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## BOOK PROFILE: *WHAT IS GNOSTICISM?*

A review of Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. 343 pp. \$16.95 (paper) / \$30.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-6740-1762-5.

**K**AREN KING'S NEWEST WORK, *What is Gnosticism?*, offers an impressive analysis of the underlying assumptions that have shaped modern conceptions of Gnosticism. Despite the volume's title, King's work does not seek to provide a new definition of Gnosticism, but to raise scholarly awareness of the pitfalls inherent to most approaches. Indeed, her work is addressed to the larger field of early Christian studies. King holds that "the task at hand is to enable an ethics of critical-reflexive practice in historiography and theology ... to further critical reflexivity with regard to the discourses and methods of historical scholarship." (147). The challenge for historians, as she aptly illustrates throughout her work, is to be aware of the biases inherent in the terminology that have shaped the study of early Christianity.

Gnosticism is a rightfully questioned term, as King argues. This problem is one that has frustrated scholars of early Christianity for some time: what is Gnosticism and how does it differ from Christianity, if it does at all? Before turning to her analysis of Gnosticism, King summarizes the prevalent historical methodologies: genealogical and typological/phenomenological. The genealogical approach searches for the roots of Gnosticism, and is embodied in the work of Adolf von Harnack, whom King devotes her third chapter to in its entirety. The second approach, typology, is exemplified in the work of Hans Jonas, which King lauds because it offers alternatives to the popular genealogical method. She notes that both approaches, however, tend towards definitions, which in "Raziel Abelson's terms ... provide a 'precise and rigorous knowledge'" (14). In turn, this often leads scholarship to assume static definitions of developing phenomenon like Gnosticism; though she briefly offers nominalism as an alternative, King is quick to point out that nominalist approaches "could end up back where we started" with the problems of definition (15).

After her preliminary look into the pitfalls of the prevalent methodology, King explores the roots of modern conceptions of Gnosticism. She locates them in the second and third centuries, when early Christian communities were struggling to establish a sense of Christian identity. In order to this, theologians used rhetoric to create idiosyncratic standards of orthodoxy and heresy, thus defining their enemies through opposition. Also encapsulated in this process is the notion of Christianity's pure origins and subsequent decline, which she finds in the works of such authors as Irenaeus and Tertullian. Such arguments contained in early Christian works found their way into modern scholarship. King advises her readers that "we should therefore not be surprised to observe twentieth-century historians employing the category of Gnosticism to establish the bounds of normative Christianity" (54).

In her third chapter, King begins to trace the evolution of Gnosticism in modern scholarship, beginning with the "work of the radical Protestant church historian Adolf von Harnack" (55). In his works, Harnack argued for the essence of Christianity as a transhistorical phenomenon that differed from its later form, which was an historical development that occurred within the context of Hellenism and the Greek spirit. For Harnack, Gnosticism was "the acute Hellenization of Christianity" (70). In short, Gnosticism was a perversion of Christianity.

Contemporaneous with the work of Harnack, the history of religions school turned away from Hellenism to "folk religion of Iran, Babylonia, and even India for the keys to the origins of a pre-Christian Gnosticism that would unlock the meaning of the Gospels and Paul" (71). The works of Richard Reitzenstein, Wilhelm Bousset and Rudolf Bultmann supported the idea of the Gnostic redeemer myth. Their works urged historians to consider Gnosticism as a "phenomenon worthy of study in its own right" (107). Its roots were located prior to the advent of Christianity, and therefore, Gnosticism was not a heretical form of Christianity. However, King notes that though the history of religions school made great contributions to the study of Gnosticism, the Gnostic redeemer myth was detrimental because it was an artificial construct: "there is no single existing ancient literary source that gives 'the Gnostic redeemer myth' as scholars have reconstructed (i.e. invented) it" (109).

King surveys some of the more influential works from the past century that have addressed Gnosticism and its relationship to Christianity. She focuses much of her discussion on the exemplary work of Walter Bauer and Hans Jonas. Bauer's work, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, offered an incredible contribution to the study of early Christianity, in that "his work pointed the way toward an alternative model of Christian historiography" (114). By holding that

early heresies, including Gnosticism, were Christian in origin, he challenged prevailing theories of religious formation, offering a more complex picture, though he continued to use the very terms he questioned. Hans Jonas' work, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, explored the origins of Gnosticism through a typological methodology. While Jonas viewed Gnosticism as its own religion, he still "charted exciting new ground; for though Gnosticism remained a religion in its own right, now scholars could perceive that its deepest religious impulses and feeling were rooted in existential alienation and revolt" (135). King devotes the remainder of the chapter to exploring how Mandaean scholars, such as Hans Litzmann, and Carsten Colpe, have addressed the "final demise of the pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth" (141), which was inherent in Jonas' work.

King also addresses developments in Gnostic scholarship since the remarkable finds at Nag Hammadi. With these new texts in hand, scholarship began to emphasize certain features of 'Gnosticism', such as cosmology or the Demiurge, and to explore connections between these texts and Judaism. They also began to foray into new categories; rather than a single Gnosticism, scholars found evidence for Valentian and Sethian Gnosticism. By continuing to search for the origins of Gnosticism, scholarship "has tended to distort the actual social and historical processes of literary production because the purpose of determining the origin of Gnosticism is less historical than rhetorical: it is aimed at delimiting the normative boundaries and definitions of Christianity" (189). The oft-used typologies of dualism, asceticism and docetism are themselves inadequate because it is impossible to "develop a single set of typological categories that will fit everything scholars have labeled Gnosticism" (213).

Overall, King notes that new scholarship recognizes the limitations of using old categories and approaches in the study of Gnosticism. She suggests that as a category itself, Gnosticism will eventually disappear from scholarly discourse, though what it will be replaced with is unknown. In her closing chapter, King envisions a new methodology that is able to "understand the parts by first grappling with the unfathomable whole, and yet at the same time to see events in terms of the episodic operations of discourses" (235). Ultimately, scholars need to "revise our notions of tradition and history" in order to reshape "discourse, categories and methods, and above all, [to rethink] the ethically informed goals of historical analysis" (236).

Though King's recommendation for new directions in scholarship is amply supported by her thorough analysis, she leaves her readers wondering as to just what that direction should be or how such an approach would be applied. She briefly hints at the prospects of post-colonialism in her final section, but does not explore its possibilities in depth.

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