

## Defining Gnosticism after the publication of the Gospel of Judas

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### *Abstract*

With the recent publication of the Gospel of Judas in 2006, Gnostic Christianity was put back onto the agenda of Church History. Since the publication of the Gospel of Judas, the limiting of Gnostic studies by some kind of definition or framework seems to have become of less importance. In this article, the term “Christian Knowledge” is used to describe movements within Christianity according to the typological definition proposed by Christoph Marksches’ recent monograph. The background and origins of Christian Knowledge are described by reflecting on some ideas from Plato. The *Apocryphon of John* and the *Gospel of Judas* are analysed to see whether they fit into this typological definition. The first case corresponding to this typological definition is then looked at.

### Literature review<sup>2</sup>

There have, broadly speaking, been three methods of investigating the phenomenon of Gnosticism:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Antti Marjanen, *What is Gnosticism? From the Pastorals to Rudolph in Was There a Gnostic Religion?* (ed. A. Marjanen; Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 57; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 2005), 1–53 offers a more comprehensive literature review.

<sup>3</sup> That is according to the analysis of Antti Marjanen, “Gnosticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 204–208 which seems quite reasonable.

1. Heresiological
2. Typological
3. The Self Designation Approach

The Heresiological method is exemplified by Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement Hippolytus, Tertullian and Epiphanius. As we can imagine, this approach was more concerned with discrediting Gnosticism than about understanding it for the sake of historical reconstruction. The typological<sup>4</sup> approach is by far the most common approach in the modern period. A typological approach implies “quite intentionally constructing groupings that are in principle independent of whatever self-definitions might have been insisted upon by the insiders in question”.<sup>5</sup> According to this approach Gnosticism would not be a single organisation or religion (or trajectory in Robinson and Koester’s terms),<sup>6</sup> but a way of thinking shared by more than one “sect”. The Self Designation approach is applied by Bentley Layton and his former student, David Brakke. According to them, Gnosticism must be reconstructed on the basis of people that identify themselves as Gnostics. Eventually their category of Gnostics corresponds to what Hans-Martin Schenke and many scholars call Sethians.<sup>7</sup> The writings belonging to these Gnostics are to be found in the segment “Classic Gnostic Scripture” in Layton’s translation of the Gnostic writings.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that Layton and Brakke describe a single religion (or trajectory) of Gnostics, whereas the typological method describes various religions. Accordingly, one has to keep these methodologies separated in any study.<sup>9</sup>

The historiography of Gnosticism has been plagued by a failure to define the phenomenon properly. It is often described in too-vague terms so that it comes close to modern ideals.<sup>10</sup> Hans Jonas thinks that central to Gnosticism is a feeling of alienation and being exposed to a hostile environment.

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<sup>4</sup> Merriam Webster. s.v. “typology,” n.p. [Cited 9 September 2014]. Online: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typology>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael L. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1996), 29–30. Williams discusses two basic strategies of analysing a religious movement: By using self-definition as in index and by using typological classification.

<sup>6</sup> James M. Robinson & Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf, 1971), 13–14.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke, “Das Sethiansische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften,” in *Studia Coptica* (ed. P. Nagel; Berlin: Akademie, 1974), 165–174. Cf. also John D. Turner, “Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (ed. C. W. Hedrick & R. Hodgson, Jr.; Peabody: Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986) 55–86.

<sup>8</sup> Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday), 5–216.

<sup>9</sup> This will not always be possible as Layton’s Gnostics are also included in the typological model of Christian Knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> Marksches, *Die Gnosis*, 43.

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Gnostics feel that this world is not their home.<sup>11</sup> Jonas also compares Gnosticism to modern Existentialism because of its shared nihilism. Indeed, Jonas mixed the two methodologies.<sup>12</sup> Because of this generalised definition, Jonas does not hesitate to include Philo of Alexandria and Plotinus among the Gnostics. It is no wonder that some scholars feel that a too-generalised definition of Gnosticism has led to the scholarly construct of “a religion without boundaries”.<sup>13</sup>

The biggest crisis in the field of Gnosticism has come with the study of Michael Williams published in 1996.<sup>14</sup> Williams analyses four texts typically labelled Gnostic and shows what distortion is required to categorise them into any sub-category of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> The sects discussed by Irenaeus are often taken to represent Gnostics because of the name of the work, *Exposure and refutation of the knowledge falsely so-called*.<sup>16</sup> Yet among these sects that Irenaeus discusses are also found the Ebionites and Encratites whose scholars do not associate with what they call Gnosticism.<sup>17</sup> Williams points out that typological definitions are not applied consistently and that scholars like Jonas assume a Gnostic religion despite working with a typological definition (mixing the two methodologies). Williams’ work is not only deconstructive but also makes suggestions on how better typological definitions can be framed without confusing them with traditiohistorical and sociohistorical identity.<sup>18</sup> He proposes that the name “Gnosticism” should be abandoned and that “biblical demiurgical” be used.<sup>19</sup> As Brakke points out, this category is interpretive rather than social, functioning in much the same way as “apocalyptic”.<sup>20</sup> Williams has laid two foundation stones for a typological definition of biblical demiurgical traditions:

1. A belief in an evil or ignorant creator separate from the highest divinity.

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<sup>11</sup> Hans Jonas, *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1987), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (2d ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1963), 32.

<sup>13</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Michael L. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 7–28; 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 22. Not that Brakke is convinced by this category as he also says this is true of all Jews and Christians that thought the word/wisdom had created the world.

2. A belief in an origin in a transcendental world for the human soul, this soul can potentially return there if it becomes aware of this.<sup>21</sup>

Not only does Williams criticise the typological approach, but he also criticises the Self Designation approach as practised by Layton.<sup>22</sup> Williams points out that there is no direct evidence for any Gnostic writer using the self-designation of γνωστικός.<sup>23</sup> Only in one instance does Irenaeus explicitly state that someone called themselves γνωστικοί, that is, in the case of Marcellina (*Haer.* 1.25.6). Interestingly enough, Layton does not include the group associated with Marcellina in his group of Gnostics.<sup>24</sup> Williams' research has drawn a line through much of the research done before him, and no scholar in the field can afford to ignore it. It has all but made the concept of Gnosticism obsolete.

Building on Williams' argumentation, Christoph Marksches has set out to fine-tune a typological definition.<sup>25</sup> Marksches is not concerned with using the concept Gnosticism or Gnostics, but rather tries to define the concept of γνῶσις in terms as interpretive as possible. An important difference between Marksches' system and that of Layton and Brakke is that the Valentinians slot into his typological construction of γνῶσις. Marksches' definition is sometimes criticised for being too elaborate – yet this objection has to be qualified to the extent that Marksches' definition tries to break up the condensed definition of Williams into its constituent elements. Upon analysis, one will see that characteristics 1 and 4 of Marksches' definition correspond to the first characteristic of Williams and characteristics 5, 6 and 7 correspond to the second characteristic of Williams.<sup>26</sup> So, unique to Marksches' definition are characteristics 2 and 8. The advantages of Marksches' definition are its clarity and simple chronology.

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<sup>21</sup> The second foundation is from a later writing of his; Michael L. Williams, "Was There a Gnostic Religion? Strategies for Clearer Analysis" in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?* (ed. A. Marjanen; Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 57; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 2005), 79.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (trans. J. Bowden; London: T & T Clark, 2003). The English translation was based on the first edition of Marksches' book (2001). The latest version is Christoph Marksches, *Die Gnosis* (3d ed.; Munich: Beck, 2010) which seems to have been changed in only a few places, like in the description of the *Apocryphon of John*. My references to the English version of Marksches' book is marked as Marksches, *Gnosis*. Those to the German 3<sup>rd</sup> edition are marked as Marksches, *Die Gnosis*. Marksches' book has been reviewed favourably by critics; cf. Margeret Lane, *JTS* (2004) 55/2: 706–708; D. Jeffrey Bingham, *JCS* (2005) 13/3: 387–388; Alastair H. B. Logan, *ExpTim* (2004) 115/7: 246; James Carleton Paget, *JEH* (2004) 55: 746–747.

<sup>26</sup> For Marksches' definition, see the discussion under the heading *A Problematic Definition*.

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Another central question in the research of Gnosticism which Marksches raises is firstly that of whether γνῶσις is a philosophical movement forming part of one religion (Christianity) or, secondly, whether it is a worldview transcending the boundaries of one religion. Since Richard Reitzenstein's postulation that the "Mythos vom erlösten Erlöser," has its origin in some of the oldest Persian Zoroastrian sources, the second viewpoint has been popular especially among History of Religions scholars.<sup>27</sup> Reitzenstein based this theory on some of the documents discovered at Turfan between 1902 and 1914 and on the preliminary translations of these. With the publication of the first critical edition of these texts it became apparent that they are in fact Manichaestic and were written during a much later period.<sup>28</sup>

The Gospel of Judas was published in 2006 by National Geographic.<sup>29</sup> It has sold an incredible 1.2 million copies, quite unprecedented for the publication of such an old text.<sup>30</sup> Although the field of Gnosis has benefited because of the discovery of a new primary source, the publication of this Gospel has actually been detrimental to the field of Gnosis with the scholarship of Williams and Marksches often being ignored in order to revert back to the views of Hans Jonas.<sup>31</sup>

David Brakke tries to take the Self Designation approach of Layton further, bearing William's objections in mind. Central to his thesis is that Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.29) is dependent on *The Apocryphon of John*.<sup>32</sup> He emphasises the big role that myth played among the Gnostics (as opposed to dogma) and criticises typological approaches for defining Gnosticism in terms of doctrine and general attitudes.<sup>33</sup> Brakke often speaks of "the Gnostic myth" (my own emphasis) as if there is only one.<sup>34</sup> His model for the Gnostic myth is based on *The Apocryphon of John* and Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.29).<sup>35</sup> Yet he and Layton group these texts together as Gnostic though they by no means exhibit a uniform mythology. The figure of Seth, especially, functions

<sup>27</sup> Richard Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen; Bonn: de Gruyter, 1921); Gilles Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (Zurich: Origo, 1951).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1961).

<sup>29</sup> Rudolph Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington: National Geographic, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> 1.2 Million according to Louis Sahagun, "Marvin W. Meyer dies at 64; expert on Gnosticism," *Los Angeles Times* (August 23, 2012), n.p. [cited 11 November 2014]. Online: <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/23/local/la-me-marvin-meyer-20120823>.

<sup>31</sup> More will be said on this publication under the heading *The Gospel of Judas*.

<sup>32</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 36. Marksches, *Die Gnosis*, 96 is only prepared to say they both used the same source. This is one of the things Marksches has changed in the latest edition. In the edition the English translation was based on he also held the same view as Brakke.

<sup>33</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 42. Cf. my fn. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 37, 40, 44, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Even the sceptic Williams does concede that there is some mythological interrelatedness among the "Sethian" texts.

differently.<sup>36</sup> As is often the case in Gnostic studies, Brakke depends heavily on the *The Apocryphon of John* to reconstruct Gnosticism.

After Williams, many scholars have reverted to viewing Gnosticism as a uniform religion and to describing the phenomenon in vague terms, eventually mixing the two methodologies (typological and self-definition) – for instance, scholars such as Marvin Meyer and Birger Pearson.<sup>37</sup> Marvin Meyer defines Gnosticism as follows: “Gnostic religion is a religious tradition that emphasises the primary importance of “gnosis,” or mystical knowledge ...”

Marvin Meyer’s admiration of the ideas of Hans Jonas is quite apparent.<sup>38</sup> Because of the success of the Gospel of Judas trademark, Marvin Meyer, with his unique charisma (especially in front of the camera), became for many the face associated with Gnostic scholarship.<sup>39</sup>

### Problem statement and methodology

Various phenomena from antiquity have over the years been labelled as Gnosticism. This is because many scholars fail to define – or fail to attempt to define – Gnosticism. If there is no framework in place, anything can succumb to the charge of Gnosticism. This has led to mistaken allegations that many ancient authors – not just Christians – were Gnostics. At times, even the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, and the Beloved Disciple, John, were not spared. Nobody using the word γνῶσις<sup>40</sup> was above suspicion. The recent

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Coptic Egypt* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004). Marvin Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 42.

<sup>38</sup> Meyer, *The Gnostic Discoveries*, 5. He also continued to believe that a pure Jewish Gnosis was a given; cf. Marvin Meyer, “When the Sethians Were Young: The Gospel of Judas in the Second Century,” in *The Codex Judas Papers* (ed. A. DeConick; NHMS 71; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 65.

<sup>39</sup> In the light of the many viewers of the documentary *The Gospel of Judas* this seems a reasonable supposition.

<sup>40</sup> For the purpose of this study I prefer to translate Greek concepts such as Knowledge, Craftsman, eternity and Wisdom instead of using language like Gnostic, Gnosis, demiurge, aeon and Sophia. Failure to translate the terms often leads to a too abstract reconstruction of history. It also stigmatizes Knowers as it makes them seem more like “the others.” If the reader sees the word “Knowledge” it is also obvious what an every day occurrence it is. “Gnosis” has too much of an exotic connotative meaning. The disadvantage is that our modern translations usually do not overlap with the concept of the source language. Another problem our language poses is capitalisation of certain terms out of respect. In the languages of the period only capitals were used. So when translating these texts one is often faced with the difficulty of interpreting these concepts onto another level that would have been quite strange to speakers of the source language. This is exemplified with the word “god.” Usually when English speakers see this word capitalised they understand it as the personal name of a monotheistic God. If it is written without capitalization one assumes that it is an unreal god or idol. This causes misunderstanding especially when Plato uses the concept in the fourth century B.C.E. I capitalise only if it counts as a personal name.

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publication of the Gospel of Judas has given us a new text to help us form a picture of Gnosticism.

A term like “Gnosticism” does not help to clarify the subject and we will not be using it in this study.<sup>41</sup> Here we will be speaking of “Christian Knowledge” and the word “Gnostic” will refer only to the particular school that referred to itself as such.

This study provisionally makes use of the proposed typological definition of γνῶσις as set out in the recent study by Marksches, though instead of the Greek word, γνῶσις, the translated form is used: (Christian) Knowledge. Unfortunately Marksches’ book has not received a wide audience in the Anglo-Saxon world, despite being translated in 2003. The two most famous Gnostic works *The Apocryphon of John* and *The Gospel of Judas* will be analysed according to this typological definition in order to investigate the validity of such an approach. One weakness of Marksches’ study is that he has not made any mention of the Gospel of Judas, despite the fact that his last edition of 2010 post-dated the publication of the Gospel of Judas. This raises the question: “Did Marksches ignore the Gospel of Judas because it did not fit into his definition of Gnosis?” Relevant to the question of any definition is also the first documented case of the phenomenon.

#### **A problematic definition**

“Gnostic” Christianity is not easy to define. Scholars use different terms to refer to this movement. It is important to note that scholars have been calling a lot of different schools interested in γνῶσις (Knowledge) Gnostics (γνωστικοί “Knowers”).<sup>42</sup> This has caused a lot of confusion as there was one particular school interested in this knowledge and that in fact called itself Γνωστικοί.<sup>43</sup>

The student of religion in antiquity will do well to remember that Knowledge was a very important concept in antiquity. The emphasis on Knowledge started with the Athenian, Plato.<sup>44</sup> Knowledge stands central to Plato’s philosophy. We would make a mistake to think of Plato as “a boring old philosopher”. In the Greek world, Plato was one of the most popular authors. Christian Knowledge is unthinkable without Plato. One could say that Christian Knowledge is the result of Christianity meeting Platonism.

If we must put Plato’s philosophy in a nutshell, the following would be important things to remember:<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> I have tried to use it only in my literature review or if it is a cited author’s preference.

<sup>42</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 17–18d.

<sup>43</sup> The school Layton and Brakke is trying to reconstruct.

<sup>44</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 1–2.

<sup>45</sup> Here I am trying to spell out which of Plato’s ideas were important to understand Christian Knowledge. The *Timaeus* was also one of Plato’s most popular writings in antiquity, if not

- The basis of knowledge is the fact that, for every reality on earth there is a model (called *ιδέα* [e.g. Plato, *Tim.* 28a, or *εἶδος*, e.g. Plato, *Meno* 72d]) in heaven.<sup>46</sup>
- A craftsman (*δημιουργός*) created the universe as one living creature and all other living creatures would develop out of this “world soul” (Plato, *Tim.* 30b).
- From this world soul, the craftsman created the gods worshipped at the time of Plato, that is, the Olympian gods led by Zeus (*Tim.* 40e–41a).<sup>47</sup>
- The Olympian gods created the bodies of humans (out of earth, wind and fire) at the craftsman’s command (*Tim.* 41cd).
- The Olympian gods imitated the way the craftsman created following his instructions (*Tim.* 42de).
- The craftsman endows the human bodies with their immortal part, their souls, having used some of the world soul (*Tim.* 41d).
- The craftsman has put each soul on its own star in a chariot (*Tim.* 41e).
- On these stars he taught every soul the knowledge of the world and destiny (*Tim.* 41e).
- Plato is convinced, therefore, that all knowledge is in fact nothing other than recollection of that which it was taught by the craftsman.<sup>48</sup>
- This knowledge has been lost to all humans, but can be recovered through (philosophical) contemplation.
- All humans have the capacity to see through this sensual world and those humans that realise this knowledge of the world’s structures become equal to god.<sup>49</sup>

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the most popular. Leonard Brandwood, “Stylometry and Chronology,” in *Cambridge Introduction to Plato* (ed. Richard Kraut; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 96–97.

<sup>46</sup> Markschies, *Gnosis*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> This craftsman of Plato is often simply called “god” (*θεός*) and after creating the Olympian gods he steps back and does not play any further role; cf. Plato, *Tim.* 42e.

<sup>48</sup> Markschies, *Gnosis*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Of course Plato lived in the pre-Christian era, so that he had a much different Theology from our tradition. Interestingly enough Plato had a monotheistic slant which made him very popular with Christian thinkers of antiquity. Even this idea of Plato was also taken up by many Christian authors including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus (though he does not cite Plato directly) and unashamedly the Alexandrines Clement and Origen; cf. Peter Heimann, *Erwähltes Schicksal: Präexistenz der Seele und christlicher Glaube im Denkmodell des Origenes* (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1988), 166.



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- Plato unashamedly uses myths to describe the indescribable.<sup>50</sup>

Knowledge stayed on the agenda of all the philosophers that followed Plato, including Aristotle and Epicurus. Popular Hellenistic philosophy started to view knowledge not only as a result of activity of the human mind, or more precisely as reason (λόγος) inhabiting the world, but as a gift of grace from God. From Egypt, we have the Hermetic literature which encourages the reader above all else to strive after the knowledge of God: "Holy is God, who wills to be known and is known by his own" (*Corp. Herm.* 1.31).<sup>51</sup> It is shown how widely the concept of knowledge was disseminated in antiquity by looking at the importance thereof also among the Jews, as can be seen by their emphasis on knowledge and wisdom.<sup>52</sup>

For the purpose of this study I will use a typological definition as set out by Christoph Marksches to define Christian Knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

1. The experience of a completely otherworldly, distant, supreme God;
2. the introduction of further divine figures, or the splitting up of existing figures into figures that are closer to human beings than the remote supreme God;
3. the estimation of the world and matter as evil creation and an experience conditioned by this of the alienation of the Gnostic in the world;
4. the introduction of a distant creator God or assistant: within the platonic tradition he is called δημιουργός (craftsman) and is sometimes described as merely ignorant, but sometimes also as evil;
5. the explanation of this state of affairs by a mythological drama in which a divine element that falls from its sphere into an evil world slumbers in human beings of one class as a divine spark and can be freed from this;
6. knowledge (γνώσις) about this state, which, however, can be gained only through a redeemer figure from the

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<sup>50</sup> Marksches, *Die Gnosis*, 86. The disciple of Plato, Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1.2 puts it succinctly δὲ καὶ ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφος πῶς ἔστιν· (Therefore the lover of myth is somehow a philosopher).

<sup>51</sup> Many scholars argue that the Hermetic literature is in actual fact part of the Christian movement of knowledge in that it prefigured "Gnostics" or a movement called "Gnosticism." For a refutation of this, see Marksches, *Gnosis*, 64; John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 389–392.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. e.g. Prov 2:6, Wis 2:13; 15:3.

<sup>53</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 16–17.

- other world who descends from a higher sphere and ascends to it again;
7. the redemption of human beings through the knowledge of “that God (or the spark) in them”;
  8. a tendency towards dualism in different types which can express itself in the concept of God, in the opposition of spirit and matter, and in anthropology.

Now we may turn our attention to some texts associated with Christians valuing Knowledge.

### Apocryphon of John

This work is seen by many to be the most significant work of Christian Knowledge as it is contained in four different manuscripts.<sup>54</sup> These manuscripts are, however, quite different from each other and it seems that the *Apocryphon of John* was never finally redacted.<sup>55</sup> In this work Christ appears to John and teaches him about “what was and is to be” so that he may know “the invisible and the visible and ... the perfect man.” Christ imparts the creation myth to John. In terms of Markschie’s typological definition it can be set out as follows.

1. There is an other-worldly supreme god (*Ap. John 4*)<sup>56</sup>.
2. Out of the supreme god various divine figures come forth, called “worlds” (αἰῶνες) (*Ap. John 8*)<sup>57</sup>.
3. After Wisdom falls, she creates the defective god, Ialdabaoth (*Ap. John 10*), who creates his own angels – and they in turn create the first human, Adam, based on

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<sup>54</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 36–37 also uses it as the basis of “the Gnostic myth.”

<sup>55</sup> Markschie, *Gnosis*, 43. Markschie seems to be exaggerating how different these manuscripts are. There seem to be two short versions (BG 8502,2 and NHC III,1) and two long versions (NHC II,1 and IV,1). Of the short versions, BG 8502,2 is even shorter than NHC III,1, but the two long versions are much the same. Papyrus Berolinensis (BG 8502,2) was discovered separately from the Nag Hammadi codices and is dated by Markschie, *Gnosis*, 42 to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. For a translation of all four texts; cf. Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1: III,1: IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies; Leiden: Brill, 1995). Cited 11 April 2013. Online: [http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl\\_sb.htm](http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl_sb.htm).

<sup>56</sup> References to the *Apocryphon of John* is consistently made to the shortest version of the text BG 8502,2.

<sup>57</sup> Markschie, *Gnosis*, 44. In platonic terms this would be termed ἰδέαι (e.g. Plato, *Tim.* 28a) or εἰδῆ (e.g. Plato, *Meno* 72d). Most Christian theologians wanted to emphasise the originality of their system by using a different word, but the concept stays the same; cf. Markschie, *Gnosis*, 91.

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- the image of the perfect human, Adamas,<sup>58</sup> ruling the first world<sup>59</sup> (*Ap. John 9*)<sup>60</sup>.
4. The world<sup>61</sup> created by Ialdabaoth seems ominous, it blazes with fire (*Ap. John 11*) but is also filled with ignorant darkness (*Ap. John 14*) – the angels are evil. Because of their jealousy the angels bring the human down to the lowest level of matter (*Ap. John 18*).
  5. The humans formed by the angels are lifeless (*Ap. John 17*)<sup>62</sup> until the Self-Generated (Christ) blows his spirit into them (a repentant Wisdom entreated the supreme god to bring them to life) (*Ap. John 10*).
  6. The supreme god sends Thought (Ἐπίνοια) to dwell in the human (*Ap. John 18*). Thought teaches him this whole myth and that he might return.
  7. Jesus emphasizes to John that it is through the Knowledge of all things that one is saved (*Ap. John 23*)<sup>63</sup>.
  8. Dualism is identifiable by the fact that the angels bring man down to the lowest level of matter (of what is already portrayed as an evil world) and that the body is seen as a tomb and a fetter (*Ap. John 19*).

All of this fits easily into Markschie's typological definition. The only problem is, perhaps, that the redeeming figure (the Self-Generated) comes to this world when the first human is made. Yet it is true that he returns to the first world and that he is responsible for breathing his spirit into the first human. Thought itself is given to Adam by the supreme god though. So here the supreme god plays the role of the redeeming figure. Perhaps, with this writing, Christians were trying to express their religion in terms that would appeal more to people familiar with popular philosophy.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> NHC III,1 has the reading "Adamas" seems preferable to the reading of BG 8502,2 "Adam." The longer versions NHC II,1 and IV,1 say Piger-Adamas.

<sup>59</sup> BG 8502,2 has the reading "light" which seems to be a corruption of "aeon" found in NHC III,1 and in the longer versions NHC II,1 and IV,1.

<sup>60</sup> Markschie's, *Gnosis*, 45. Ialdabaoth in Aramaic means "child of chaos"; cf. Rudolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, Gregor Wurst and François Gaudard, "The Gospel of Judas," in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst; Washington: National Geographic, 2006), 37 fn. 113.

<sup>61</sup> Again αἰών.

<sup>62</sup> NHC III,1 adds that "he [Ialdabaoth] blew his breath into them, but the story has it that they still remained lifeless till the Self-Generated blew his breath into them. The longer versions NHC II,1 and IV,1 has a different version where the five luminaries (one of them the Self-Generated) also come down to the eternity

<sup>63</sup> Even the unrepentant get another chance through μετεμψύχωσης (reincarnation).

<sup>64</sup> Markschie's, *Gnosis*, 45.

### The Gospel of Judas

*The Gospel of Judas* caused quite a sensation<sup>65</sup> when the news broke of its publication in 2006.<sup>66</sup> One must not forget that the publication of the Gospel of Judas was also a commercial enterprise. One would not be surprised if this publication does not stand up to the scrutiny of critical scholarship<sup>67</sup> – though critical scholars were hardly the publication’s target audience. One of the ways it has failed in this regard is that, instead of exposing people to the ideas of Christian Knowledge, it has taken this away from people. Very little is said to define the phenomenon of Christian Knowledge.<sup>68</sup> There is no engagement with the ideas of Williams, King and Marksches. All that is said is one sentence:

Although some scholars criticise the word *gnostic* as too broad of an umbrella term, covering many different types of beliefs, Irenaeus says that in fact certain religious groups referred to themselves as “gnostics.”<sup>69</sup>

Yet even Meyer does not mention that these scholars’ claims are diametrically opposed to the view of “Gnosticism” displayed by all contributors to

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<sup>65</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas,” in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst; Washington: National Geographic, 2006), 77.

<sup>66</sup> For a description of Codex Tchacos and the bizarre road it followed before it was finally bought by the Maecenas Foundation for Ancient Art; cf. Rudolphe Kasser, “The Story of Codex Tchacos and the Gospel of Judas,” in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst; Washington: National Geographic, 2006), 47–76. This version by Kasser is to be read with the more critical version by James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007) which exposes many of the financial implications. I did want to include a summary of my own, but due to lack of space I have left this out.

<sup>67</sup> April DeConick, “More on the Gospel Truth,” Opposite the Editorial Page of *The New York Times* (December 1, 2007), n.p. [cited 11 November 2014]. Online: <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=743> is one scholar that is quite critical of this publication on philological and ethical grounds.

<sup>68</sup> No mention of Marksches’ book on Gnosis which had appeared for the first time 5 years previously, despite its often trying to define Gnosis, Gnosticism and Sethian Gnosticism; cf. Bart D. Ehrman, “Christianity Turned on its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas,” in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst; Washington: National Geographic, 2006), 84 and Marvin Meyer, “Judas and the Gnostic Connection,” in *The Gospel of Judas* (ed. R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst; Washington: National Geographic, 2006), 141. These definitions are all very vague and do not help the reader to appreciate Christian Knowledge.

<sup>69</sup> Meyer, “Judas and the Gnostic Connection,” 138 and endnote 2–3 p173 casually refers to Antti Marjanen, *Was There a Gnostic Religion?*; Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2003) and Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* among some of his own works which serve as counter arguments to them. Another example of the vague terms in which Meyer understood Gnosticism.

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the book. This whole body of research is simplistically refuted by referring to Irenaeus. Nothing is said about the difficulties associated with Irenaeus' use of the word γνωστικοί or how it is the main source of contention in the study of Christian Knowledge (Gnostic studies), giving rise to the different methodologies.

Now we may try to fit the myth of the Gospel of Judas into a typological definition. Irenaeus mentioned *The Gospel of Judas* and nobody expected that we would one day rediscover it.<sup>70</sup> This Gospel is also written in the form of a dialogue, and quite artistically at that. Jesus' revelation is interrupted with questions and narration of visions by both Judas and the disciples for variation. This Gospel is very negative toward the twelve disciples, apart from Judas, and they seem to represent the Catholic Christianity that was developing at the time. The protagonist, Judas, is praised for betraying Jesus in that he is actually said to sacrifice Jesus' flesh (*Gos. Jud.* 56).<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately the text of this Gospel has been ruined at critical places. Be that as it may, a creation myth is set out by Jesus. In terms of Markschies' typological definition it appears as follows:

1. The great invisible spirit has created a great and boundless realm (*Gos. Jud.* 47).
2. There appears a great luminous cloud from which the spirit's attendant emerges, the Self-Generated (Αὐτογενής). Both the great invisible spirit and the Self-Generated create angels, luminaries and worlds by simple command. Out of this same luminous cloud the model of human beings comes forth, called Adamas, and time is created (*Gos. Jud.* 48).<sup>72</sup>
3. The world (i.e. planet earth) is mentioned for the first time and seems to have developed out of the above-mentioned cloud (*Gos. Jud.* 50). It is in a state of chaos.
4. Twelve angels are created (as the text breaks off at this part it is unclear who creates) to rule over this chaos (*Gos. Jud.* 51). One of these angels is called Nebro, though others call him Ialdabaoth, and his face flashes with fire and he seems to be defiled in blood.<sup>73</sup> Another

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<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.31.

<sup>71</sup> DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007); "More on the Gospel Truth," does not agree that Judas is portrayed as a hero in this Gospel.

<sup>72</sup> Here one is reminded of Philo's version of the creation of two kinds of humans: one created according to the image of God, the other with a material body made out of clay; cf. Philo, *Leg.* 31–35; 53–55; 88–89; 94 or in *QG* 4; 8; 14.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. his description in *Ap. John* 10 which reminds one of Homer's description of the Chimaera (cf. Homer, *Il.* 6.179–182). Even more significantly the Chimaera is mentioned in

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of these angels is called Saklas and he along with Ialdabaoth creates another twelve angels.<sup>74</sup> Saklas creates Adam and Eve, the first humans, in the image of Adamas (*Gos. Jud.* 52).<sup>75</sup>

5. —
6. God gives Adam Knowledge
7. This Knowledge keeps the kings of chaos and the underworld from lording it over him (*Gos. Jud.* 54).
8. Fitting into the category of dualism is the fact that the world is called perdition. The body perishes but the soul lives on and is taken up to heaven (*Gos. Jud.* 43)

Due to the fragmentary nature of the text of *the Gospel of Judas*, parts of the myth may be broken off, but we would have expected it to say something about the divine spark within humans or that the spirit was blown into them by Christ or the supreme God.<sup>76</sup> Certainly Alastair Logan seems right in commenting that this myth comes across as “a very truncated version of the ‘classic’ myth.”<sup>77</sup> Missing is the Sophia myth and the redeemer myth which is considered typical of Sethian myths.<sup>78</sup> This part of the text (*Gos. Jud.* 52–53) is not fragmentary, so one cannot explain its absence that way. Judas does make his confession regarding Jesus saying:

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the only fragment of Plato discovered in the Nag Hammadi library (Plato, *Rep.* 588c; cf. also *Phaedr.* 229d–230a) to describe the inside part of people that live unjustly though they are reputed to be just.

<sup>74</sup> Kassert et al., “The Gospel of Judas,” 37 fn. 114 point out that *Sakl’ā* means “fool” in Aramaic.

<sup>75</sup> According to Kassert et al., “The Gospel of Judas,” 39 fn. 118 Adam and Eve are created in the image of God with reference to Genesis 1:26, referring the reader to *Apoc. John* 15. Yet The Apocryphon of John seems to contradict itself so that it is possible to interpret it that Adam was created in the image of God or of Adamas. In other literature associated with Christian Knowledge the first humans are created in the image of the ideal human being in heaven who had in fact been created in the image of God. The text of the *Gospel of Judas* is not very clear in this regard “Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image” (*Gos. Jud.* 52). Alastair Logan, “The Tchacos Codex: Another Document of the Gnostics?” in *The Codex Judas Papers* (ed. A. DeConick; NHMS 71; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 19 also agrees with my judgement – not just concerning the Gospel of Judas, but also concerning Gnostic (Sethian) myths in general.

<sup>76</sup> John D. Turner, “The Sethian Myth in the Gospel of Judas: Soteriology or Demonology?” in *The Codex Judas Papers* (ed. A. DeConick; NHMS 71; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 98 also highlights this lack of any narration of the “primordial enlightenment” although he feels it is assumed in *Gos. Jud.* 54.

<sup>77</sup> Logan, “The Tchacos Codex,” 5.

<sup>78</sup> Gesine Sch. Robinson, “The Gospel of Judas: Its Protagonist, Its Composition, Its Community,” in *The Codex Judas Papers* (ed. A. DeConick; NHMS 71; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 88.

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I know who You are and where You have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo (*Gos. Jud.* 35).<sup>79</sup>

One cannot help but be reminded of the confession of Peter in Matthew 16:16 or of Thomas in *The Gospel of Thomas* 13.<sup>80</sup> How does Judas know Jesus is from the immortal realm of Barbelo. There are two possible answers which need not exclude each other: God imparts Knowledge to Adam (*Gos. Jud.* 54), otherwise this may be Knowledge as recollection of part of Judas that came from the same world as Barbelo.<sup>81</sup> A significant difference between the semantic range of English “knowledge” and Greek γνώσις is the reference of “recollection (from your soul’s pre-existence)” which plays such a big role in Plato’s writings. This may open the door to seeing this Gospel of Judas as representing a version where a divine spark is present in humans – even if this is not stated explicitly.

This Gospel reflects the typical features associated with Christian Knowledge. It slots into Markschie’s typological definition. While no consensus has been reached on the fifth point of the typological definition, it certainly seems possible. It also fits into Brakke’s picture of Gnostics, or what Schenke would call Sethianism.<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to note how many things in this Gospel are said against Catholic Christianity.

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<sup>79</sup> This verse is critical to determine how Judas is viewed in the Gospel. His words “I know” and the similarity to the confessions of Peter and Thomas seems to support the first translators opinion of a positive appraisal. For the opposite view of a demonized Judas, cf. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*.

<sup>80</sup> Jesus said to his disciples, “Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like.”  
Simon Peter said to him, “You are like a righteous angel.”  
Matthew said to him, “You are like a wise philosopher.”  
Thomas said to him, “Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like.”  
Jesus said, “I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out.”  
And he took him and withdrew and told him three things.  
When Thomas returned to his companions, they asked him, “What did Jesus say to you?”  
Thomas said to them, “If I tell you one of the things which he told me, you will pick up stones and throw them at me; a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up” (*Gos. Thom.* 13 [Lamdin]).

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Plato, *Phaed.* 72d–74a.

<sup>82</sup> Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 38–39, 50. Also preferring the term Gnostic as used by Layton and Brakke is Logan, “The Tchacos Codex,” 5. Of course most scholars prefer the term “Sethian.” Be that as it may, James M. Robinson, “The Gospel of Judas and the Sethians,” *Coptica* 5 (2006): 50–68 feels the Gospel of Judas is not Sethian.

**The first case of Christian Knowledge corresponding to the typological definition**

The big question then is whether Christian Knowledge already existed at the time of the New Testament. The best case of many alleged instances is to be found in 1 Timothy 6:20f.<sup>83</sup>

Ὡς Τιμόθεε, τὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον ἐκτρεπόμενος τὰς βεήλους κενοφωνίας καὶ ἀντιθέσεις τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως, ἣν τινες ἐπαγγελλόμενοι περὶ τὴν πίστιν ἡστόχησαν.<sup>84</sup>

One immediately notes that Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* has much the same title as this, that is, Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως. Most probably Irenaeus thought that he was addressing the same problem as the apostle did in the above.

Another passage that might be addressing the phenomenon is 1 Timothy 1:4:

Καθὼς παρεκάλεσά σε προσμεῖναι ἐν Ἐφέσῳ πορευόμενος εἰς Μακεδονίαν, ἵνα παραγγείλῃς τοῖς μὴ ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖν μηδὲ προσέχειν μύθοις καὶ γενεαλογίαις ἀπεράντοις, αἵτινες ἐκζητήσεις παρέχουσιν μᾶλλον ἢ οἰκονομίαν θεοῦ τὴν ἐν πίστει.<sup>85</sup>

Christian Knowledge also had a tendency to create myths in much the same way that Plato did. In these they described the genealogy of how eternities like Wisdom and Ialdabaoth would develop out of the World Soul. There must have been people the author had in mind who saw themselves as a privileged few who had knowledge that others were lacking.<sup>86</sup> Historical critics tend to date 1 Timothy to about 100 C.E.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the subsequent use of the word "knowledge" in Christian literature shows that it did not as yet have a fixed meaning, until the time of Irenaeus. So the *Epistle of Barnabas* can speak of a knowledge that means only the way of reading the Old Testament in the light of Jesus (*Barn.* 1.5).<sup>88</sup> Clement can still say

<sup>83</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 67–68.

<sup>84</sup> O Timothy, preserve our heritage and turn away from the godless empty talk and contradictions of the knowledge falsely so-called as some after having professed it have gone wide of the mark concerning their faith.

<sup>85</sup> As I urged you to stay in Ephesus when I went to Macedonia, that you command them not to teach other doctrine nor pay attention to myths or endless genealogies which provide speculations rather than edification of God in faith.

<sup>86</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Pokorný and Heckel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 669.

<sup>88</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 6.



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(without causing any eyebrow to be raised) that, at about 200 C.E., knowledge was the purpose of true Christian life and thought. He does attack Christian Knowledge movements, but still has the confidence to contrast these Knowers (Gnostics) with real knowers who think as he does.<sup>89</sup> Evidently the terms “Knowledge” and “Knowers” still had a positive connotation in the time of Clement (and Irenaeus).<sup>90</sup>

Irenaeus testifies that Simon the Magician and Menander were the first exponents of the Christian knowledge movement. Yet their views as described in the reports do not correspond to the typological definition of Christian Knowledge.<sup>91</sup> What is more, as already mentioned, Irenaeus’ strategy to make Simon the Magician the father of all heretics most probably does not reflect history. It was a strategy he adopted to discredit at a stroke all the heretics he discusses in his book. If the father of the movement was a dubious character, obviously the movement dependent on him must also be.<sup>92</sup> It is probably better to see the first exponent of this Christian Knowledge according to the typological definition as outlined above as Saturninus from Antioch who, according to Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.7.3), taught at the time of Hadrian (117–138 C.E.).<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately we do not know much about Saturninus. The knowledge reflected in I Timothy 30 years before Saturninus was, in all probability, not a developed movement, but merely a movement in its infancy stages.<sup>94</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The typological definition proposed by Christoph Marksches works well as a framework to understand *The Apocryphon of John*, *The Gospel of Judas*. It is not too elaborate as some scholars feel – at least not in these cases. When deciding on a typological definition it is advantageous to identify as many characteristics as possible as this narrows the data that is to be analysed. This is why the definition of Marksches is more useful than that of Williams and Marjanen. An advantage to Marksches’ definition is the neat chronology, yet I can imagine that this will not work with all texts. Characteristics 3 and 4 definitely have to be swapped around as this will reflect the chronology

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<sup>89</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.11.1; cf. Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 34.

<sup>91</sup> Marksches, *Die Gnosis*, 74–79.

<sup>92</sup> This point is made by Marjanen, “Gnosticism,” 204.

<sup>93</sup> This dating of Saturninus, the only that we have, is not without controversy; cf. Marksches, *Gnosis*, 79. For Irenaeus’ report on Saturninus; cf. *Haer.* 1.24. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 159 in fact goes so far as to say “No single gnostic work is more comprehensive than this; it is thus possible that the document here summarized parallels an original statement of gnostic myth that underlies other gnostic scriptures.”

<sup>94</sup> Marksches, *Gnosis*, 67–68.

displayed in texts even better. A controversial part remains the phrase “a tendency towards dualism”. The word “tendency” should be avoided in definitions.

One of the biggest problems with Christian Knowledge is how to define it. There are many names such as “Gnosticism” and “Gnostics” that seem only to cloud the issue –and modern scholarship still uses these terms. It is better to speak of Christian Knowledge and Christians valuing Knowledge.

Knowledge was not just a Christian movement. Since the time of Plato it has played a big role in the way (especially educated) people have thought. Christian Knowledge was, however, a unique movement which stands in this knowledge tradition. Christians valuing Knowledge evidently had a vast literature of their own. Central to their thinking was the redeemer-figure, the Christ, and salvation. Christian Knowledge can be seen a union between Platonism and Christianity, though other influences may have played a small role too in shaping Christian Knowledge. We also know that not all Platonists were comfortable with this association (cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.9).<sup>95</sup> Neither were all Christians comfortable with taking over ideas from Plato indiscriminately. Some Platonic ideas were quite acceptable within the acceptable diversity of early Christianity, for example, the Logos-doctrine since the time of the Apologists, the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul (at least at the time of Clement and Origen), but also the idea of becoming one with God (*enosis*).<sup>96</sup> There were limits to this, however.<sup>97</sup> The first time we hear of something like Christian Knowledge is in 1 Timothy at about 100 C.E. In Saturninus we see Christian Knowledge in its full form for the first time, just after 120 C.E.

Though portrayed by Irenaeus as a confused movement full of contradictions, it consisted of people more educated than most Christians of the time. They were exposed to the ideas of Plato and tried to make a more philosophically inspired Christianity.

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<sup>95</sup> Thanks to the reviewer for this reference to Plotinus' work.

<sup>96</sup> Peter Heimann, *Erwähltes Schicksal: Präexistenz der Seele und christlicher Glaube im Denkmodell des Origenes* (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1988), 166.

<sup>97</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (3d ed.; London: SCM, 2006), 407, 413.

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