

Baur's Introduction

The Topic of This Investigation and How it Has Been Treated: Massuet, Mosheim, Neander

THERE IS HARDLY ANY other topic in church history that has been more repeatedly and thoroughly examined than the extraordinary phenomenon referred to by the general terms "Gnosis" and "Gnosticism." This phenomenon became prominent in various forms within the setting of the early church and, with its various orientations, it cut across the church by being pointedly and hostilely antithetical to the prevailing dogma.

Since the onset of a more penetrating and more independent form of research in the broad area of church history, scholars have also turned to investigations of the Gnostics. These investigations were partly into the many branches of Gnosticism, taken as a whole, and partly into its individual components as such. They never ceased but were always renewed, by relying on what diligence and erudition, a sagacious and ingenious combination, had to offer. These investigations sought to penetrate the mysterious darkness, which, although illuminated at a few points, was all the more enticing to the spirit of inquiry owing to its glimmering light. The researchers set out from very diverse perspectives and, although they did not exhaust the topic, the results they gained seemed to be at least a contribution of lasting value toward the achievement of the larger goal.

Massuet, Mosheim, and Neander are the prominent names associated with the three epochs in the history of the lengthy series of these investigations. The guiding interest has always aimed at finding how those foreign and abnormal aspects, which seem to mark the entire phenomenon of Gnosticism, have points of contact with what makes a general understanding of Gnosticism possible, with what locates it within the given historical context of the pre-Christian history of religion and philosophy, and makes it explainable on that basis.

Massuet⁴⁰ at least tones down the ancient abhorrence of this class of heretics, an abhorrence that is the heritage from the era of those who first challenged them.

40. [Ed.] René Massuet (1666–1716) was a French Benedictine patrologist. His edition of Irenaeus, *Contra haereses libri quinque* (Paris, 1710), was later included as the Irenaeus text in Migne,

These critics had regarded Gnosticism as a willful perversion of, and an intentional contradiction to, Christian truth. The early church fathers seemed to assign Gnosticism's ultimate source to a deep-seated opposition to the Christianity of the Catholic Church. Instead of this, it was now located in an unfortunate mental aberration, and the Gnostics were considered to be, at the least, fanatics who can be compared to similar manifestations of crazed enthusiasm in other eras.⁴¹

Massuet, as the editor of the five books of Irenaeus' *Contra haereses* [Against Heresies] (Paris, 1710), was a distinguished contributor to the historical interpretation of the Gnostic systems. He is meritorious for his exacting and learned demonstrations (in his *Dissertationes praeviae in Irenaei libros, Dissert. 1. de haereticis, quos libro primo recenset Irenaeus, eorumque actibus, scriptis et doctrina*) of how Gnostic teachings are linked with Platonism. However, inasmuch as the entire phenomenon of Gnosticism could hardly be satisfactorily derived from this source alone, and especially from Massuet's knowledge of how to make use of it, that had to leave a considerable excess of eccentric and abnormal material that could only come under the heading of fanatical foolishness. Hence the next step forward could only come from expanding and extending as much as possible the horizons within which one operated in grasping and evaluating the phenomena of Gnosis, so as to create a wider scope for what one could produce by doing so. Then one would not have to seek in the Gnostic creations themselves, however much their own peculiar features might involve it, just the random play of an intoxicated fantasy, devoid of reason.

This is what Mosheim⁴² aimed to do when, dissatisfied with merely presupposing Platonism, he believed that he could find the actual source of the Gnostic systems simply in what he referred to as "Oriental philosophy." Indeed this term directly expressed the call for those investigating this topic to transfer their attention to a new and distinctive sphere. They would have to bring with them a quite different measuring stick than our usual Western one for gauging reason and fantasy, to deal with the speculation presented in Gnosticism. Despite Mosheim's great effort to construct a system of "Orientalism," and despite the fact that we undoubtedly have to thank him for his more exacting research into the internal nexus of the Gnostic systems, it is nevertheless well-known how he hardly ever wanted to fall in line with the idea of an Oriental philosophy that has a solidly historical basis and bedrock. Thus however

Patrologia Graeca, vol. 7. His 1710 work also contains his own "dissertations on the heresies impugned by Irenaeus," from which Baur includes quotations below.

41. In his dissertation on the Valentinian Gnostics (*Dissert. praeviae*, p. xlvi in the 1710 edition), Massuet ends by drawing a parallel between the extravagant views of the Valentinians and the foolishness and craziness of the fanaticism present in his own times in various European countries. [Ed.] This statement sums up the lengthy text in Latin from Massuet, which Baur quotes in full in this footnote.

42. [Ed.] Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1694/5–1755) was a wide-ranging historian and theologian at Göttingen. [Baur] The principal works by Mosheim pertinent here are: *Institutiones historiae christianae majores, saeculum primum* (Helmstädt, 1739); *Versuch einer unpartheiischen und gründlichen Ketzergeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Helmstädt, 1748); *De rebus Christianorum ante Constantinum Magnum commentarii* (Helmstädt, 1758).

often Mosheim came back to this theme, it was always just reiterated as that “round dance about the altar of an unknown god—the eternal circle of Oriental philosophy revolving within itself, with no footing or standing,” as Herder, with clever and not wholly undeserved ridicule, characterized Mosheim’s “Orientalism.”⁴³

That idea always remains a lifeless abstraction devoid of any concrete concept. This is especially evident from the fact that it hardly serves as a satisfactory and natural basis for sorting out and classifying the various Gnostic systems. Indeed Mosheim has still not even disengaged himself from Massuet’s notion of a Gnostic fanaticism. To him the Gnostics seem at times to be not so much fancifiers as they are metaphysicians afflicted with a fanatical pestilence.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this, Mosheim’s idea of Oriental philosophy expressed the presentiment of an internally and externally magnificent nexus of Gnostic systems, a presentiment truly confirmed by subsequent investigations.⁴⁵ What other result than this can there be from the investigations of learned and discerning researchers who returned our attention to this topic, such as Neander,⁴⁶ Lewald,⁴⁷ Gieseler,⁴⁸ Matter,⁴⁹ and others? These works appeared after a lengthy interim period in which people had simply been content to augment

43. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Aelteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts*, Part 3.4, *Morgenländische Philosophie*. In *Sämmtliche Werke: Zur Religion und Theologie* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1827–30), vol. 6, pp. 206, 215. The only question is what right Herder has to spew forth his ridicule of Mosheim, and to demean this gifted man himself, in contrast to how Walch (n. 50) treats him (p. 208). Or do Herder’s interpretations shed significant light on this issue? See, for instance, p. 200, where he says: “Gnosis was a deluge of ancient, obscure wisdom that, even with its prolonged, foul stagnation, inundated and ensnared, and thus became sufficiently detestable on, the soil of every region, everywhere from Bactria to Arabia and Egypt. Could it have looked the same everywhere in Asia and Africa? Could the vessel have changed something in the muddy water that was not yet stagnant? Now what results is the Gnostics’ great hatred of the Jewish religion and Moses . . . They had a different and higher authority! . . . Their gnosis was the fount of truth, the oldest religion of the world, delivered by a hundred prophets”; and so forth.

44. “I think they were not stupid and outrightly lazy people. Still, they were not of a sufficiently sound mind. In short, they were fanatical metaphysicians, infected with pestilence.” *Institutiones maiores* (n. 42), 147.

45. In the *Theologische Zeitschrift*, ed. by F. Schleiermacher, W. de Wette, and F. Lücke, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1820), see the article on pp. 132–71, by Friedrich Lücke, “Kritik der bisherigen Untersuchungen über die Gnostiker, bis auf die neuesten Forschungen darüber von Herrn Dr. Neander und Herrn Prof. Lewald.” The article, which dealt with just part of the topic, only discussed Mosheim.

46. August Neander, *Genetische Entwicklung der vornehmsten gnostischen Systeme* (Berlin, 1818). [Ed.] Neander (1789–1850), a convert from Judaism, was a Lutheran theologian and professor of church history in Berlin from 1813 until his death. He represented a very different approach to history than that of Baur, who, while appreciating his study of Gnosticism, in later years became critical of his partisan spirit.

47. Ernst Anton Lewald, *Commentatio ad historiam religionum veterum illustrandam pertinens de doctrina gnostica* (Heidelberg, 1818).

48. See especially J. C. L. Gieseler’s extensive evaluation of the two aforementioned works by Neander and Lewald, in the Halle *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* 104 (April 1823), 825 ff.

49. Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme et de son influence sur les sectes religieuses et philosophiques des six premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1828). German translation from the French, by C. H. Dörner (Heilbronn, 1833).

Mosheim's investigations with Walch's kind of diligence and mentality.⁵⁰ Or else they were content with Semler's audacity in coupling the even more serious suspicion of a cunning popular deception with the ancient prejudice that Gnosticism was reckless fanaticism.⁵¹

What sets this period we are discussing apart is that many elements had to combine of their own accord in order to cast a new light on this segment of the early history of the church. These elements included: more extensive geographical and ethnological information; the discovery of so many new sources that threw ever more light on the ancient Orient; the now so very successfully initiated research on the symbolism and mythology of ancient peoples; the general progress of science, and of critical historiography in particular. In the process what then appeared was the recent era's own critical tendency, which stood directly opposed to Mosheim's orientation.

Based on the general statement that he himself had constructed, Mosheim sought to study closely the special character of Gnosticism; whereas Neander in the main almost wholly bypassed the general question and turned directly to researching the internal origins and construction of the various Gnostic systems. Although that general question could not be dismissed, to simply avoid Mosheim's vague lack of specificity the researchers were far more inclined to draw narrower boundaries in place of overly widely horizons. The two contemporary scholars, Neander and Lewald, did so in the most striking way. Neander focused in a one-sided way on the Platonism of Philo, while Lewald just sought to identify the roots of Gnosis in Zoroastrian dualism. The continuing investigations by Neander⁵² had the evident tendency to increasingly compensate for the one-sidedness of his earlier standpoint, by tracing Gnosis back to both Alexandrian Platonism and Persian dualism, as the two predominant elements behind it. Other scholars, in contrast, are noticeably inclined to adopt a standpoint either far too limited in scope, or else far too extensive and indefinite.

So as not to anticipate what follows below, I refrain here from engaging in a broader critique of the current status of the investigations of the Gnostics. However,

50. C. W. F. Walch, *Entwurf einer vollständigen Historie der Ketzereien*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1762), 217ff.

51. In the introduction to Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten's *Untersuchung theologischer Streitigkeiten*, vol. 1 (Halle, 1771), 158: "Valentinus had devised such a system that its mysterious and weighty contents consequently were able to cause a great sensation among simple-minded, fanatical people. Doubtless he himself found it amusing that people so readily believed in the reality of such notions." But Semler has a different verdict (p. 119): "In fact one can only with difficulty avoid the verdict that many of the so-called heretics of that time, Gnostics especially and Manicheans, were the same sort of theosophists as Boehme, Dippel, and similar writers of our day . . . In short, the Gnostic kind of teachings that Irenaeus informs us about one can very well learn how to envisage for oneself in Boehme's writings, teachings one elsewhere looks upon as much too erudite and wholly false." Our own investigation later in this book will show how accurate this comparison with Boehme's theosophy is (although in a different sense than Semler supposed). [Ed.] Johann Salomo Semler edited this book of his teacher Baumgarten, writing a preface, a brief "history of Christian doctrine," and a historical introduction.

52. *Allgemeine Geschichte der christlichen Religion und Kirche*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Hamburg, 1826), 627 ff.

what even here indeed deserves mention, as the most illuminating point of Neander's elucidation of this topic, is his division of the Gnostics into two groups, Jewish Gnostics and anti-Jewish Gnostics. This provides for the first time something more specific to hold on to as we look more deeply into the inner organic structure and principle of Gnosticism, rather than merely exhibiting and arranging the Gnostic systems in the colorful multiplicity of their mutually intersecting features. Yet although this division attests to Neander's historical acumen, we can hardly overlook or pass over in silence the halfway measures with which he comes to a halt. Simply consider that the same distinction and dividing line that Neander drew with regard to Gnostic Christianity's relation to Judaism must also hold good in relation to paganism. This is the completion of Neander's standpoint that is needed. Yet at the same time it would have to essentially change our entire view of Gnosis as such.⁵³

In short, Gnosis must be treated from the perspective of a history of religion encompassing all three religions: paganism, Judaism, and Christianity. While what is distinctive and striking about it formerly seemed to be accounted for only via the concept of Oriental religious philosophy, I maintain that, in the end, Gnosticism can only be accounted for, conceptually, as religious philosophy itself. That is because, in its essential nature, religious philosophy itself has forever after taken the same path that ancient Gnosis had already taken.

53. I initially suggested this view, and the classification of Gnostic systems resting on it, in my inaugural dissertation, *De Gnosticorum christianismo ideali* (Tübingen, 1827), 33ff.