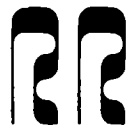


The Poimandres as Myth
Scholarly Theory and Gnostic Meaning



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The Poimandres as Myth

Scholarly Theory
and Gnostic Meaning

Robert A. Segal

Louisiana State University

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Introduction

The academic world, if not the world itself, seems divided into "universalists" and "particularists": into those who stress the similarities among phenomena and those who stress the differences. Amidst apparent differences universalists detect similarities. Amidst apparent similarities particularists perceive differences. Where universalists are concerned with what, for example, makes Socrates a member of a class--Greek, philosopher, or human being--particularists are concerned with what makes Socrates Socrates.

The two approaches seem distinct and therefore compatible. Universalists scarcely deny that Socrates is different from any other Greek, philosopher, or human being. They are simply interested in him as a member of a group. Particularists hardly deny that Socrates is a Greek, a philosopher, and a human being, but it is his uniqueness which concerns them.

The approaches clash when, as inevitably happens, each deems itself not just distinct but superior. Invariably, universalists claim that Socrates' membership in a class is what essentially defines him, and particularists aver that Socrates' uniqueness is what at heart characterizes him.

Universalists grant that even after all possible similarities have been discovered, differences remain: however similar, Socrates is just not the same as any other Greek, philosopher, or human being. Universalists simply dismiss the differences as trivial. Conversely, particularists concede that as distinctive as Socrates is, he is still a Greek, a philosopher, and a human being. They in turn spurn the similarities as superficial.

Though the approaches can surely clash over any class of phenomenon, they clash most over human phenomena: over man and his artifacts. Universalists typically insist that the study of man parallel the study of the physical

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world: that it be reducible to universal laws. Particularists usually demand that the study of man differ from that of the physical world. Stressing exactly the uniqueness of every human being and his creation, they seek the distinctive qualities of each, qualities which are therefore not generalizable.

Like any other artifact, myth is approachable as either a universal or a particular. Any myth is approachable either as an instance of the universal category myth or as a specific myth. Certainly there have been innumerable analyses of both kinds. Numerous universalists have interpreted numerous myths as cases of myth generally, and numerous particularists have interpreted numerous individual myths.

Rarely, however, has there been a comparison of the approaches, and it is my aim to do so. I am not seeking to resolve the intractable issue of the superiority of either approach. I myself think that the approaches are answering distinct questions--precisely what is common and what is unique about phenomena--and therefore run askew. I seek only to juxtapose the approaches. Because I will doubtless be addressing more particularists than universalists, I will be trying to show less what difference a particularistic approach makes and more what difference a universal one does. I am advocating a universal approach not in place of a particularistic one but alongside it.

As a test case, I have chosen a single myth: the Poimandres, the first tractate of the Corpus Hermeticum. I have chosen it because it falls within my area of training: Greco-Roman myths. As test cases of "particularism" I have therefore chosen the leading specialists on the Poimandres, which really means the leading specialists on Gnosticism or Hermeticism generally. As test cases of "universalism" I have chosen two theorists of myth: Mircea Eliade and Carl Jung. Where some universalists seek only to identify similarities, theorists seek to analyze them. Likewise where some particularists seek only to pinpoint differences, the ones I will be citing seek to analyze them.

Just as I am not trying to determine the superiority of either a particularistic or universal approach, so I am not trying to present either approach exhaustively. I am trying neither to analyze the Poimandres exhaustively as a Gnostic myth nor to apply to it every conceivable kind of theory—for example, sociological and structuralist theories. My aim is only to compare a specialized approach with a theoretical one.

In chapter one I will be using the scholarship of specialists to analyze the Poimandres as a specifically Gnostic myth. In chapters two and three I will be using the theories of Eliade and Jung to analyze the Poimandres as a case of myth per se. In characterizing the Poimandres as a Gnostic myth, I am obviously classifying it, but the classification is still particularistic vis-à-vis that of myth generally.

Whether or not the leading scholars of Gnosticism believe that Gnostic myths are unique, they study them in their uniqueness, in isolation from other myths except ones bearing historically on them. They study the Poimandres as a specifically Gnostic or, alternatively, Hermetic myth.

There have been a few theoretical analyses of Gnostic myths, though none of the Poimandres itself. The most notable ones have been Hans Jonas' existentialist interpretation(1) and the psychological interpretations of Jung(2) and several of his followers(3). These psychological interpretations, however, analyze specific themes rather than whole myths. Eliade's main discussion of Gnosticism is historical rather than theoretical: it does not apply his theory to Gnosticism(4).

Theorists of myth abound. They span both the social sciences and the humanities. Any list of the leading theorists would likely include the anthropologists Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Claude Lévi-Strauss; the psychologists Sigmund Freud and Jung; the historian of religions Eliade; and the existentialist philosopher Rudolf Bultmann(5).

What makes these figures theorists is the scope of their inquiries. Though in principle there can be theorists

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of only creation myths, hero myths, or other particular kinds of myth, in practice virtually all theorists theorize about myth generally. Whether or not they succeed in encompassing all myths within their schemes, they profess to do so.

Theorists of myth differ from specialists, at least of Gnosticism, not only because they are interested in more than one set of myths but also because they are interested in more than one question about myth.

At least three fundamental questions can be asked of myth, either of a single myth or of all mythology: what is its origin? What is its function? What is its subject?

The question of origin is twofold: not only why but also how myth originates. To ascribe myth to a need, particular or universal, is to explain only why myth originates. To describe the process by which myth arises to satisfy that need is to explain how myth originates. Similarly, the question of function is twofold: how as well as why myth functions.

The question of subject means to what entity myth, rightly understood, refers. Man, society, and the cosmos are the subjects most frequently proposed by theorists. For Lévi-Strauss, for example, the subject of myth is the logical operation, or structure, of man's mind. For Tylor, it is the operation of the physical world. For Bultmann, it is the place of man in the world.

Scholars of Gnosticism have concentrated on the question of origin. They have been concerned with the possible Greek, Iranian, Jewish, and Christian roots of Gnosticism. They have simply taken for granted that the function of Gnostic myths was explanatory and their subject cosmic: they have assumed that the myths served to explain the literal beginning and end of the cosmos, including man. Because of their particularistic approach they have, moreover, sought not a recurrent origin like the need for an explanation of the cosmos but a one-time origin like the availability of a specific kind of explanation.

Theorists of myth, by contrast, deal with all three main questions about all myths: origin, function, and subject. Certainly not all theorists deal with all three questions. Eliade, for example, explains only why myth originates--to fulfill man's need for the sacred--but not how. Bultmann explains neither: myth, for him, functions to express man's relationship to the cosmos, but nothing seems to spur that expression. Preoccupied with the effect of myth, Malinowski barely considers its subject. I include them all as theorists because they are concerned with at least two of the three main questions about myth. Moreover, theorists collectively deal with all three questions. Furthermore, they deal most with the question of function, with which scholars of Gnosticism deal least, and deal least with the question of origin, with which scholars of Gnosticism deal most. Of the theorists named, Tylor alone is concerned most with origin.

As different as their approaches are, scholars of Gnosticism and theorists of myth nevertheless agree substantially on the definition of myth. For both, myth must, first, be a story. Though Lévi-Strauss, among theorists, regards the story as only the surface level of myth, even he considers it prerequisite to the deeper, structural level. As a story, myth on the one hand is more than a mere doctrine or conviction like the American "myth" of the frontier or of the self-made man. A myth may well express a belief, but it must do so in the form of a story: a chronological sequence of events.

As a story, myth on the other hand is more, or other, than an argument or proof. Not logic but imagination impels the plot. Events happen not because logic dictates that they do but because the myth says that they do. In myth, anything can happen. Scholars of Gnosticism above all contrast the arbitrariness of events in myth to their logical necessity in philosophy.

Likewise for both scholars and theorists, myth must, second, deem the causes of events personalities. Events happen not because of the mechanical operation of impersonal forces but because of the decisions of willful

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agents. For many of the theorists--Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, Eliade, and Bultmann--the personalities must be gods. For the others, they can be legendary humans or even animals. Moreover, many of the theorists interpret the personalities symbolically: for example, gods as symbols of humans, of the parts of the psyche, or of the forces of nature. Nevertheless, all require that the literal causes of events be personalities of some kind.

Stressing as he does an impersonal sacred reality, Eliade seemingly accords personalities scant importance. Yet the direct causes of events in myth are for him gods, who are somehow agents of a nonvolitional sacred. In translating the divine and human figures of myth into parts of the psyche, Jung, too, seemingly disregards personality. But in fact he sees the ego, the unconscious, and the archetypes composing the unconscious as themselves personalities. Three of the four chief archetypes--the persona, the shadow, and the anima and animus--manifest themselves entirely as personalities, and the fourth, the self, does so in all but its deepest expressions.

Scholars of Gnosticism contrast myth to philosophy on the count of personality, too. To be sure, the causes of events in even philosophy can be personalities, but those personalities are wholly rational agents. For example, they not only are omniscient but also act on the basis of their omniscience. By contrast, personalities in myth are emotional as well as rational. They, too, may be omniscient, but their feelings often override their knowledge.

For scholars of Gnosticism and many theorists of myth alike, the prime kind of myth must, third, be a creation story: a story of the creation of the world itself or of individual phenomena within it. For Tylor, Frazer, Malinowski, and Eliade, myth describes either the creation or the operation of the world. For the rest, there exist other, often more important kinds of myth--for Freud and Jung, for example, hero myths, under which Jung subsumes creation myths. For scholars of Gnosticism, creation myths underlie all others.

Theorists of myth as well as specialists in Gnosticism would consider the Poimandres myth. As interpreted by specialists, the Poimandres is a literal explanation of the beginning and end of both the cosmos and man. It describes the origin of the material world either by or from the immaterial godhead, the fall of immaterial Primal Man into that world, and the need to retrieve his human descendants from it.

The myth preaches radical dualism: the severance of all ties between immateriality and matter. Because those ties began with the emergence of the material world, if not of matter itself, the myth bemoans the creation of that world and preaches its dissolution. Only by escaping from it can the bits of immateriality trapped in human bodies be saved.

Because the Poimandres ascribes the emergence of the material world to, directly or indirectly, the willful act of an apparently omniscient and omnipotent God, the key question it poses is why God creates a world which he subsequently opposes. The Poimandres itself does not say. On the one hand it says that God knowingly and freely decides to create. On the other hand it says that God then seeks to undo creation.

Taken as philosophy, the Poimandres fails to resolve the paradox, which is found in all other Gnostic texts as well. None of the possible resolutions considered in chapter one works. The Poimandres simply leaves unexplained the complicity of God in the event which marks his own fall: creation.

Taken as myth, however, the Poimandres allows for a resolution, though it itself provides none. Because the characters in myth, including the highest god, are ruled by emotion as well as reason, even an omniscient and omnipotent God can act contrary to his knowledge and power.

Alternatively, the Poimandres, taken as myth, need provide no resolution of the paradox. As a story rather than an argument, the Poimandres simply declares that God knowingly and freely creates a world which he then

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strives to topple. The myth presents creation as a fact: as an event which logically should never have occurred yet did. The myth does not deny the paradox. It denies the need to resolve it.

Ancient thinkers themselves distinguish sharply between myth and philosophy. In the Republic, for example, Plato dismisses Homer and Hesiod as false and immoral storytellers who rely on divine inspiration rather than reason. More germane, in Against the Gnostics Plotinus scorns Gnostics not just because they preach radical dualism but also because their preaching relies on revelation rather than reason, assertion rather than argument, and illogical rather than logical claims--in short, because it is mythical rather than philosophical.

If scholars of Gnosticism as well commonly distinguish between myth and philosophy, they differ with one another over the proportion of each in Gnosticism. Most view Gnostic texts as more mythical than philosophical--on, as stated, the grounds that those texts take the form of stories rather than arguments and attribute events at least as much to emotional personalities as to wholly rational ones, let alone to impersonal forces. Says Jonas:

The pathomorphic form of gnostic emanationism directly implies another trait: its irresolubly mythological character. For tragedy and drama, crisis and fall, require concrete and personal agents, individual divinities--in short, mythical figures, however symbolically they may be conceived. The Plotinian descensus of Being, in some respects an analogy to the gnostic one, proceeds through the autonomous movement of impersonal concept, by an inner necessity that is its own justification. The gnostic descensus cannot do without the contingency of subjective affect and will. (This, of course, is among the major reproaches leveled by Plotinus himself against the Gnostics.) The mythological--and thus nonphilosophical--form belongs to the nature of Gnosticism: a difference not of form only but of substance(6).

For some scholars, the Gnostics derive their beliefs from Oriental mythology rather than Greek philosophy(7). For others, the Gnostics take Greek philosophy and "mythologize" it(8). For some scholars, Gnosticism is always mythological(9). For others, it is at first mythological and later becomes philosophical(10).

I contend that in various ways a theoretical approach to the Poimandres makes an enormous difference. First, I will argue, Jung's theory, though not Eliade's and therefore not theory per se, resolves the paradox of creation. Taken as a particular, the myth itself, again, provides no resolution and may even scorn the need for one. By interpreting the godhead as the unconscious and the material world as ego consciousness, Jung's theory can explain the creation of the material world as the natural emergence of ego consciousness out of the unconscious and can explain the rejection of that world as the equally natural, if unfortunate, response of an inflated ego to its rediscovery of the unconscious. Eliade's theory, it will turn out, can explain only why God creates the material world, not why he rejects it.

Second, I will argue that Jung's theory, not Eliade's, provides an alternative to the particularistic subject of the Poimandres. For Jung's theory transforms the subject of the myth from the external world to the world of man's mind. The subject ceases to be metaphysical and becomes psychological. Because the subject of myth for Eliade is the external world of the sacred and the profane, his theory does not alter the particularistic subject of the Poimandres.

Third, I will argue that the theories of both Eliade and Jung provide an alternative--better, supplement--to the particularistic function of the Poimandres. The myth ceases to serve merely to reveal the existence of the godhead and becomes a means of reaching it as well. The myth ceases to be merely an explanation of the beginning and end of the cosmos and becomes a vehicle for realizing that end as well. The myth ceases merely to tell man what to do and also enables him to do it. The myth ceases to be

merely a statement and becomes an activity, too. It becomes not merely "expressive" but also "instrumental."

Fourth and last, I will argue that the theories of Eliade and Jung, as theories, necessarily "universalize" both the subject and the function of the Poimandres. The subject of the myth ceases to be merely the particular, Gnostic world of immaterial and material realities and becomes the universal world, metaphysical or psychological, of ultimate and everyday realities. Immaterial Mind and material Nature become only the particular forms which those realities take. The Gnostic yearning to transcend the material world and reach the godhead becomes only an instance of every man's yearning to transcend everyday reality and reach ultimate reality. That experience fulfills not just Gnostic man but every man.

At the least, the desire merely to encounter ultimate reality becomes universal. At the most, the desire to return wholly and permanently to it becomes universal. In between, the desire to return wholly and permanently becomes an extreme version of the universal desire to do so partly and temporarily. How far the theories of Eliade and Jung can universalize the world-rejecting nature of the Poimandres I will consider at length.

Footnotes

- 1 See Hans Jonas, Gnosis and spätantiker Geist, first ed., II, part 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1954), *passim*.
- 2 See the references below, p. 147 note 25.
- 3 See the references below, p. 153 note 62.
- 4 See the references below, p. 87 note 47.

- 5 See Edward B. Tylor, Primitive Culture, 2 vols., first ed. (London: Murray, 1871); James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough, third ed., 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1911-1915); Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1926); Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, How Natives Think, tr. Lilian A. Clare (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926); Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," Journal of American Folklore, 68 (October-December 1955), 428-444; Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, tr. A. A. Brill (London: Allen, 1913); C. G. Jung and Carl Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology, tr. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1949); Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1963); Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in Kerygma and Myth, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, tr. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1953), 1-44. See also Robert A. Segal, "In Defense of Mythology: The History of Theories of Myth," Annals of Scholarship, 1 (Winter 1980), 3-49.
- 6 Hans Jonas, "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon--Typological and Historical," in Le Origini dello Gnosticismo, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 93.
- 7 See, for example, E. F. Scott, "Gnosticism," in Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. James Hastings, VI (1913), 234.
- 8 See, for example, A.-J. Festugière, La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste, III (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1953), 23-26.
- 9 See, for example, Robert M. Grant, Gnosticism and Early Christianity, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), ch. 5.

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- 10 See, for example, Jonas, Gnosis und spätantiker Geist, II, part 1, esp. ch. 4; Jonas, "Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought," Journal of Religion, 49 (October 1969), 315-329; Jonas, "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon--Typological and Historical," 107. To be sure, Jonas equates philosophy with not only impersonal forces rather than personalities but also internal forces rather than external ones, so that the shift from myth to philosophy is also a shift from gods projected onto the cosmos to gods found mystically within.

Chapter 1

The *Poimandres* as a Gnostic Myth

The Corpus Hermeticum, of which the Poimandres is the first tractate, is a collection of from fourteen to eighteen ancient Greek texts. The Corpus is part of the *Hermetica*(1), an array of Greek and Latin texts written in Egypt during the Greco-Roman period. The *Hermetica* is composed of two kinds of texts: metaphysical ones, which served to explain the world, and magical, astrological, and alchemical ones, which served more practically to cure illnesses, cast spells, and tell the future. So great is the difference between the one kind of text and the other that they may share only their purported origin: a revelation by the god Hermes Trismegistus, an amalgam of Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom, and Hermes, the Greek messenger god.

The differences within the metaphysical and the magical *Hermetica* are as great as those between them. The metaphysical works, of which the ones forming the Corpus are the most important, evince two opposed outlooks: an optimistic, worldly, monistic one, and a pessimistic, otherworldly, radically dualistic one. The Poimandres is the Hermetic work most resolutely pessimistic.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is definable in several ways. Defined most narrowly(2), it is a second-century Christian heresy. By this definition the Poimandres does not qualify: it is almost entirely non-Christian. In addition, it lacks two other common prerequisites: a savior god distinct from the

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highest god and, more, a creator god opposed to the highest god(3).

Defined more broadly(4), Gnosticism is not merely a Christian phenomenon. It is non-Christian and even pre-Christian as well. It spans the Hellenistic world and encompasses Christianity rather than is encompassed by it. The Nag Hammadi discovery(5) firmly establishes Gnosticism as at least a non-Christian, whether or not pre-Christian, movement.

Gnosticism here is the belief in a radical, or antithetical, dualism of immateriality and matter. More specifically, it is the belief in radical dualism in man, the cosmos, and god; the primordial unity of all immateriality; the yearning to restore that unity; the present entrapment of a portion of immateriality in man; the need for knowledge to reveal to man that entrapment; and the need for a savior to reveal to him that knowledge.

By this definition the Poimandres qualifies as Gnostic, and this definition will be used here. The fact that the savior god is the same as the highest god does not temper the severity of the dualism. Nor, more important, does the fact that the creator god is the agent rather than the opponent of the highest god temper it. The dutifulness of the creator god simply underscores the key paradox in not only the Poimandres but Gnosticism generally: how an omniscient and omnipotent God can permit, let alone direct, the creation of a world which he then seeks to topple.

Within Gnosticism there are degrees of even radical dualism. First, texts in which matter originates out of immateriality are less radically dualistic than ones in which matter is pre-existent. At the same time the origin of matter out of immateriality does not constitute the reconciliation of the two and therefore the resolution of the dualism. The emergence of matter out of immateriality is paradoxical, so that the opposition between the one and the other remains. In texts in which matter is pre-existent the involvement of immateriality in the creation of the material world does not resolve the