is the intermediary between *epistēmē*, and *doxa* because mathematicians are concerned with the universal principles and axioms behind their craft. The highest level of knowledge, and of chief concern to a study of Gnosticism, is called *Gnōsis* (γνώσις). *Gnōsis* is the comes from a mystical experience where one has vision of the Forms, the unchanging beings behind all things. Gnostics were unclear about what exactly this mental state involved and considered *gnōsis* so these teachings likely took place in person. Or, writings about Gnostic mystical experiences could have been censored or lost over time. These forms are not disconnected from physical reality. Physical objects connect to the Forms through metaphysical bonds. These bonds are the necessary connections between objects on earth

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<sup>4</sup> “Archetypes” refers to universals which are employed during description.

and what exists in the realm of Forms. Plato does not specify how these bonds work. Forms are not isolated objects but exist simultaneously in the realm of Forms with their earthly counterparts (Copleston 152).

The *Timaeus* is Plato's account of the creation of the world, and it is of the most significant dialogues that shaped Gnostic beliefs and philosophy during Late Antiquity. In the *Timaeus*, continuing a pattern from the earlier dialogues, Plato separates Being from Becoming. Being is unchanging, uniform, self-identical, and immortal perfection. Becoming is changing, not uniform, not identical to itself, and imperfect. Both the Existent and the Becoming are caused by Necessity (Plato 28d-29a). The cosmos and this world are imperfect copies the Demiurge forms out of preexisting materials. Plato does not specify the exact identity of the Demiurge. The name Demiurge is the Latinized form of Plato's references to the "artificer" ( $\delta\eta\mu\iota\omicron\upsilon\rho\gamma\acute{o}\varsigma$ /dēmiourgos), a lower being who orders the cosmos out of materials that existed from the First Cause (Plato 29a). Plato does not specify exactly what the First Cause is. Since the Demiurge ordered the universe and did not create it, the universe is a representation of the real universe beyond, located in the realm of Being instead of this realm of Becoming (Plato 29b-30a). The Demiurge is in the realm of Becoming because it, and everything else, changes while the realm of Being never changes. Plato's Demiurge has good intentions when it models the universe after the immortal pattern it copies from Being and constructs a Living Creature to occupy the newly ordered universe (Plato 30b-e). In the space between the indivisible Being and Becoming, the Demiurge forms a new god out of the matter that existed between Being and Becoming in a mixture of Same, Other, and Being (Plato 35a-b). The Demiurge forms Young Gods out of other mixtures, and the lowest gods formed humans (Plato 42e). So, in *Timaeus*, there are three forms between the gods. There is Being, which is the Model Form, that always

exists. Next, there is the Being's copy, Becoming. The third form is the Receptacle, which contains this universe (Plato 48e). The dialogue concludes by arguing that all forms are modeled after elemental triangles because these ideal solids such as the triangles, the cube, the dodecahedron, etc., are the perfect building blocks of the universe (Plato 52a-54e).

*Timaeus* contains several unresolved issues that philosophers explored, and these were of particular interest to the Gnostics. One issue is whether the creation of the universe took place in time. Nor is it clear who the Demiurge and the Lower Gods that form humanity are. What exactly happens in the Receptacle is not specified. Neither is the manner that the elemental triangles combine to form substances, or the nature of relationship between these triangles and the Forms (Dillon 7). Gnostics, too, used their philosophical myths to address these issues and used Plato's framework to form their own creation myths. During the course of the *Timaeus*, Timaeus says the unresolved issue under discussion will be addressed in more detail at a later point in time: "Later on, perhaps, at our leisure these points may receive the attention they merit" (Plato 38e). Through the inclusion of these unresolved issues, Plato likely meant the *Timaeus* to serve as a "likely account," or a guide to understanding creation and not necessarily as literal, factual description of the creation of the world.

### **III.b Gnostic Development during Middle Platonism within Late Antiquity**

Gnostics reflect the greater philosophical traditions and cultural shifts that occurred before and subsequently shaped the period of Late Antiquity. These shifts were part of a much larger cultural change that occurred in four phases. The first phase was before Alexander and is the classical phase of national Greek culture. Hellenism, which followed, was a cosmopolitan, secular culture that spread through Alexander's military activity. After Alexander, late Hellenism emerged as a pagan religious culture. The Byzantine Greek Christians emerged in the final stage

(Jonas 10). Alexander's conquest of the east during 334-323 BCE and the subsequent founding of Alexandria allowed Hellenistic culture to flourish in Egypt which was later absorbed by the Roman Empire. When Rome absorbed Alexandria and the surrounding regions, she gave this region an official form and unity that existed informally before. Alexander's conquests were in regions that were previously under Persian control, and parts of the Zoroastrian religion slowly entered the larger Hellenistic philosophical systems and culture, demonstrating the syncretism that defines Late Antiquity. This cross-pollination between Greek and Persian culture is demonstrated by the inclusion of Zoroastrian iconography onto coins and Greek pagan religious imagery (Boyce 66, 235). Monotheistic themes, Babylonian astrology, and Zoroastrian dualism were echoed in Gnostic texts as a result of these cultural exchanges (Jonas 17). The cultural shifts occurred a few centuries before the period of Gnostic activity, but Gnosticism draws from some pagan, Persian, and Hellenistic themes, so they ought to be discussed to show that their ideas reflected centuries of intellectual development across cultures. Understanding Gnostics in purely Christian terms neglects the earlier social changes that shaped the society in which they wrote.

The basic language of the group was Greek, as was the case for non-Gnostic Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism during Late Antiquity. Irenaeus wrote about the Gnostics circa 180 CE in his work *The Detection and Overthrow of "Gnōsis" Falsely So Called, or Against Heresies*. Irenaeus's work is the earliest surviving reference to Gnostics (Layton 5, 277). Gnostic myths drew on Platonist interpretations of the creation myth in Plato's *Timaeus*, usually combined with the book of Genesis, Zoroastrian mythology, and Egyptian teachings. During this period of Middle Platonism, religious speculation was a popular activity among educated Jews in Alexandria who spoke Greek. Gnostic speculations include older myths, and it is possible that they could be older than Philo's work, but there is not conclusive evidence that they are (Layton

8). Some scholars put Gnostic activity as early as 150 BCE using linguistic analysis. There is debate as to whether later Gnostic authors added the figure of Christ to the myths after their initial completion, for some myths are not as concerned with Christ while others use his figure to provide forbidden knowledge (Painchaud; Rudolph 132). Some evidence demonstrates that Gnostics and some of their activities existed at least fifty years before Christ, considering many of their texts predominantly interpreted materials that are older than the Church and are not included in Christian teachings. The first Christian Gnostic was Marcion, who existed in the middle of the second century CE (Rudolph 62). So, Gnostics certainly existed beyond the scope of the Church. Therefore, viewing Gnostic beliefs through a solely Christian lens ignores centuries of intellectual development and patterns that shaped them, leading to a one-dimensional explanation of the Gnostic systems.

The aforementioned cultural shifts spawned a revival of Plato's *Timaeus* where philosophers synthesized the dialogue's themes that local cultures reworked. Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (c. 20 CE—c. 50 CE) wrote *On the Creation of the World*. Philo synthesized *Timaeus* and Genesis to argue that both texts contained the same messages concerning the creation of the world. Philo argued that Genesis followed the same sequences that the *Timaeus* did. Philo's writing contributed to the development of Gnostic Christians because Christianity took many of its beliefs from Hellenistic Judaism. The intermediate craftsman, the Young Gods (see section II.c) even appears in Genesis Rabbah, a rabbinic commentary on Genesis released c. 350 CE. In this commentary, the Jewish Mystics argue that God read from the Torah as He created the world, so the Torah was a gift from the realm above (Neusner 52). So too did the Gnostics work *Timaeus* into their own myths. Plato's dualism between the spatial counterparts between Forms and matter, as well as his divisions of the different universes appear in the Gnostic myth, so the

Gnostic myth was not a unique development. Philosophical myth, that is, myths that utilized philosophical ideas and were not quite within the bounds of pure theological works, were fashionable during the second century CE. This development followed a revival of Plato's *Timaeus* during the previous two centuries (Layton 11). The mixing of religious work and intertwining cultural threads lead to the development of most Gnostic systems in Alexandria. The problems that the Gnostics addressed were based on Greek Platonic philosophy. Middle Platonism produced Alexandrine Gnosis that consequently linked early and late Platonism (Rudolph 285). As demonstrated, far from existing in cultural isolation, "Origin" participates in a conversation between intellectuals that spanned centuries; it is not merely a one-off proto-Christian document. Now that the Gnostics have been properly contextualized, their myths can be understood without the limitations that viewing their beliefs through a Christian lens, like Pagels did, would impose.

#### **IV. Mistakes in the Sophia Myth**

A misconception about Gnostic belief systems is that they are philosophically sound, that is, they make sense and the belief systems generally hold together in a coherent system. Pagels never addressed the philosophical errors in "Origin." While Gnostic beliefs are generally consistent, there are some errors that need to be understood in "Origin." These issues are meaningful to discuss because they contributed to the rejection of "Origin" by the proto-orthodox. "Origin" is riddled with philosophical errors, unfounded conclusions, and unresolved paradoxes. As a result, "Origin" is not unified, and rejects parts of Platonic philosophy. "Origin" will be understood in the terms of the relationships it presents between the gods and why these explanations are inconsistent. It should be noted that "Origin" survived in fragments, so sections

that addressed these errors may have existed. But there are still some impossibilities that are simply unresolvable in “Origin.”

The first inconsistency in “Origin” is the paradoxical nature of the first being, the Aeon of Light whose confusing nature is discussed in Section IV.a. Section IV.b shows how it is impossible that a perfect being could generate an imperfect one. These issues are secondary factors as to why the story was not included in orthodox Christianity because “Origin” is difficult to teach effectively. The rejection of “Origin” was primarily based on its heresies, but the text also presents other issues that make it difficult to present to an audience during a church service.

#### **IV.a Paradoxical First Beings**

In “Origin,” the first beings are paradoxically limited and limitless. The very first beings are the Aeon of Truth and the Shadow that existed “from the beginning” (“Origin” 203).

The aeon of truth has no shadow <within> it because infinite light shines everywhere within it. There is a shadow, however, outside it, and the shadow has been called darkness. From the shadow appeared a power set over the darkness, and the powers that came afterwards called the shadow limitless chaos. From it, [every] sort of deity emerged, [one after] another, along with the whole world. So [the shadow] came after something that existed in the beginning, and then it became visible (“Origin” 203-204).

There is indeed a boundary between the Aeon of Truth which contains an infinite amount of light and the Shadow since the Shadow is described as “outside” the Aeon of Truth. It is possible to have an infinite set of something in a finite space, such as the infinite divisions between the numbers one and two. These divisions are bound between the range of the numbers, so the divisions are finite. However, light in “Origin” is not a number. Since this light is infinite, it should be impossible to divide because what is truly infinite cannot be subject to division. Divisions are limitations, and infinity excludes limitations. Therefore, this “infinite” light is an infinite entity in a finite space. Yet, the light cannot penetrate the borders of the aeon, so it naturally generates a shadow, which is also infinite since it generates the limitless chaos.

However, the light is shining through the boundaries, since shadow needs some kind of light source to exist and this infinite Shadow exists in the space that is not the Aeon of Light. So, too, in the beginning, some sort of spaces had to exist to house these beings. The issue is that both the beings, Shadow and the Aeon of Light, are simultaneously infinite and finite with the boundaries that exist between them is porous at best and their capacity to extend is limited by their own nature. The argument that a being can be limited and limitless does not work because limited and limitless are mutually exclusive categories. A limitless being is not bound by anything outside of it because any and all boundaries would be constraints and thus make the being limited in some way. The Aeon of Truth is inconsistent with itself and its properties. When a first being is paradoxical, it is difficult for a person to relate to it, for it is difficult to grasp what one is supposed to relate to.

#### **IV.b Imperfection Generates Perfection**

Another issue is that the perfect realm generates an imperfect being. Sophia, who creates her own enemy Yaldabaoth, comes from the Aeon of Light. “After the world of the immortals was brought to completion out of the infinite, a being with this likeness, called Sophia, flowed from Pistis” (“Origin” 203). Sophia not a perfect goddess because her thought brings Yaldabaoth to life.

When Pistis [Sophia] saw...[that Yaldabaoth] came into being from her deficiency, she was disturbed. And her disturbance appeared as something frightful, and it fled to her in the chaos. She turned to it and [blew] into its face in the abyss, below all the heavens (“Origin” 204).

Sophia’s flowing out of the Aeon of Light indicates a porous boundary between the Aeon of Light and Shadow and shows these “timeless” beings are bound within some container, some kind of time and space continuum. The beings are timeless and bound in time, space-less yet bound in space. This is incompatible because the categories timeless and bound in time are



mutually exclusive. The issues are that the boundaries between the Aeon and the Shadow are corrupted and a perfect realm generates an imperfect being which is impossible by definition and in Platonic philosophy. This is a mistake in the logic of “Origin,” since a perfect being could not make a mistake that brings misery into the world. A possible refutation to this would be to argue that that could have been a perfect being above the Aeon of Light that is implied in the text. However, this being makes the imperfect aeon, so it could not have been perfect either, and there is no way around that concept. That argument might also repeat the chain of gods higher and higher with the same results. So, Sophia’s creation could not have been from a perfect being, but a being that is self-contradictory. It does not and cannot follow that a perfect being could generate an imperfect one. This is incompatible with Platonic teachings that emphasize a perfect realm of Forms that is unified and self-identical. When a being has properties that are not self-identical, it invalidates the concept of the Form, for the Forms are self-identical. Pagels ignores these flaws in her discussions of Gnostic creation myths.

## **V. Gnostic “Heresies”**

Gnostic “heresies” are best understood under the following conditions. A “heresy” is a religious belief that the Christian Church did not include in its set of orthodox beliefs codified in 325 CE. “Heresy” is a problematic term to describe their beliefs because every early Christian group viewed other ones as “heretical” or incomplete. What are understood in contemporary society as “heresies” are the result of the Nicaean Council. A better way to understand “heresies” during Late Antiquity is to separate beliefs based on what became official, canonized beliefs and what did not. If a belief became part of official Christian doctrine, then it is a proto-orthodox belief. Otherwise, it is a non-orthodox belief (Ehrman 7). Viewing Gnostics in terms of “heresies” is anachronistic for it ignores that during Late Antiquity there were no official church

beliefs, and the institution was in its infancy while its teachings were based on different collections of texts and different forms of worship. Irenaeus's work, *Against Heresies*, serves as the source of proto-orthodox reasoning against the Gnostics, for he wrote extensively against their beliefs and viewed them as a threat to the institution.

Pagels offered a reductive list of heresies that ignored significant parts of Gnostic metaphysics and its history within the context of Middle Platonism. Pagels focused on the equalization of women to men, which is simply not the case in Gnostic myths. Sophia causes the downfall of humanity in a much worse way than Eve in Genesis did. Sophia creates Yaldabaoth who is the source of all evil. How is it possible to justify that these texts offer any more empowerment to women than what Christianity offers when women are the source of evil in "Origin?" Recall that Christianity idolizes the Virgin Mary figure, yet the religion remains a patriarchal system. Pagels ignores that it is possible to idolize a female figure on one hand, and still condemn women with the other. Pagels also disregards significant metaphysical issues concerning creation myths. Instead, she interprets Christian monotheism as a political power move. Pagels forgets that Genesis creates necessary connections back to God, due to the nature of God and the order of events in Genesis, where God is the monadic center of everything. There may have been political motivations behind Irenaeus and Paul, but we have no way of knowing that for sure since that would rely on information that is not supported by evidence, but only by contemporary speculation. Pagels briefly mentioned the Docetic Christ, but she does so through a Christian lens on a period when "true" Christianity did not exist yet and these debates concerning Christ's nature were still being made. Pagels disregards the Platonic roots behind the Docetic Christ and its significance as the figure relates back to the *Timaeus* in favor of her own reductive narrative. The following sections address the issues Pagels overlooked.

Now let us address “Origin” and its “heretical” content more accurately. Section V.a describes how “Origin” removes necessary connections back to God who is a single, unified, and benevolent deity by presenting polarized creators, Yaldabaoth and Sophia, who are separate from the eternal realm of all things good. Yaldabaoth’s purpose as the parody of the Old Testament God is shown in section V.b. Section V.c presents the most offensive “heresy” in “Origin,” where Christ is a Docetic being, that is, a god who deceived humanity into thinking that he was human. Gnostics did not allow for Christ to be resurrected; Christ’s death and resurrection later became the fundamental orthodox Christian belief.

### **V.a No Oneness with God**

The Dualist-One, or a Dyad, which borrows from the Platonic, and particularly the interpretations of *Timaeus* offered in Late Antiquity, stemming from the works of Philo and Plutarch, is a non-orthodox belief held by Gnostics that violated the principle of a single, unified God that Irenaeus describes and is part of orthodox Christianity. The “Origin” cosmology is varied, limited, and even chaotic.

The aeon of truth has no shadow <within> it because infinite light shines everywhere within it. There is a shadow, however, outside it, and the shadow has been called darkness. From the shadow appeared a power set over the darkness, and the powers that came afterwards called the shadow limitless chaos. From it [every] sort of deity emerged, [one after] another, along with the whole world...[the shadow] came after something that existed in the beginning, and then it became visible. The abyss also came from Pistis, whom we have mentioned (“Origin” 203-204).

A division is observed here between beings in time and beings out of time. The aeon of truth, the One, is outside of time. The flowing motion of the gods outside of the aeon indicates motion. Motion is a process that occurs over time, so the gods that proceed out of the shadow matter and the light matter are bound in time while the primary aeon is not, since the first aeon does not move. The actions of both Sophia and Yaldabaoth are bound in time, and the human world is

bound using the markers that Yaldabaoth creates: “he created beautiful heavens, by means of the word, as dwelling places” (“Origin” 206). Sophia creates another instance of time in Yaldabaoth’s realm, the lower realm, “[she] created great heavenly lights and all the stars, and she placed them in the sky to shine upon the earth and designate chronological signs, seasons, years...the whole region of the sky was organized” (“Origin” 211). In opposition to the first timeless aeon, there exist two other time spans. Sophia’s time span, which does not include humanity or paradise. Yaldabaoth’s timespan does include humanity and paradise, and Sophia, during her interventions, occupies Yaldabaoth’s timespan. This resolves the first issue in the *Timaeus* with Sophia and Yaldabaoth also being bound by time, while the initial aeon of truth is not. Since beings are self-contradictory, it is impossible for them to be unified with anything else. Necessary connections back to these beings cannot be established for it is impossible for the highest gods to form relationships that are not buried in multiple levels of contradictions.

The highest being in “Origin”, the Aeon of Truth, is not an equalized being because the aeon of truth exists in a state of tension. This introduces a cause of disequilibrium at the highest level of creation that demonstrates that the world is in a state of imperfection in addition to the state of the creator and all the created (Dillon 386). “Origin” presents the source of all creation as a cosmic disaster from unbalanced, chaotic energy (Erhman 123). This is a later interpretation of the One and Infinite Dyad. The One, or Aeon of Light as it appears in “Origin,” is an active principle that limits (*peras/πέρας*) or sets boundaries on the formlessness (*aperion/ἄπειρον*), that is, the opposite principle. The dyad is a dualist conception between these two bounds, being simultaneously large and small (Dillon 3). Philo contrasted between God and Logos. Other Platonists such as Albinus, Apuleius, and Numenius postulated two distinct Gods which are both Intellects (*nous/νοῦς*), but one god is in repose, turned in on itself, and the other is directed

outwards and turned outwards (Dillon 45, 385-386). Such a teaching is incompatible with what Genesis presents, where God is a perfect being who is monadic without any opposing sides. The implication in “Origin” is that the world is in a perpetual state of contradiction and flux with warring dimensions constantly folding and out of themselves. In this world, only suffering and contradictions are possible until one achieves *gnōsis*.

The Gnostic description of reality is incompatible with the orthodox conception. Proto-orthodox Christian God is the only God, and there is no one above him. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus argues:

There is one only God, the creator— who is above every principality and power and dominion and virtue. He is Father, he is God, the founder, the maker, the creator who made those things by himself (that is, through his Word and his Wisdom)—heaven and earth, the seas, and everything in them. He is just; he is good; he it was who formed humanity, who planted paradise, who made the world (Payton 51).

“Origin” violates everything Irenaeus argues for in this passage and what became orthodox Christianity. There is a first principle beyond the gods in “Origin,” although it is not specified what exactly that is, and the Aeon of Light has multiple inconsistencies that make it difficult to properly describe. There are no good gods in “Origin,” for Yaldabaoth is ignorant and Sophia is partially evil, and ignorant as well. There is no justice in “Origin,” for “injustice is set over all their creations” (“Origin” 208). Without a just God it is difficult to establish the existence of some kind of justice in the first place, or a set of unified beliefs. When, as in “Origin,” principles are cast in self-contradictory, polarized ways, the teachings themselves are unstable and can be viewed doubtfully, in contrast with the stable teachings that Genesis contains. Genesis contains a unifying metaphysics: everything goes back to God, and there are no principles above him. “Origin” never provides a closed system like in Genesis, where there are unresolved issues concerning the first causal principles above the creative gods, and the issues of paradoxical

dyadic beings. It follows that “Origin” could not have made it into the orthodox canon that emphasizes unity.

### **V.b Yaldabaoth as a Parody of God**

Yaldabaoth is as a parody of the Jewish God in the Torah who later became God in the Old and New Testaments. Yaldabaoth’s figure adds another dimension to the non-orthodox beliefs that Gnostics maintained. The name is reminiscent of “Sabaoth, Lord of Hosts” and serves to signal that the Jewish God is a malformed and imperfect divine being who is ignorant as to where he came from (Ehrman 123-124). Yaldabaoth’s name is part of a tradition in Gnostic systems that malformed proper names of gods and used them to name demonic beings. This reveals the negative view Gnostics had towards some previous traditions, particularly the Jewish tradition because Gnostics were generally extremely anti-Semitic<sup>5</sup> (Jonas 43). Yaldabaoth’s language and assertions concerning himself mock God, for Yaldabaoth claims that “I am God, and there is no other but me” (“Origin” 206, 209, 212). God makes these claims repeatedly across the Torah, and the claims eventually made it into the Gospel of Mark (Exodus 20:3, 34:14; Isaiah 37:16, 37:20, 45:5; Mark 12:32 AKJV). Sophia mocks Yaldabaoth, calling him, “Samael” that in “Origin” means “blind god,” also mocking the Kabbalistic traditions that feature Samael, equating the Jewish God with the apocryphal Prince of Demons (“Origin” 206). The teaching that God is a flawed being, as Yaldabaoth implies, was rejected because it denies the possibility

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<sup>5</sup> The term “anti-Semitism” first appeared during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it refers to any racism or discrimination that the Jewish people experience because of their religion. However, there were many instances of anti-Semitic behavior before this term existed, particularly in the Roman Empire where Jews and Romans sometimes had cultural conflicts and frequently were at war. Anti-Semitic behavior was common in Rome, although it was called by different names over time. The rise of Christianity caused more widespread anti-Semitism, since Jews were blamed for the crucifixion. Since a Jew is someone who has an ethnicity and a religious practice, anti-Semitic behavior involves a combination of racism and anti-religious sentiment.

of an all-powerful god at the center of the universe in a perfect realm because there cannot be a realm above God or Heaven without weakening God in some way.

Now that the first beings and some issues in the *Timaeus* have been answered, another misunderstood “heresy” in “Origin” is the role of Yaldabaoth who serves as a personification of the Demiurge, adding another dimension to the heretical teaching. “Origin” provides many instances where Yaldabaoth has creative power in the same way that the Demiurge from *Timaeus* does. In the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge is referred to as the “artificer,” with limited powers to create objects as imitations of the true Forms and not the Forms themselves. “[When] the artificer of any object...keeps his gaze fixed on that which is uniform, using a model of this kind, that object, must of necessity be beautiful; but whenever he gazes at that which has come into existence and uses a created model, the object thus executed is not beautiful [*kalon/καλόν*]” (Plato 28a). Plato argues that the world is brought into completion through imitative models without connections to the form. It follows that nothing exists in its true manifestation on Earth since the Earth is an entirely separate realm, necessarily separated away from the beautiful, the ideal, and also the highest good. Yaldabaoth takes the role of the Demiurge when he creates matter from darkness, and out of darkness, and his evil creation is where Eden is and the subsequent generation of humanity.

[Yaldabaoth] separated the watery substance to one region and the dry substance to another region. From matter the ruler created for himself a dwelling place and called it heaven, and from matter he created a footstool and called it earth [Cf. *Gen.* 1:6-9]. ...The powers [Yaldabaoth created] were androgynous in accordance with the immortal pattern that existed before them and the will of Pistis, so that the likeness of what was from the beginning might have power to the end (“Origin” 205).

The language in this passage demonstrates Yaldabaoth’s role as Demiurge. The inclusion of “immortal pattern that existed before them” recalls the line “it has been constructed after the pattern of which is apprehensible by reason and thought and is self-identical” (Plato 29a).

Yaldabaoth's creations are imitations of the patterns in the initial Aeon of Light; this further condemns the material world as a pale imitation of the highest, inaccessible realm of the gods. This demonstrates Yaldabaoth serves to simultaneously ridicule Jehovah and resolve issues in the *Timaeus*.

Through Yaldabaoth and Sophia, "Origin" departs a good deal from Middle Platonist teachings and adds a further level of instability to the world: the split Demiurge. That is, the role of Demiurge is split between two evil characters: Sophia and Yaldabaoth. Yaldabaoth is in fact a product of Sophia's thought after she emerges from the Aeon of Light.

[Sophia] came and appeared over chaotic matter, which had been expelled like an aborted fetus, without any spirit in it... When Pistis [Sophia] saw what came into being through her deficiency, she was disturbed. And her disturbance appeared as something frightful, and it fled to her in the chaos. She turned to it... [and] wanted this thing with no spirit to be made into a likeness of the divine and rule over matter and all its powers, for the first time an archon [Yaldabaoth] appeared, out of the waters, lionlike in appearance, androgynous, with great authority in himself but ignorant of where he came from ("Origin" 204).

Sophia also shares the role of Demiurge, since she is the creator who creates with imitations of true objects. Since Yaldabaoth is in a likeness of the divine, he is not connected to it, but a copy of it, and cannot be beautiful. This follows for their creations as well, since these creations are only passing resemblances of the Aeon of Truth, which neither Sophia nor Yaldabaoth can occupy. The Demiurge is split between Sophia and Yaldabaoth. This is problematic because they are enemies throughout the text, even though they are both "evil". The result is a creative power that is turned inward against itself and creates a tension that by design is impossible to resolve. "Origin," through the polarized split Demiurge, teaches that the universe is fundamentally flawed at every plane of existence. Beyond parody, this teaching questions the idea of perfect beings at any level, utterly incompatible with the peaceful creation in Genesis through the Jewish God.



Nor does Genesis posit the idea that it is possible for such a thing as a separate realm of beauty and perfection to exist.

The split Demiurge is also a more extreme teaching than what one finds in Middle Platonism. Sophia and Yaldabaoth's relationship is almost reminiscent of the Zoroastrian teaching, where in the Zoroastrian creation myth Ahura Mazda, the entirely good god, and Angra Mainyu, the entirely evil god, are adversaries and create entirely good or evil creations respectively (Boyce 459-460). Indeed, Plutarch incorporates these dyadic figures as good and evil daemons into his metaphysics in *On Isis and Osiris*, but they are not inherently evil but rather fallen from a good state (Dillon 206, 218). "Origin" combines both of these teachings since Yaldabaoth and Sophia are counterparts, Sophia falls away from the Aeon of Truth and appears to be good while Yaldabaoth is certainly evil, considering he creates evil beings and he directed the other archons to rape Eve in Paradise. However, Sophia is "evil" as well, since she is capable of thinking evil thoughts that come to life and serve as her own enemy, and she is distanced from the beautiful by creating things only in a likeness of it, and thus further erasing any possibility for manifestation of the ideal in any realm outside of the Aeon of Light. In "Origin," evil fights against evil and good is an impossibility in this stark departure from both Jewish teachings and the Middle Platonists, upsetting people who were not part of their movement.

### **V.c The Docetic Christ**

"Origin" also denies Christ's resurrection because the text states that Christ is not a man, but a god that existed eternally. Docetism, the beliefs about Christ that Gnostics and some other early non-orthodox Christians shared, derives its name from the Greek word for "appearance" (*dokēsis/δόκησις*) and it means to demonstrate that Christ only appeared in "semblance" (*dokesi/δόκεσι*) of a man and hid his true nature as a god (Rudolph 157). Since Christ is an

eternal figure born in aeon of Sabaoth, Christ cannot be a man who suffered in any way, died, and returned to life. The central idea of all branches of orthodox Christianity is that Christ died for the sins of the world, and Christ's death and resurrection bring salvation into the world and eventually allow God to redeem the world (Ehrman 128). Gnostics completely reject this idea. Christ did not take on the sins of the world, nor was his flesh ever nailed to the cross. "Origin" presents an understanding of docetic understanding of Christ where he is a divine being instead of a man. In "Origin," Christ comes down from the heavens, possessing the fullness of the aeons, and came down to the earth as a reduction of himself instead of in his true form to meld himself temporarily with the body of a normal man. That man, Jesus of Nazareth, was embodied with the spirit of Christ and accomplished that which is listed in the canonical gospels. The composite form of Christ is made of the Earthly Jesus of Nazareth who dies and the heavenly and eternal Christ (Rudolph 151). Christ in "Origin" makes an appearance to establish himself as a docetic being and refute the Christian teaching that he is the savior. When that man was crucified, the divine Christ left the mortal body for the heavens and the man died (Ehrman 224; Rudolph 167). When Christ said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" during the crucifixion, the Gnostics interpreted that as meaning that his divine essence, the eternal Christ, left the earthly Christ and the earthly Christ died (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46 AKJV). Christ must be a man so he can be resurrected but this is impossible if "Origin" presents him as a god. Without the resurrection, Christianity simply cannot stand in its orthodox form, so it was deemed a "heresy" by early church fathers. This is the core of Gnostic "heresy."

This impossibility of achieving the good and the cosmology described in "Origin" refutes the fundamental Christian belief that Christ is good. Since goodness cannot exist in this world due to the systems of its creation, neither Christ, nor anyone else, can be "good" and therefore

redemption is impossible. In “Origin,” Christ is not good because Sabaoth, Yaldabaoth’s son, creates him. “[Sabaoth] created another being called Jesus Christ, who is like the Savior above the eighth heaven and who sits at the right of Sabaoth on a remarkable throne...All the armies of angels glorify and praise him” (“Origin” 208). Christ is an emanation from an evil being, so it would be impossible to seek salvation through him since belief in Christ would be a belief in evil. This fundamentally refutes the central idea of orthodox Christianity that people are made right with God through works and or faith (Ehrman 128). It is impossible to be redeemed through a being that is inherently wrong and who is an imitation of the world. Christ is shown as an imitation of the higher being through the use of the term “like” instead of is, recalling the issues of imitation versus true forms discussed and not of the higher world and an imitative being instead of a true being.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Consider how different Christianity would be if it were not for the Gnostics. Would Pistis Sophia be the main character in *Paradise Lost*? Imagine Yaldabaoth, the lion-headed serpent, on the cover of Genesis in medieval bibles. The Sistine Chapel may have been painted with a depiction of the final battle between Sophia and Yaldabaoth in “Origin.” Visualize the challenge of explaining that the most significant teachings of a spiritual movement could not be taught directly, and the issues should congregations have all sorts of different messages. In a church service, Plato would be read alongside the gospels, and the dialogues would be acted out for special presentations.

The lenses with which we view history are as important as the events that took place. Viewing the Gnostics merely in terms of “heresies” is only useful to do just that: view them in the eyes of the great orthodox Church, and through our own modern eyes who have difficulty

conceiving of a movement that uses Christ as a prominent figure as a movement which is mostly outside of and even predates Christianity. Through a proper contextualization of Gnostics, a multi-dimensional analysis of their beliefs and their relationship to Christianity comes to fruition. This approach reveals that philosophy and religion occur through great patterns of theme and variation. Specifically, Gnostics were another variation on a Platonic theme. Without the awareness of these patterns, history is erroneously understood in isolated names, events, and places; often these places are told through the eyes of the victor and not those who were present. The voices of the past are lost to the winds and remain in obscurity or perpetually distorted by the words of their enemies, forever keeping the modern public in a state of deception concerning the real nature of their cultural lineage. This contextualization of the Gnostics on their own terms removes some of, but certainly not all, of these distortions that most modern eyes cannot discern in order to see the reality of Christianity's history and the history of Western thought.

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