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Diversity and Development in early Christian Gnostic Thought:
An Analysis of Chaos, the Salvific Function of Humanity, and the True Nature of the Rulers in
The Secret Book of John, The Nature of the Rulers, and On the Origin of the World

by

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I. Introduction

The current conversation about the classification of texts in Gnostic scholarship has yet to provide a satisfactory or consistent categorization of “Gnostic” literature. This thesis builds upon current academic conversations about Gnosticism. It seeks to show that excluding or including texts in any Gnostic “corpus” based on the notion that *The Secret Book of John* is the foundational text obscures diversity and development within Gnostic thought either by hiding mythical variations behind the curtain of categorical classification or excluding the possibility of variation altogether. It focuses on the relationship between *The Secret Book of John*, *The Nature of the Rulers*, and the disputed text *On the Origin of the World*. It will examine the soteriological functions of “gnosis” attainment in these texts to show that *The Nature of the Rulers* and *On the Origin of the World* diverge from *The Secret Book of John* in similar ways, revealing theological diversity within the Gnostic school of thought.

The first historical mention of the Gnostics occurred in Irenaeus of Lyon’s account, *Against the Heresies*, written in the second half of the second century.¹ Early scholars knew about the Gnostics only through this and other polemical accounts, the majority written by Church fathers determined to define orthodoxy at the expense of other contemporary Christian theologies, resulting in work that inscribed rhetorical notions of orthodoxy and heresy to reinforce the proto-orthodox image of an originally pure, normative Christianity.² Such an approach obscured strategies of self-differentiation and theological diversity present within the

¹ David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

² Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), 6-8.

early Christian tradition, casting many streams of Christian thought into an unjustifiable heretical void stripped of their rightful place within the historical development of early Christianity.³

Although a wholly accepted understanding of the Gnostic identity has not yet prevailed, much progress has been made. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945 revealed literature that mirrored, for the first time, descriptions found in heresiological accounts, as well as texts that did not quite fit previously established molds of Gnostic thought, allowing for new means of analysis. Michael Williams, Karen King, and David Brakke, among others, have all worked to deconstruct the old category so it can be reconstructed beyond what Bauer calls the “ecclesiastical opinion” of Gnostic thought as a distorted deviation of Christ’s true message.⁴

Michael Williams is a critical figure for lifting negative stereotypes and generalities about the Gnostics such as the once widely accepted, but heresiologically rooted belief that Gnostics practiced libertine ethics or rejected the material world altogether.⁵ As an alternative to the typological approach, a method of extracting key characteristics about the Gnostics from particular texts and then using them to identify other texts as Gnostic, Williams offers “biblical demiurgical traditions” as a new, artificial category to replace Gnosticism.⁶ He defends this designation on the basis that it clarifies which texts and groups belong within its umbrella, including only “biblical” traditions that “ascribe the creation and management of the cosmos to some lower entity or entities, distinct from the highest God.”⁷ In a way, it is a simplified version

³ Walter Bauer, Robert A. Kraft, and Gerhard Krodel, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

⁴ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, xxiii.

⁵ Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43, 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*

of previous typological constructs, broadening the criteria but nonetheless basing the category on particular qualities. The two most significant and interrelated implications for this categorical construction are its divergence from “any ancient self-designation, real or imagined,” as well as its capacity to break through clichés often wrongly associated with Gnosticism.⁸ As Williams argues, these points will prevent scholars from speaking of the “biblical-demiurgical religion” as an essentialized and actual entity and therefore avoid obscuring diversity and meaning within early Christianity and the Nag Hammadi texts.⁹ However helpful Williams’ contribution to Gnostic studies may be, biblical demiurgical traditions does not resolve the categorical impediment associated with “Gnosticism.” The category is merely a patchwork disguise for “Gnosticism,” nearly equivalent in meaning, crossing its fingers that the glasses and mustache will sufficiently hide its otherwise obvious identity, and by so doing, prevent further assaults. In her groundbreaking work, *What is Gnosticism?*, King criticizes this designation for a similar reason, writing that “the result of Williams’ study has been merely to lead scholars to put Gnosticism in quotation marks and continue to use it more or less as always.”¹⁰ King also identifies Williams’ unintentional role in further promoting the polemical vision he so hopes to reject, revealing the need for a close examination of all scholarship concerning the Gnostics, including scholarship that claims to deny the biases of polemics.¹¹ One way that Williams reveals this bias is by including all texts originally associated with the “Gnosticism” as heresy model,

⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 214.

¹¹ Ibid., 215-217

including more distinct groups like the Marcionites and the Valentinians, in biblical demiurgical traditions.

What are we to do with “Gnosticism” if the polemics run so deep that even scholars who make efforts to escape them, fail? And, more importantly, how are we to understand the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi both in relation to each other and in relation to the early Christian world? David Brakke hopes to answer these questions by positing the historical existence of a single, socio-historical, self-named Gnostic school of thought.¹² His overarching goal is to identify the basic Gnostic mythic structure through a close reading of ancient polemical sources written by Irenaeus and others to give order and clarity to the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi.¹³ Building from the philological analysis of Bentley Layton and Hans Martin-Schenke, Brakke seeks to identify the texts associated most closely with what many scholars call “Sethian” Gnosticism, so-called because of its emphasis on Adam’s son Seth as “prototype of the individual Gnostic.”¹⁴ The basis of his work rests on Irenaeus’ description of the Gnostic myth in *Against the Heresies* and a study of the word *gnostikos*.¹⁵ From here, he identifies *The Secret Book of John* as the text that most closely mirrors Irenaeus’ description. Then, he analyzes the

¹² Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 8; Brakke, *The Gnostics*, x. Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334-350; Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism vol. 2*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 588-616.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-35.

Nag Hammadi texts through the lens of what he calls the “myth-oriented method” to identify literature presumed to have been read or written by the Gnostics as he defines them.¹⁶

Brakke’s interpretation of the Gnostics as a distinct social group with their own rituals and myth within a diverse early Christianity presents a tempting conclusion to the debate.¹⁷ However, the polemical foundation for Brakke’s social group continues to obscure the Gnostics and their literature, particularly because of his reliance on Irenaeus. Brakke himself notes that in contrast to the details provided about other early Christian groups Irenaeus describes, he “reports only mythology and biblical interpretation when he describes the Gnostics” and likely “relied on written sources and *even hearsay* for his information.”¹⁸ It is important here to note that Irenaeus’ intent was far from a neutral historical survey of the varying intellectual traditions in the early Christian world, but rather an act of defining his version of Christianity against that of others. The basis of Brakke’s argument lies, however, on a set of assumptions that begin with Irenaeus’ description of the Gnostics: Irenaeus, for polemical purposes, outlines the “Gnostic” myth to establish it as a heresy; then, Brakke and other scholars *trust* that Irenaeus’ familiarity with the Gnostics was substantial enough that he correctly recorded their central myth.¹⁹ Because *The Secret Book of John* discovered at Nag Hammadi most closely resembles Irenaeus’ description, Brakke considers it to be the basic mythic structure of the Gnostic worldview. Finally, scholars

¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁷ Brakke, *The Gnostics*.

¹⁸ Ibid., 36. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ See Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334-350; Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism vol. 2*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 588-616.

give this set of assumptions priority when reading for potential “Gnostic” texts, using them as the basis for identifying their Gnostic-ness and excluding those texts which do not exhibit particular motifs used in particular ways.

When relying on polemical texts like *Against the Heresies*, we must be careful, as Frederick Wisse so aptly states, “to distinguish between the historical situation which they *reflect* and the historical situation they *created*.”²⁰ This distinction raises the question: Did the “Gnostics” even exist in terms of a distinct Christian group, and, as Karen King ponders, does studying them as such “further promote imagining some sort of unified or overly well-differentiated social group too early, too widespread, and too persistent” within the early Christian context?²¹ Without more resources about the social happenings of the Gnostics, scholars may never know with certainty.

How should we think of the Gnostics or “Gnosticism” when details about their practices and myth remain obscured by both the lack of information and the misinterpretation of what little information we do have? The wide variety of texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, ranging from works resembling Irenaeus’ description of the Gnostic myth to Valentinian essays, expanded the purview of early Christian studies in part because it gave scholars access to the literature of the Gnostics themselves. Because the only resources available about the Gnostics are their literature and the biased accounts of church fathers, quite a lot is at stake if scholars exclude a text because it does not quite fit Irenaeus’ model. One such text is *On the Origin of the World*. Brakke does

²⁰ Frederik Wisse, “The Use of Early Christian Literature as Evidence for Inner Diversity and Conflict,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and early Christianity*, ed. Charles W. Hendrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 179.

²¹ Karen L. King, “David Brakke, The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity,” *History of Religions* 52, no. 3 (February 2013): 294-301.

not include this work in his categorization of Gnostic texts at all, failing even to include it in the section labelled “works that scholars dispute,” when in fact his very exclusion of the text evidences such a dispute. For another example, Tuomas Raisimus’ insightful and intricate study of different types of Gnosticism (such as Ophite, Barbeloite, and Sethian, if we dare use such categories), clearly suggests that *On the Origin of the World* is indeed a Gnostic text, even if he places it within the typological construction he calls “Ophite” Gnosticism.²²

Brakke’s objection to the text’s inclusion provides a perfect example of the risks taken by scholars who rely on Irenaeus’ account as the basis for defining “Gnosticism.” First, Brakke opposes its inclusion because its myth “differs considerably from what one finds in *The Secret Book According to John* and related books.”²³ Second, he suggests that “if he [the author] was [an adherent to the Gnostic school of thought], he was not very concerned to maintain its distinctive traditions (at least in this work).”²⁴ To answer Brakke’s objection we can refer back to the issue of Irenaeus’ shaky knowledge of the Gnostics. If Brakke’s objection is to be taken seriously, we must also agree with the premise that *The Secret Book According to John* is the exemplar text which all potentially “Gnostic” literature must be compared. Brakke’s second objection strengthens King’s concern that his idea of the Gnostics as a distinct social group with a clearly established myth and matching ritual system distorts the fluidity of early Christian thought more broadly, as well as potential avenues for growth and development within the

²² Tuomas Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

²³ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

Gnostic worldview.²⁵ Given the diversity within even Brakke's approved list of Gnostic texts, his notion of a distinct Gnostic myth seems more a modern scholarly imposition than a historical reality.

Strangely enough, however, there *is* a text that Brakke places within the category of "works that have wide scholarly agreement" which bears significant resemblance to *On the Origin of the World*, and diverges from *The Secret Book of John* in similar ways: *The Nature of the Rulers*. It is apparent that the author of *On the Origin of the World* was familiar with *The Nature of the Rulers* or a similar text, and extrapolates on key mythic details, even filling in vague areas of confusion within *The Nature of the Rulers*. Fallon emphasizes the significant relationship between these texts and states that "its citation of other Gnostic writings and its developed mythology suggest a later date" of composition than *The Nature of the Rulers*.²⁶ The most striking similarities between the two texts are the origination of chaos, the function of humankind's gnosis attainment in relation to both the divine and material worlds, and the addition of Norea and Sabaoth, two figures absent in *The Secret Book of John* but of primary focus in the other two texts. In the next section of this paper, I will explore these three points of similarity in *The Secret Book of John*, followed by an analysis of both *The Nature of the Rulers* and *On the Origin of the World*. Ultimately, my analysis of the salvific significance for the readers of the text will show that scholars need to account for avenues of development within the Gnostic worldview over time, taking special care not to make rigid the fluid boundaries of early Christian Gnostic thought.

²⁵ King, "David Brakke."

²⁶ Francis T. Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 6.

Before continuing, I would like to make a brief statement on methodology. Until now, I have not identified how I define the Gnostics or Gnosticism. Brakke's exceptional study of the Gnostics and their place as a school of thought within early Christianity has been a significant influence, even if I remain suspicious of the rigid boundaries he proposes. However, this does not mean that we should reject boundaries altogether. I believe that reading the Nag Hammadi literature without Irenaeus' and other polemicist descriptions of the Gnostic myth would yield a similar categorization of the literature as a distinctive school of thought. When I refer to the Gnostics, I am referring to potential authors, readers, and adherents of this distinctive mythic experience. I will not go so far as to conjecture about the primacy of any particular text, nor do I find it plausible to conclude the fashion with which these texts were utilized or studied by the Gnostics themselves.

King's suggestions for future studies of early Christian identity inform my analysis of Gnostic texts. She emphasizes the greater importance of studying practice over "origins and essence" because it frees early Christianity from "any causal-linear frame of origins and development" and "will result in more than one true and authentic narrative."²⁷ To better understand the unique narrative that the relationship between these three texts reveals, I will also maintain her definition of rhetorical analysis: "Rhetorical analysis...seeks to identify a work's construction of the implied author and audience, its ends as well as its means of persuasion, the issues under contention, and the symbolic world it assumes as well as the world it constructs."²⁸ Such an approach is especially important due to the literary nature of the remaining textual

²⁷ Ibid., 235-236.

²⁸ Ibid., 233.

materials about the Gnostics and their worldview, helping us better understand their perceptions of the world and themselves, as well as their interactions with other early Christian groups and intellectual traditions. Because we cannot ask a historical Gnostic how they interpreted these texts, scholars must rely on the cultural identity left behind in early Christian thought. Rhetorical analysis allows the scholar to study the diversity of ideas present within each text, emphasizing points of difference and similarity with other texts to yield a fuller image of Gnostic thought and development through the study of both broad trends and specific details.

II. *The Secret Book of John*

According to Karen King, *The Secret Book of John* was most likely composed in second-century Alexandria within the context of an informal philosophical school consisting of a teacher and his pupils.²⁹ The text pulls from contemporary philosophical and religious schools of thought, including Platonism, Judaism, and Johannine Christianity.³⁰ Four versions of the text have been discovered and translated from Coptic, containing different degrees of similarity.³¹ *The Secret Book of John* was first discovered in the Berlin Codex in 1896, with longer versions discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945.³² The translation upon which I will base my analysis utilizes the longer version found in Nag Hammadi Codex II. I have chosen Marvin Meyer's translation of *The Secret Book of John*, as well as *The Nature of the Rulers* and *On the Origin of the World* because I expect that analyzing his translations against each other will yield the most consistent analysis.

The text is structured as a dialogue between Christ and John, in which Christ reveals the cosmology of the divine realm, the creation of the material world, and humankind's relationship to both. The narrative is complex and filled with holes, due in no small part to the damaged quality of the manuscript itself. What follows is a summary of the narrative of divine generation, the creation of the world, and the fate of humanity. Christ begins the narrative with a detailed description of the highest power, or ultimate God, given numerous titles attesting to its

²⁹ Karen King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 10-13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

³¹ John D. Turner, "The Secret Book of John" in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 103.

³² *Ibid.*

incorporeality such as “The One,” “God, Parent, and Father of the All,” and the “Invisible Spirit.”³³ All other divine beings, called aeons, arise through its power and with its permission to form the divine realm. The first of these occurs when the Invisible Spirit reflects upon itself, emanating the Barbelo, the image of the divine.³⁴ Barbelo then requests a series of qualities from the Father, including Foreknowledge, Incorruptibility, Life Eternal, and Truth, which along with Barbelo form the “five aeons of the Father.”³⁵

Barbelo and the Invisible Spirit become the Mother-Father after “the Father gazed into Barbelo” and she “conceived from him” Christ, their “only Child.”³⁶ From him appeared the four luminaries Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithai, and Eleleth who are “appointed” to four realms, each with three aeons.³⁷ Sophia, or Wisdom, is the last of these aeons. Through Foreknowledge and the will of the Invisible Spirit and the Self-Generated (Christ) “came the perfect human, the first revelation, the truth” Geradamas (Adam).³⁸ Barbelo appointed him to the first eternal realm, with Harmozel and Christ. Adam appointed his son, Seth, to the second eternal realm, Seth’s offspring to the third eternal realm, and “the souls of those who were ignorant of the Fullness” to the fourth eternal realm, with Eleleth.³⁹

Like other early Christian literature, the authors of *The Secret Book of John* sought to make sense of the Old Testament in light of Christ’s message. Unlike Irenaeus and other proto-

³³ *The Secret Book of John* (trans. Meyer, 108)

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

orthodox thinkers, however, the Gnostics reinterpreted the creator God in Genesis as an unjust and arrogant demiurge named Ialdabaoth, ignorant of and inferior to the divine world outside of which he exists. He came into existence, when his mother, Sophia, desired to create “without the consent of the Spirit.”⁴⁰ Shocked that her creation was “imperfect” and “misshapen,” she hid it in its own realm, out of site from the divine.⁴¹ But, Ialdabaoth took with him a portion of his mother’s divine power, giving him the ability to form his own horrendous realms and aeons that become the material world, or chaos.

Sophia repented to the Fullness once she recognized that “the brightness of her light diminished.”⁴² After Ialdabaoth boasted that there is no God except him, an image of the Human appeared in the clouds of chaos as part of the divine plan to restore Wisdom’s lost power. Ialdabaoth and his authorities began creating a reflection of that image in the material world. This image becomes the Adam of Genesis. However, after Ialdabaoth’s authorities construct Adam’s body, they find that it has no life.

Wisdom again prays to the Mother-Father, and it sent luminaries to Ialdabaoth’s material terrain. They advised him to “breathe some of his spirit into the face of Adam and the body will arise.”⁴³ Ignorant of the fact that the power he stole from his mother was in his breath, Ialdabaoth transferred Wisdom’s power into Adam, not only giving him movement, but also enlightenment.

After realizing that Adam’s strength and gnosis surpassed his own, Ialdabaoth cast him into a mortal body. “Enlightened Insight” persisted within him, “rejuvenating Adam’s mind”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 114-115.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 117-118.

⁴³ Ibid., 124-125.

despite the confines of the material body.⁴⁴ No matter his efforts, however, Ialdabaoth cannot recapture the Spirit of the divine to regain his lessened power. Instead, he forced humanity to “drink water of forgetfulness.”⁴⁵ He even attempted to destroy humanity with a flood, but Forethought forewarned Noah and humanity was preserved.⁴⁶

Ialdabaoth and his authorities envied Adam and sent him to the “the lowest part of the whole material realm.”⁴⁷ The Mother-Father took pity on Adam and sent enlightened Insight, or Zoe, to help restore Wisdom’s power through its guidance.⁴⁸ The world powers created Paradise to distract Adam from his own enlightenment, but found that Adam still possessed enlightened Insight, or Zoe, and “brought deep sleep upon” him.⁴⁹ During his slumber, Ialdabaoth extracted Zoe from Adam and created Eve. However, Insight could not be apprehended. When Ialdabaoth raped Eve in an attempt to defile Insight, divine emissaries “stole Life out of Eve.”⁵⁰

From Ialdabaoth, Eve birthed Cain and Abel. When Adam once again knew “the counterpart of his own foreknowledge,” he produced Seth, “a son like the child of humanity.”⁵¹ The spirit of the Mother came down into the material realm to help prepare the “seed” of Seth to rejoin the Fullness through enlightenment.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Meyer’s translation of “enlightened Insight” is clarified in his footnote as being akin to Zoe. Bentley Layton prefers Zoe or life; Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 44-45. Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 124-125.

⁴⁹ *The Secret Book of John* (trans. Meyer, 130).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 127-128.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The text concludes with a hymn that describes three descents of the savior into the material realm.⁵² In the third descent, the savior “entered the midst of their prison, which is the prison of the body” to awaken humankind from its slumber of ignorance.⁵³ Even though Ialdabaoth enslaved humanity within the bonds of the body in a final attempt to divorce humanity from the divine, with the help of the Spirit humankind can awaken from its ignorant slumber and transcend the corruption of the demiurge and his authorities, now, in this body. The awakened individual can then teach others how to end their enslavement and reach salvation.

Awakening from ignorance, or attaining gnosis, is the salvific goal of *The Secret Book of John*. To do so means restoring the natural order and replenishing the portion of Wisdom’s power that has been trapped in chaos. The lack of a power struggle in the divine world suggests that power struggles in the material world that humanity currently occupies are unnatural impositions that impede salvation through destruction and distraction. The savior’s threefold descent into the underworld aims to reignite the divine seed within humanity that has been put to sleep by the worldly rulers.

Although Ialdabaoth and his minions enslaved humanity, they play only a limited role in its creation. Without the temptation of the First Human’s image in the waters of the sky, Ialdabaoth would not have been inspired to create Adam. Furthermore, without expelling the remnants of the Spirit into Adam’s body under the guidance of divine emissaries, Adam would have been nothing but a lifeless heap of bone and sinew. This shows that without divine interference, humanity would not exist. In fact, humanity’s sole purpose is to return Wisdom’s

⁵² Ibid., 131-132.

⁵³ Ibid.

stolen power to the All, and therefore restore the natural order. Humankind becomes the hero of the story, liberating the divine from the prison of unnatural corruption through personal enlightenment. But first, it must overcome the distractions and disasters installed against them by Ialdabaoth and his authorities. For example, Ialdabaoth threatens the enlightened human race with the great flood of *Genesis*. Ialdabaoth regretted creating humanity and planned to destroy it with the flood. Forethought warned Noah, an enlightened human, so that he could warn others. Forethought's intervention on behalf of the human race demonstrates the righteousness of humanity while simultaneously debasing Ialdabaoth's defiance against the natural order. For humanity, defying Ialdabaoth and his minions is imperative to achieve salvation. This contrasts with the account found in *Genesis*, where God regrets creation because of "how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time."⁵⁴

The Secret Book of John's reinterpretation of the great flood of *Genesis* highlights the contrasting relationship between the actual position of humanity and the demiurge's account of it due to his fear that humanity would continue to defy his power. By reinterpreting this scene, *The Secret Book of John* not only recasts humanity in a positive light, but also illuminates Ialdabaoth's caustic attitude towards the human race and its efforts to restore the natural order of the divine. Even though Ialdabaoth thinks he has the power to destroy humanity through the flood, his plan backfires because the unenlightened beings ignored Noah and were destroyed while "many other people from the unshakable race" survived.⁵⁵ The fact that Ialdabaoth could

⁵⁴ *Genesis* 6:5 NIV.

⁵⁵ *The Secret Book of John* (trans. Meyer, 130).

not infiltrate the unshakable race demonstrates his lack of power in the face of enlightened beings. This is an exemplary representation of the significance of humanity's persistent deviance against worldly oppression. As the earthly rulers seek to distract humanity with pleasures and suffering, the seed of enlightenment strives to liberate them from the influence of the counterfeit spirit. Thus, the human body becomes a battleground between corruption and divinity.

In the final hymn, Christ warns John to “guard [himself] against the angels of misery, the demons of chaos, and all who entrap you,” extending the edict of enlightened resistance beyond the archons themselves to include humans in positions of power, such as kings and emperors whose rulership enslaves them.⁵⁶ Karen King conjectures that this may be a major point of conflict between Irenaeus' proto-orthodox perspective and the Gnostic myth as presented in *The Secret Book of John*, and even suggests that Gnosticism may have fallen out of popularity in part because “such an uncompromising critique of ruling power in the world below” could not have been “compatible with the radical shift in the political condition of Christianity from persecuted sect to imperial favor,” that occurred in the fourth century.⁵⁷ Even before the possibility of imperial favor colored the Christian identity, Irenaeus expressed disagreement with the Gnostics about worldly authority, arguing that “God imposed the fear of man” where the fear of God failed, through governance.⁵⁸ *The Secret Book of John* does not suggest that the fear of God, or obedience to God, is on the minds of the Gnostics at all. In fact, obedience in this world is not

⁵⁶ *The Secret book of John* (trans. Meyer, 131).

⁵⁷ Karen L. King, “Social and Theological Effects of Heresiological Discourse,” *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Eduard Iricinschi. and Holger M. Zellentin (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 46-47.

⁵⁸ Robert M. Grant, trans. *Against the Heresies* 24.2 in *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997), Taylor and Francis e-library edition, 131.

only irrelevant to salvation, but postpones it indefinitely because it is an act of disobedience to the divine order and rejects the role that humanity was sent to fulfill.

The text is clear that the world rulers have bound humanity in “iniquity, and injustice and blasphemy, the bondage of forgetfulness, and ignorance, and all burdensome orders, weighty sins, and great fears.”⁵⁹ The significance of these qualities in the life of a specific Gnostic is unclear, and perhaps purposefully so. Vague adjectives that the reader can interpret within the context of their own experiences give an almost limitless power to the text. Recognizing that accepting the status quo as the truth gives undue power to the counterfeit spirit and weakens humanity’s connection to the divine encourages the reader to listen carefully to the world around them as well as the emotional world within them, lest they never awaken from their slumber and remain forever “in the bowels of the underworld.”⁶⁰ In other words, the text validates experiences of suffering and provides not only a divine, but also a moral reason to withstand injustice, particularly when it is disguised as justice.

The text differentiates between the natural order of the divine realm and the corrupt order of the material world by contrasting the sanctioned appointment of divinities with the domineering rule of earthly rulers. The first half of the text describes a harmonious realm where all entities are in agreement with one another (with the exception of Wisdom, which we will discuss later). The Father of the All is described in positive terms, as a “sovereign,” with “nothing over it.”⁶¹ However, unlike descriptions of the entities in charge of the material world, the Father does not rule or reign over any other power. Instead, he is “a realm that gives a realm,

⁵⁹ *The Secret Book of John* (trans. Meyer, 130).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

life that gives life, a blessed one that gives blessedness, knowledge that gives knowledge, a good one that gives goodness, mercy that gives mercy and redemption, grace that gives grace.”⁶² In essence, the One is knowledge, or gnosis itself. He does not need to declare his power like Ialdabaoth, who says to his authorities “I am a jealous god and there is no other god beside me,” because His presence as Father is natural rather than created.⁶³ The text highlights this distinction when the revealer says to Ialdabaoth’s claim, “but by announcing this, he suggested to the angels with him that there is another god. For if there were no other god, of whom would he be jealous?”⁶⁴

The text’s language distinguishes between the natural order of the divine realm and the corrupt one that constitutes the material realm. For example, to become powerful, Ialdabaoth “took great power from his mother,” whereas in the divine realm, power is given freely by its source, the Father.⁶⁵ Ialdabaoth also “took control and created for himself other aeons...and authorities.”⁶⁶ In contrast to this, the generation of divinities in the divine realm is couched in more natural descriptions such as the emanation of Barbelo through the Father’s gaze, conception of the Child (Christ, also through the Father’s gaze), and the derivation of the Four Luminaries (from the Child’s gaze). The practice of ruling others and the struggle for power are not present in the divine realm, and are likely an impossibility outside of the material realm. Even Wisdom, who rebelled against the All to create without her counterpart and without the

⁶² Ibid., 109.

⁶³ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

consent of the Mother-Father, recognized her error and sought repentance with the intention to restore the natural order.

It is important to keep in mind *The Secret Book of John's* depiction of the origination of chaos as well as the role of humanity when comparing it to *The Nature of the Rulers*. As we shall see in the following section, *The Nature of the Rulers* delivers a different perspective on chaos, and even deemphasizes the role of personal enlightenment, altering the overall character and function of the myth.

III. The Nature of the Rulers: Gnostic Thought Developed

Hypostasis of the Archons, also titled *The Nature of the Rulers* or *The Reality of the Rulers*, was first discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945. Like *The Secret Book of John*, it was also translated from Greek into Coptic, and most likely had its point of origin in Alexandria.⁶⁷ Scholars argue that the original text is later than *The Secret Book of John* because it presents a more developed explication of Gnostic thought.⁶⁸ The purpose of the text, as given in the first paragraph, is to answer an anonymous inquirer's questions "about the real nature of the authorities," suggesting that other Gnostic texts either failed to answer the question to the affect desired by readers, or that it was a response to polemics.⁶⁹ It shares a similar soteriological aim with *The Secret Book of John*, namely that humanity must achieve salvation to free themselves from the archons and destroy the material realm. However, in *The Nature of the Rulers*, the significance of this aim differs from *The Secret Book of John* because it focuses on the story of Adam and Eve's daughter, Norea, and her inborn resistance to the rulers, drawing attention away from the function of humanity as the restorer of the light to the All. This emphasis distracts from differences in the larger context of humanity's salvific aim, such as the origination of chaos and the possibility for the rulers to repent.

The text begins after the creation of Ialdabaoth, in the moment that he claims himself as the only god with none above him. Incorruptibility shared her image in the waters to inspire the authorities to create Adam through the Father's will, so "she might bring all into union with the

⁶⁷ Marvin Meyer, introduction to *The Nature of the Rulers* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 190.

⁶⁸ Bullard, introduction to *Hypostasis of the Archons* in *The Nag Hammadi Library* ed. James Robinson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 161.

⁶⁹ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 192).

light.”⁷⁰ Contrary to *The Secret Book of John*, Ialdabaoth’s breath did not have the power to make him arise, though it did give him a soul. Adam finally arose after the Spirit descended from the “adamantine land” of the divine realm and “made his home within him.”⁷¹ Rather than feeling dissuaded by Adam, the rulers placed him in the garden to “cultivate” and “watch over it.”⁷² Eventually, they forced the deep sleep of ignorance upon him and created Eve, leaving Adam with “only a soul.”⁷³ After the rulers defiled Eve, the “female spiritual presence came in the shape of the serpent” and guided Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge.⁷⁴ The angered rulers, who had given the humans direct orders to avoid the fruit of that tree, threw them out of the garden and “into great confusion and a life of toil” to prevent them from pursuing the truth of the holy Spirit.⁷⁵

Eve then gives birth to Cain and Abel, the sons of the worldly rulers, as well as Seth, and Norea. When the rulers decided to destroy humanity with a flood, Norea burned Noah’s first ark because he disallowed her from boarding. The rulers then confronted Norea “to seduce her” like they had her mother.⁷⁶ She called to the divine, beginning a dialogue between her and Eleleth in which Eleleth tells the story of creation and reveals humankind’s destiny. Unlike *The Secret Book of John*, Eleleth’s story excludes the layout of the divine realm and instead focuses on the creation of chaos and Ialdabaoth. One significant difference between this and *The Secret Book of*

⁷⁰ Ibid., 191.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 193).

⁷⁵ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer 194).

⁷⁶ Ibid. 194.

John lies in the introduction and role of Sabaoth, Ialdabaoth's resistant son. When Ialdabaoth claimed to be the only god, Zoe breathed an angel into Ialdabaoth's face to bind him into Tartaros, "the bottom of the abyss."⁷⁷ Sabaoth, his son, was so impressed with this angel that he "condemned his father and his mother."⁷⁸ In return for his songs and prayers to the heavens, Sophia placed him "above the powers of chaos" and he was named "god of the powers."⁷⁹ Eleleth then makes an abrupt transition to the conclusion where she predicts the salvation of humanity three generations hence, when "the true human in human form reveals [the spirit of truth] that the Father has sent."⁸⁰

The exclusion of an explicit divine cosmology as well as the presence of an implicit divine realm suggests the author's familiarity with a text like *The Secret Book of John*, and suggests that its readership had a similar familiarity. This is not surprising given that the text seeks to answer specific questions about the rulers rather than to provide an overview of the entire mythic system. It is worth considering what these questions may have looked like, and how they impacted the narrative function of the text.

Of particular interest is the text's reiteration of the divine will in the actions and even the creation of the rulers. The most telling example of this phenomenon occurs when Eleleth claims that "all these things came to be by the will of the Father of the All, after the pattern of all that is above, so that the sum total of chaos might be reached."⁸¹ This passage directly follows a

⁷⁷ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 198.

⁸¹ Ibid., 197.

description of the origins of envy and death as a result of Sabaoth's repentance and consequent rejection of Ialdabaoth's authority, therefore creating the last remaining elements necessary to complete the material world. Bentley Layton suggests that these reiterations "probably" altered "to some degree the original intent of gnostic myth," something presumably contained in *The Secret Book of John*.⁸² Although we have cast doubt on using *The Secret Book of John* as the exemplary Gnostic text, a close examination of the two texts reveals two different views on humanity's ontological relationship with the divine and material realms. Middle Platonist metaphysics influenced the authors of both texts and may illuminate conflicting ideas about the function of the authorities and humankind's relationship with the world within the Gnostic school of thought as it developed over time. Plato's *Timaeus* provides insight into *The Nature of the Rulers'* emphasis on the idea that the sum total of chaos must be reached for the completion of the larger universe. This philosophical idea grows directly from Plato's *Timaeus*, but is absent in *The Secret Book of John*, despite its use of Middle Platonist cosmological structure. Like the *The Secret Book of John* and *The Nature of the Rulers* the *Timaeus'* cosmological structure includes a high, pure god (the demiurge) and multiple lesser gods who create humanity.⁸³ However, in the *Timaeus*, the highest god sanctions the creation of humanity and the material world in order to organize chaos to the best possible good and complete the universe. He creates the lesser gods to complete this task because he can only create immortal things and the remainder of chaos must consist of mortal things.⁸⁴ In this case, the demiurge in the *Timaeus*

⁸² Bentley Layton, introduction to *The Reality of the Rulers* in *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 65.

⁸³ *Timaeus*, 41c (trans. Francis M. Cornford, 36).

⁸⁴ *Timaeus*, 41c (trans. Francis M. Cornford, 36).

sanctioned the creation of human beings, even crafting their souls himself before handing the material aspect of creation to his lower gods.⁸⁵ While the souls of humans in *The Secret Book of John* contain the seed of the divine spirit that will allow them to attain salvation through enlightenment, *The Secret Book of John* casts the creation of material humanity as the divine solution to Wisdom's deliberate error, but not, as is the case in *The Nature of the Rulers* as part of any explicit plan to complete "the sum total of chaos."⁸⁶

The idea that the completion of chaos and all its creatures through the sanction of the divine will, including Ialdabaoth and humanity, in *The Nature of the Rulers* replaces the ingenuity of humanity as a last ditch effort to restore the power of the All stolen from Wisdom with a pre-planned scheme necessary for the overall completion of the universe. Indeed, the text lacks the very idea that Ialdabaoth stole any power from Wisdom at all, bringing into question humanity's function in this version of the Gnostic world-view. Evidence of this occurs when Ialdabaoth breathes a soul into Adam but cannot make him rise because he lacks the Spirit, unlike in *The Secret Book of John* where the only way to free Ialdabaoth's stolen power is to convince him to blow it into Adam.⁸⁷ This suggests that Ialdabaoth did not steal Wisdom's power, eliminating the potential for humanity to function as the restorer of Wisdom's stolen power to the All through enlightenment in *The Secret Book of John*. Without such a purpose, the function of humanity within the so-called Gnostic mythos clearly differs between *The Secret Book of John* and *The Nature of the Rulers*.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 41c-44d.

⁸⁶ *The Secret Book of John* (trans. Meyer, 124); *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 197).

⁸⁷ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 192).

If humanity does not function in this text as a force to resist the rulers and remedy Wisdom's lack, what is its purpose? The answer is not clear. In Eleleth's concluding remarks to Norea rests a vague impression of humanity's function when she says "they will be freed from blind thought," "trample death," and "ascend into the infinite light where this offspring is."⁸⁸ Then, the rulers "will surrender their years and ages" and "all the children of the light will know the truth," "their root," "and the Father of the All."⁸⁹ It is evident that gnosis attainment is supposed to be beneficial to humanity and harmful to the earthly rulers, but unlike the *The Secret Book of John*, nowhere does the text state the ultimate purpose of their enlightenment except that it will bring about the eventual destruction of the material world. In this regard, the text seems incomplete compared to both *The Secret Book of John* and *On the Origin of the World*, the latter of which elucidates humankind's function even more clearly than the former. It is possible that the author felt that *The Secret Book of John* leaned too far outwards from the platonic conception of reality and wrote or edited this text to express a more strongly Middle Platonic function for humanity. However, unlike the positive view of human creation and the creation of the archons in Middle Platonic thought which might be expected in a text that emphasizes the demiurge's divine will for all aspects of creation, *The Nature of the Rulers* criticizes the worldly rulers on a fundamentally harsher level than *The Secret Book of John* by giving Sabaoth, Ialdabaoth's own son, the ability to repent.

In the *Timaeus*, the demiurge worked under the direct orders of the highest god to create mortal living creatures, for if he created them himself, "they would be equal to gods," and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 198.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Heaven would remain incomplete.⁹⁰ Gnostic thought tends to present the demiurge negatively, often using the qualifier “arrogant.” In *The Nature of the Rulers*, for example, Incorruptibility names the demiurge “Samael” whose name is emphasized as meaning “blind god.”⁹¹ *The Secret Book of John* describes Ialdabaoth and his minions similarly. However, *The Nature of the Rulers* illustrates the potential of the authorities to repent by forgoing ignorance and seeking salvation both through Incorruptibility’s interactions with Ialdabaoth and Sabaoth’s own repentance.

Ialdabaoth’s interaction with Incorruptibility is detailed twice within the text, once at the beginning and again during Eleleth and Norea’s dialogue. In both instances, Incorruptibility reveals herself in the waters of the sky to refute Ialdabaoth’s claim that he is the only god. The first account is brief, giving only the basic description of the interaction and excluding the scene of Sabaoth’s repentance, perhaps revealing that the latter is an addition to an earlier version of the text. The second interaction between Ialdabaoth and Incorruptibility is by far the more important because it opens a dialogue between the two characters that reveals Ialdabaoth’s stubborn rejection of divine authority even after it is shown to him. Like their first encounter, it begins with Ialdabaoth’s boast to be the only god. When he said this, “he sinned against the realm of the All.”⁹² This, in fact, is the only example of a sin in both *The Secret Book of John* and *The Nature of the Rulers*, suggesting that ignorance of the divine order is the most condemnable act in this worldview. But, Incorruptibility gives Ialdabaoth a second chance when she attempts to correct his view by speaking to him from above. He responds with the demand: “If anything

⁹⁰ *Timaeus*, 41b-c (trans. Francis M. Cornford, 36).

⁹¹ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 191).

⁹² *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 196).

exists before me, let me see it.”⁹³ Sophia then “pointed her finger and brought light into matter... and pursued it down to the region of chaos,” then left, withdrawing with the light.⁹⁴ Ialdabaoth, now undeniably knowledgeable about the realm above and the power of those above, “said to his children ‘I am God of all.’”⁹⁵ His obstinance does him in when Zoe, the daughter of Sophia “called out and said to him, ‘you are blind Sakla, ’” and bound him in Tartaros.⁹⁶ The dialogue shows that Ialdabaoth is not inherently flawed, but that his ignorance is flawed. Sophia could have bound him in Tartaros at any time, but chose not to do so until he was given a fair chance at redemption. Attempting to correct Ialdabaoth’s ignorance demonstrates a capacity for divine mercy. This mercy extends to humanity through the Spirit’s seed, as well as the impending arrival of the savior.

Ialdabaoth’s son, Sabaoth, does repent, suggesting the potential for the redemption of all beings through the acceptance of enlightenment, including the rulers. After he “sent songs of praise” to Sophia, she established him as “god of the powers” in his own realm, between “what is above and what is below.”⁹⁷ Within his realm, he “made himself a huge four-faced chariot of cherubim,” “an infinity of angels as ministers,” and “harps and lyres.”⁹⁸ Sophia installed her daughter, Zoe (Life), on his right to teach him about the realm above. She installed the angel of wrath on his left.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 197.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Fallon argues that Sabaoth's repentance and ascent functioned to differentiate between the evil demiurge and the Jewish God in the Old Testament.⁹⁹ He writes "the God of the OT is shown to be the one who rules this world and to be not completely evil, even though he is the offspring of an evil father Ialdabaoth."¹⁰⁰ Since many early Christian groups worked to define the relationship between the OT in light of NT ideas, an attempt to reconcile the God of the OT within the Gnostic worldview is not surprising. This does not lessen Sabaoth's function to buttress the vileness of Ialdabaoth, but it does suggest a space for development within Gnostic literature.

Even though the overall narrative in *The Nature of the Rulers* reflects significant similarity with *The Secret Book of John*, it also reveals significant difference, namely, the origination of chaos, humanity's purpose and relationship to the divine, as well as that of Ialdabaoth's and his rulers'. Nonetheless, such differences do not exclude *The Nature of the Rulers* from Brakke's list of Gnostic texts, nor would it be logical to exclude it based on this examination given what we know about the complicated development of religious thought generally, and early Christian thought specifically. However, these differences do call into question those who exclude *On the Origin of the World* from the Gnostic school of thought. The next section will show how *On the Origin of the World* provides insight into logical leaps present within *The Nature of the Rulers* but also the ways in which it brings us further from *The Secret Book of John* without pushing it completely out of mind. The text's description of chaos, the function of humanity, and Sabaoth's repentance all bear significant commonalities with *The*

⁹⁹ Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 77.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

Nature of the Rulers. As we shall see in the next section, reading *The Nature of the Rulers* beside *On the Origin of the World* is a helpful approach for understanding both texts more thoroughly.

IV. The Origin of the World: Expanding Ideas in *The Nature of the Rulers*

On the Origin of the World is an untitled work discovered in Nag Hammadi Codex II, directly preceded by *The Nature of the Rulers*.¹⁰¹ Unlike the revelation narrative in *The Secret Book of John* and *The Nature of the Rulers*, it is composed as an essay, referencing multiple unknown texts to validate a point or as suggestions for further reading. It was likely composed after the other two texts because of its “developed mythology.”¹⁰² Like the others, it is was translated into Coptic from its original Greek and likely has its point of origin in Alexandria.¹⁰³ David Brakke argues that the author of the text was not himself a Gnostic, or interested in maintaining its so called “distinctive traditions.”¹⁰⁴ Through the following analysis, I will show that although *On the Origin of the World* contains obscure references unfamiliar to *The Secret Book of John*, it does indeed contain the spirit of the Gnostic myth, such as humanity’s purpose to restore the All to its greatest fullness and the role of enlightenment in this process. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to show that *On the Origin of the World* is just as “Gnostic” as *The Nature of the Rulers*, proving its relevance not merely because it contains similar motifs, but because it shares meaning with both *The Secret Book of John* as well as *The Nature of the Rulers*.

The purpose of the text as declared in the first paragraph is to educate those who claim that “nothing existed before chaos,” including “both the gods of the world and people.”¹⁰⁵ Like in *The Nature of the Rulers*, the author excludes the cosmogony of the divine realm, choosing

¹⁰¹ Marvin Meyer, introduction to *On the Origin of the World* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 199-200.

¹⁰² Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 6.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 202

¹⁰⁴ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 43.

¹⁰⁵ *On the Origin of the World* (trans. Meyer, 203).

instead to begin with the creation of chaos and Ialdabaoth, providing an even fuller picture than *The Nature of the Rulers*. It features Ialdabaoth's boast that he is god, Pistis' revelation of her image, and Sabaoth's repentance. The Sabaoth account in this text is also extended: Sabaoth creates his many angels as in *The Nature of the Rulers*, but also a "firstborn called Israel" or "the person who sees God," as well as "Jesus Christ," a savior who resembles the savior in the eighth heaven, the divine realm, recalling notions of Plato's forms and a more developed reconciliation of the Jewish God in the OT than exists in *The Nature of the Rulers*.¹⁰⁶

The Greek gods Eros, Himeros, and Psyche play roles in the creation of paradise, worldly creatures, and heavenly bodies, inspired by Forethought's impossible love for the image presented in the clouds after Ialdabaoth's boast.¹⁰⁷ Then, the rulers created Adam while Sophia Zoe worked diligently to create Eve, "the instructor," from her position in the eighth heaven alongside Sabaoth.¹⁰⁸ Ialdabaoth feared Adam because Pistis had warned him that humanity would end their authority, but their fear was temporarily abated when they realized that Adam was lifeless and could not move.¹⁰⁹ Eve gave Adam life, incurring the wrath of the rulers who then defiled the earthly Eve after her Spirit entered the tree of knowledge.¹¹⁰ Eve's Spirit then entered the snake, who later recognized Eve and instructed her to eat from the tree of knowledge. After her and Adam indulged in the enlightening fruit, the rulers cursed all of creation. Sophia

¹⁰⁶ *On the Origin of the World* (trans. Meyer, 208).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 210-211. I understand this Forethought to be Ialdabaoth's own authority, inadvertently mirroring the divine realm, but not the Forethought of the divine realm for this being "hated her because she was in darkness" (209).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 212.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

Zoe then “chased the rulers from their heavens (as constructed by Ialdabaoth) and cast them down into the sinful world so that they might dwell there as evil demons upon the earth.”¹¹¹

These demons created angels to distract humans, leading all of humanity astray “until the appearance of the true human.”¹¹² However, all is not lost: “the immortal Father” sent enlightened spirits to “the world of perdition” to overcome the rulers.¹¹³ The text then departs from the chronological narrative to prophesy about the Word and the end of the age, where “the light will overcome the darkness and banish it.”¹¹⁴ Humanity once more functions to bring everything back to the light through enlightenment, or the attainment of gnosis. In this text, their purpose begins with the very existence of chaos itself.

Without the more detailed description found in *On the Origin of the World* the origination of chaos in *The Nature of the Rulers* remains incomplete and obscured. *On the Origin of the World* describes the origination of outer darkness in more detail than *The Nature of the Rulers*, though pulls from the same foundational idea that chaos originated from the shadow of the divine realm. Here, as in *The Nature of the Rulers*, chaos exists not because Wisdom created it, but rather due to an unavoidable aberration at the end of the divine realm that needs to be rectified.

The potential for chaos came from the veil at the bottom of the divine realm from the deficiency of the aeon of truth. The text is clear that truth has “no shadow within it because infinite light shines everywhere within it,” but there is, however, “a shadow outside it, and the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 217.

¹¹² Ibid., 218.

¹¹³ Ibid., 219.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 220-221.

shadow has been called darkness,” to strengthen the division between the divine realm and the darkness of its shadow.¹¹⁵ Powers arose from this darkness until “every sort of deity emerged, along with the whole world,” bringing to memory the Middle Platonist idea found in *The Nature of the Rulers* that the sum total of chaos must be reached.¹¹⁶ When Pistis Sophia “saw what came into being from her deficiency, she was disturbed.”¹¹⁷ The darkness frightened her and her fear emanated “something frightful,” which was a “thing with no spirit.”¹¹⁸ She formed Ialdabaoth from this accidental emanation to “rule over matter and all its powers” in the likeness of the divine, showing that Ialdabaoth was a creation intended to remedy the unintentional and unavoidable, deficiency.¹¹⁹ When Ialdabaoth boasted to be the only god, Pistis cursed him, like other divine figures do in both *The Nature of the Rulers* and *The Secret Book of John*, giving him his name.

In this text, however, Pistis also warns Ialdabaoth:

An enlightened, immortal human exists before you and will appear within the forms you have shaped. The human will trample upon you as a potter’s clay is trampled, and you will descend with those who are yours to your mother the abyss. And when your work comes to an end, all the deficiency that appeared from truth will be dissolved. It will cease to be, and it will be like what never was.¹²⁰

This passage not only provides explicit prophetic foresight about the very purpose of humanity, but also suggests that Ialdabaoth holds an important role despite his vileness, namely to create

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 202.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 204.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 206.

humanity in a molded form so that it can dissolve the “deficiency that appeared from truth.”¹²¹ It is important to keep in mind that this interaction occurs before the creation of Adam, yet refers to the forms Ialdabaoth will create in the past tense, evidencing an inescapable fate that not even Ialdabaoth, now aware of this trap, can avoid.

Despite Pistis’ warning, Ialdabaoth and his rulers believe that they can outsmart the divine. Proof of this fate occurs after “Adam of Light” flashes his image through chaos, inspiring the rulers to create material Adam. Upon seeing this image, the rulers asked Ialdabaoth if he is the being destined to ruin their work. Ialdabaoth affirms this statement, ordering the creation of a human being made “out of earth in the image of our body and with a likeness to this being, to serve us, so what when this being sees his likeness he may fall in love with it.”¹²² Then he says “he will no longer ruin our work, and we shall make the children of the light our slaves for this entire age.”¹²³ Sophia Zoe “laughed at their decision, because they are blind, and they created humanity in ignorance and against their own interests.”¹²⁴ This is when she begins creating Eve, the instructor.

The Nature of the Rulers contains a similar insight, though to a less explicit degree after Incorruptibility’s first encounter with Ialdabaoth. The text states that “Incorruptibility looked down into that region, so that, by the Father’s will, she might bring all into union with the light, ” however, the meaning of this statement remains obscure, leaving lingering questions.¹²⁵ Why

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 212.

¹²³ Ibid. 212.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 191).

should the darkness become one with the light? What is the theological significance of this intention? The detailed dialogue concerning humanity's purpose in *On the Origin of the World* reveals insight into Incorruptibility's actions and the reiteration of the Father's will throughout *The Nature of the Rulers*, reaffirming humanity's function as the means to complete the divine realm. Reading *The Nature of the Rulers* alone, however, provides an incomplete image of the heart of Gnostic literature because it deemphasizes humanity's function in the mythic system.

The Sabaoth account in *On the Origin of the World* is more developed than that in *The Nature of the Rulers*, much like the origination of chaos and the more explicit concern for the function of humanity and its salvation. Despite this emphasis, Fallon argues that the Sabaoth account in *On the Origin of the World* is not concerned with the God the OT like *The Nature of the Rulers*, but is instead concerned "with the different types of men."¹²⁶ These ideas need not be in opposition. Indeed, *On the Origin of the World* reflects interest in the different types of humans, but gives one the impression that the author either was not finished with the work or expected his audience to have outside familiarity with the four types of people presented in the text.

Brakke emphasizes the importance of the four luminaries when he provides an overview of the elements he finds particularly significant in the basis Gnostic myth.¹²⁷ He draws particular attention to Eleleth due to her presence in multiple Gnostic texts, including *The Secret Book of John*, *The Nature of the Rulers*, *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, and *The Gospel of Judas*.¹²⁸ Although Brakke does not explicitly state that the presence of the four luminaries

¹²⁶ Fallon, *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*, 97.

¹²⁷ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 55-57.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

contributed to his exclusion of *On the Origin of the World* from his list of Gnostic texts, the importance he gives them within the myth suggests that their exclusion factored into his decision. However, there is evidence that the four luminaries have merely taken a back-seat in the *On the Origin of the World*.

In *The Secret Book of John* and other Gnostic writings, the four generations are associated with the four luminaries. In *The Secret Book of John*, the first of these is Adam, the perfect human, the second his son Seth. Seth's offspring as well as "the souls of the saints" were stationed in the third eternal realm. The fourth eternal realm held "the souls of those who were ignorant of the Fullness," or those who "did not repent immediately but held out for a while and repented later."¹²⁹ Although *On the Origin of the World* does not directly mention the four luminaries, including Eleleth, it does recall "four generations" of people as well as an angel who "stands before the father and is not incapable of giving them knowledge," whom we may associate with Eleleth given her role as revealer in other Gnostic literature such as *The Nature of the Rulers*.¹³⁰ The text connects three of these generations to trees: "the tree of life eternal" was placed in "the north of paradise to give immortality to the souls of the holy people," or saints; the tree of knowledge (more literally "gnosis" as Meyer has noted) was also placed in the north "to arouse the souls from demonic stupor" and "condemn the authorities and their angels;" the olive tree represents an ambiguous purpose, namely to "purify kings and high priests of justice were to come in the last days."¹³¹ The kingless race, referred to as the fourth generation here, is not symbolized by a tree but most closely resembles the Adamantine generation of beings because

¹²⁹ *The Secret Book of John* (trans. Meyer, 124).

¹³⁰ *On the Origin of the World*, (trans, Meyer, 219).

¹³¹ *On the Origin of the World* (trans. Meyer, 210-211).

their spirits were sent by the Father himself, and they are kingless.¹³² Even though Seth's generation is not present here, the heavenly system functions similarly to the four luminaries in *The Secret Book of John*. For example, once the war between the enlightened beings and the rulers concludes, "all must return to the place where they came from."¹³³ All will rejoice in the light, but the kingless generation alone will return to "the holy place of their Father," from whom they were directly sent.¹³⁴ *The Nature of the Rulers* also mentions "the generation without a king," destined to provide the "oil of eternal life" to humanity at large.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 211.

¹³³ Ibid., 221.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 219.

¹³⁵ *The Nature of the Rulers* (trans. Meyer, 198).

V. Implications

Examining these three texts reveals the contradiction between the amorphous nature of early Christian thought and Irenaeus' solidified construction of both himself and groups like the Gnostics. King writes that "religions are not fixed entities with a determinate essence or decisive moment of pure origination," but are instead "constructions that require assiduous, ongoing labor to maintain in the face of both contested power relations within, and porous, overlapping boundaries without."¹³⁶ The Gnostics are no exception.

Forming the ideal version of the Gnostic myth on the foundations of Irenaeus' polemical description is particularly problematic because it obscures Gnostic identity formation and prioritizes that of the proto-orthodox school of thought. Brakke echoes King's sentiment when he states that "adherents of the same religious group may argue, for example, about the status of the body in the spiritual life or how salvation is achieved, but they will share an authoritative story to which they will refer in support of their views."¹³⁷ Using the example of modern day diversity within the larger Christian tradition, he writes that "Christians infer strikingly different doctrines from that story, creating at times very different theological systems."¹³⁸ He does not forget that "the Gnostic Christians of the second and third centuries lived at a time when Christians did not yet share a single story other than that of the Jewish Scriptures," and worked to create their own.¹³⁹ Brakke's recognition of early Christian diversity makes it strange for him to exclude *On the Origin of the World* from his list of Gnostic literature. He is hopeful that the Gnostics had an

¹³⁶ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 229-230

¹³⁷ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 42.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

established myth but nonetheless allows some degree of conflict and variation. However, his myth-oriented method still remains too rigid when considering potential streams within the development of Gnostic thought through these three texts. The approach classifies texts based on “shared myth of origins, fall, and salvation...which could serve to establish and to maintain the unique identity of a distinct religious movement over time.”¹⁴⁰ This model is too rigid because it finds its base first in Irenaeus’ *Against the Heresies*, and then in *The Secret Book of John*, both of which provide a static image of the Gnostic worldview as it existed in the second century. As our analysis shows, these three texts reveal ongoing development and debate within the Gnostic worldview on particular topics like the origination of chaos, the true nature of the rulers, and even the purpose of salvation, all of which bear significant influence on the basic mythic structure over time.

Ultimately, I accept Brakke’s proposal for a self-identified, Gnostic school of thought. However, his clinginess to a particular type of Gnostic thought based on Irenaeus’ time capsule view of the Gnostics merits questioning. *The Nature of the Rulers* and *On the Origin of the World* are more strongly related to each other than either text is to *The Secret Book of John*, both in their descriptions of the origin of chaos, the purpose of humanity, and the ruler’s relationship to the divine. This is not to say that the relationship between *The Secret Book of John* and the other texts is nonexistent or contradictory, but rather that it reveals a stream of development in Gnostic Christian thought. As scholars have noted, *The Secret Book of John* precedes both of the other texts, followed by *The Nature of the Rulers* which likely came before *On the Origin of the World*, further evidencing the claim that these texts reflect development. This does not exclude

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.

the possibility that other Gnostic thinkers and groups developed their thought in different ways, seeking answers to different questions.

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