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THE MESSAGE OF THE ALIEN GOD & THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

The Gnostic Religion



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to exaggerate the importance of the Mandaeans in the general picture of Gnosticism.

Chapter 3. *Gnostic Imagery and Symbolic Language*

At his first encounter with gnostic literature, the reader will be struck by certain recurrent elements of expression which by their intrinsic quality, even outside the wider context, reveal something of the fundamental experience, the mode of feeling, and the vision of reality distinctively characteristic of the gnostic mind. These expressions range from single words with symbolic suggestion to extensive metaphors; and more than for their frequency of occurrence, they are significant for their inherent eloquence, often enhanced by startling novelty. In this chapter we shall consider some of them. The advantage of this line of approach is that it confronts us with a level of utterance more fundamental than the doctrinal differentiation into which gnostic thought branched out in the completed systems.

Especially rich in the kind of original coinage that displays the stamp of the gnostic mind with telling force is the *Mandaean* literature. This wealth of expressiveness is at least in part the obverse of its poorness on the theoretical side; it is also connected with the fact that owing to their geographical and social remoteness from Hellenistic influence the Mandaeans were less exposed than most to the temptation to assimilate the expression of their ideas to Western intellectual and literary conventions. In their writings mythological fantasy abounds, the compactness of its imagery unattenuated by any ambition toward conceptualization, its variety unchecked by care for consistency and system. Although this lack of intellectual discipline often makes tedious the reading of their larger compositions, which are highly repetitious, the unsophisticated colorfulness of mythical vision that permeates them offers ample compensation; and in Mandaean poetry the gnostic soul pours forth its anguish, nostalgia, and relief in an unending stream of powerful symbolism. For the purposes of this chapter, we shall accordingly draw heavily on this source, without thereby wishing

(a) THE "ALIEN"

"In the name of the great first alien Life from the worlds of light, the sublime that stands above all works": this is the standard opening of Mandaean compositions, and "alien" is a constant attribute of the "Life" that by its nature is alien to this world and under certain conditions alien within it. The formula quoted speaks of the "first" Life "that stands above all works," where we have to supply "*of creation*," i.e., above the world. The concept of the alien Life is one of the great impressive word-symbols which we encounter in gnostic speech, and it is new in the history of human speech in general. It has equivalents throughout gnostic literature, for example Marcion's concept of the "alien God" or just "the Alien," "the Other," "the Unknown," "the Nameless," "the Hidden"; or the "unknown Father" in many Christian-gnostic writings. Its philosophic counterpart is the "absolute transcendence" of Neoplatonic thought. But even apart from these theological uses where it is one of the predicates of God or of the highest Being, the word "alien" (and its equivalents) has its own symbolic significance as an expression of an elemental human experience, and this underlies the different uses of the word in the more theoretical contexts. Regarding this underlying experience, the combination "the alien life" is particularly instructive.

The alien is that which stems from elsewhere and does not belong here. To those who do belong here it is thus the strange, the unfamiliar and incomprehensible; but their world on its part is just as incomprehensible to the alien that comes to dwell here, and like a foreign land where it is far from home. Then it suffers the lot of the stranger who is lonely, unprotected, uncomprehended, and uncomprehending in a situation full of danger. Anguish and homesickness are a part of the stranger's lot. The stranger who does not know the ways of the foreign land wanders about lost; if he learns its ways too well, he forgets that he is a stranger and gets lost in a different sense by succumbing to the lure of the alien world and becoming estranged from his own origin. Then he has

become a "son of the house." This too is part of the alien's fate. In his alienation from himself the distress has gone, but this very fact is the culmination of the stranger's tragedy. The recollection of his own alienness, the recognition of his place of exile for what it is, is the first step back; the awakened homesickness is the beginning of the return. All this belongs to the "suffering" side of alienness. Yet with relation to its origin it is at the same time a mark of excellence, a source of power and of a secret life unknown to the environment and in the last resort impregnable to it, as it is incomprehensible to the creatures of this world. This superiority of the alien which distinguishes it even here, though secretly, is its manifest glory in its own native realm, which is outside this world. In such position the alien is the remote, the inaccessible, and its strangeness means majesty. Thus the alien taken absolutely is the wholly transcendent, the "beyond," and an eminent attribute of God.

Both sides of the idea of the "Alien," the positive and the negative, alienness as superiority and as suffering, as the prerogative of remoteness and as the fate of involvement, alternate as the characteristics of one and the same subject—the "Life." As the "great first Life" it partakes in the positive aspect alone: it is "beyond," "above the world," "in the worlds of light," "in the fruits of splendor, in the courts of light, in the house of perfection," and so forth. In its split-off existence in the world it tragically partakes in the interpenetration of both sides; and the actualization of all the features outlined above, in a dramatic succession that is governed by the theme of salvation, makes up the metaphysical history of the light exiled from Light, of the life exiled from Life and involved in the world—the history of its alienation and recovery, its "way" down and through the nether world and up again. According to the various stages of this history, the term "alien" or its equivalents can enter into manifold combinations: "my alien soul," "my worldsick heart," "the lonely vine," apply to the human condition, while "the alien man" and "the stranger" apply to the messenger from the world of Light—though he may apply to himself the former terms as well, as we shall see when we consider the "redeemed redeemer." Thus by implication the very concept of the "alien" includes in its meaning all the aspects which the "way" explicates in the form of temporally distinct phases. At the same

time it most directly expresses the basic experience which first led to this conception of the "way" of existence—the elementary experience of alienness and transcendence. We may therefore regard the figure of the "alien Life" as a primary symbol of Gnosticism.

(b) "BEYOND," "WITHOUT," "THIS WORLD," AND "THE OTHER WORLD"

To this central concept other terms and images are organically related. If the "Life" is originally alien, then its home is "outside" or "beyond" this world. "Beyond" here means beyond everything that is of the cosmos, heaven and its stars included. And "included" literally: the idea of an absolute "without" limits the world to a closed and bounded system, terrifying in its vastness and inclusiveness to those who are lost in it, yet finite within the total scope of being. It is a power-system, a demonic entity charged with personal tendencies and compulsive forces. The limitation by the idea of the "beyond" deprives the "world" of its claim to totality. As long as "world" means "the All," the sum total of reality, there is only "the" world, and further specification would be pointless: if the cosmos ceases to be the All, if it is limited by something radically "other" yet eminently real, then it must be designated as "this" world. All relations of man's terrestrial existence are "in this world," "of this world," which is in contrast to "the other world," the habitation of "Life." Seen from beyond, however, and in the eyes of the inhabitants of the worlds of Light and Life, it is our world which appears as "that world." The demonstrative pronoun has thus become a relevant addition to the term "world"; and the combination is again a fundamental linguistic symbol of Gnosticism, closely related to the primary concept of the "alien."

(c) WORLDS AND AEONS

It is in line with this view of things that "world" comes to be used in the plural. The expression "the worlds" denotes the long chain of such closed power-domains, divisions of the larger cosmic system, through which Life has to pass on its way, all of them equally alien to it. Only by losing its status of totality, by becoming

themselves are as much spatial realms as they are persons. To overcome them is the same thing as to pass through them, and in breaking through their boundaries this passage at the same time breaks their power and achieves the liberation from the magic of their sphere. Thus even in its role as redeemer the Life in Mandaeen writings says of itself that it "wandered through the worlds": or as Jesus is made to say in the Naassene Psalm, "All the worlds shall I journey through, all the mysteries unlock."

This is the spatial aspect of the conception. No less demonized is the time dimension of life's cosmic existence, which also is represented as an order of quasi-personal powers (e.g., the "Aeons"). Its quality, like that of the world's space, reflects the basic experience of alienness and exile. Here too we meet the plurality we observed there: whole series of ages stretch between the soul and its goal, and their mere number expresses the hold which the cosmos as a principle has over its captives. Here again, escape is achieved only by passing through them all. Thus the way of salvation leads through the temporal order of the "generations": through chains of unnumbered generations the transcendent Life enters the world, sojourns in it, and endures its seemingly endless duration, and only through this long and laborious way, with memory lost and regained, can it fulfill its destiny. This explains the impressive formula "worlds and generations" which constantly occurs in Mandaeen writings: "I wandered through worlds and generations," says the redeemer. To the unredeemed soul (which may be that of the redeemer himself), this time perspective is a source of anguish. The terror of the vastness of cosmic spaces is matched by the terror of the times that have to be endured: "How long have I endured already and been dwelling in the world!" (G 458).

This twofold aspect of the cosmic terror, the spatial and the temporal, is well exhibited in the complex meaning of the gnostically adapted Hellenistic concept of "Aeon." Originally a time-concept purely (duration of life, length of cosmic time, hence eternity), it underwent personification in pre-gnostic Hellenistic religion—possibly an adaptation of the Persian god Zervan—and became an object of worship, even then with some fearsome associations. In Gnosticism it takes a further mythological turn and becomes a class-name for whole categories of either divine, semi-

particularized and at the same time demonized, did the concept "world" come to admit of plurality. We might also say that "world" denotes a collective rather than a unity, a demonic family rather than a unique individual. The plurality denotes also the labyrinthine aspect of the world: in the worlds the soul loses its way and wanders about, and wherever it seeks an escape it only passes from one world into another that is no less world. This multiplication of demonic systems to which unredeemed life is banished is a theme of many gnostic teachings. To the "worlds" of the Mandaeans correspond the "aeons" of Hellenistic Gnosticism. Usually there are seven or twelve (corresponding to the number of the planets or the signs of the zodiac), but in some systems the plurality proliferates to dizzying and terrifying dimensions, up to 365 "heavens" or the innumerable "spaces," "mysteries" (here used topologically), and "aeons" of the *Pistis Sophia*. Through all of them, representing so many degrees of separation from the light, "Life" must pass in order to get out.

You see, O child, through how many bodies [elements?], how many ranks of demons, how many concatenations and revolutions of stars, we have to work our way in order to hasten to the one and only God. (C.H. IV. 8)

It is to be understood even where it is not expressly stated that the role of these intervening forces is inimical and obstructive: with the spatial extent they symbolize at the same time the anti-divine and imprisoning power of this world. "The way that we have to go is long and endless" (G 433);¹ "How wide are the boundaries of these worlds of darkness!" (G 155);

Having once strayed into the labyrinth of evils,

The wretched [Soul] finds no way out . . .

She seeks to escape from the bitter chaos,

And knows not how she shall get through.

(Naassene Psalm, Hippol. V. 10. 2)

Apart from all personification, the whole of space in which life finds itself has a malevolently spiritual character, and the "demons"

¹ Mandaeen quotations are based on the German translation by M. Lidzbarski, "G" standing for *Ginza: Der Schatz oder das Grosse Buch der Mandäer*, Göttingen, 1925, "J" for *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, Giessen, 1915. Numbers after the letter indicate pages of these publications.

(d) THE COSMIC HABITATION AND THE STRANGERS
SOJOURN

For the world as a whole, vast as it appears to its inhabitants, we have thus the visual image of an enclosed cell—what Marcion contemptuously called *haec cellula creatoris*—into which or out of which life may move. "To come from outside" and "to get out" are standard phrases in gnostic literature. Thus the Life or the Light "has come into this world," "has travelled here"; it "departs into the world," it can stand "at the outer rim of the worlds" and thence, "from without," "call into" the world. We shall later deal with the religious significance of these expressions: at present we are concerned with the symbolic topology and with the immediate eloquence of the imagery.

The sojourn "in the world" is called "dwelling," the world itself a "dwelling" or "house," and in contrast to the bright dwellings, the "dark" or the "base" dwelling, "the mortal house." The idea of "dwelling" has two aspects: on the one hand it implies a temporary state, something contingent and therefore revocable—a dwelling can be exchanged for another, it can be abandoned and even allowed to go to ruin; on the other hand, it implies the dependence of life on its surroundings—the place where he dwells makes a decisive difference to the dweller and determines his whole condition. He can therefore only change one dwelling for another one, and the extra-mundane existence is also called "dwelling," this time in the seats of Light and Life, which though infinite have their own order of bounded regions. When Life settles in the world, the temporary belonging thus established may lead to its becoming "a son of the house" and make necessary the reminder, "Thou wert not from here, and thy root was not of the world" (G 379). If the emphasis is on the temporary and transient nature of the worldly sojourn and on the condition of being a stranger, the world is called also the "inn," in which one "lodges"; and "to keep the inn" is a formula for "to be in the world" or "in the body." The creatures of this world are the "fellow-dwellers of the inn," though their relation to it is not that of guests: "Since I was

divine, or demonic beings. In the last sense "the Aeons" represent with temporal as well as spatial implications the demonic power of the universe or (as in the *Pistis Sophia*) of the realm of darkness in its enormity. Their extreme personification may sometimes all but obliterate the original time aspect, but in the frequent equating of "aeons" with "worlds" that aspect is kept alive as part of a meaning become rather protean through the drifts of mythical imagination.²

The feeling inspired by the time aspect of cosmic exile finds moving expression in words like these:

In that world [of darkness] I dwelt thousands of myriads of years, and nobody knew of me that I was there. . . . Year upon year and generation upon generation I was there, and they did not know about me that I dwelt in their world. (G 153 f.)³

or (from a Turkish Manichaean text):

Now, O our gracious Father, numberless myriads of years have passed since we were separated from thee. Thy beloved shining living countenance we long to behold. . . . (Abh. d. Pr. Akad. 1912, p. 10)

The immeasurable cosmic duration means separation from God, as does the towering scale of cosmic spaces, and the demonic quality of both consists in maintaining this separation.

²In the singular, "aeon" can simply mean "the world," and is as "this aeon" in Jewish and Christian thought opposed to "the coming aeon": here the model was probably the Hebrew word *olam* (Aram. *alma*), whose original meaning of "eternity" came to include that of "world." The Mandaeen plural *almaya* can mean "worlds" and "beings," the latter in a personal (superhuman) sense. Personification is joined to the New Testament concept of "this aeon" by expressions like "the god [or, "the rulers"] of this aeon."

³These are words spoken by the savior; but how close his situation is to that of the life exiled in the world in general, i.e., of those to be saved, is shown by the words with which he is sent forth on his mission: "Go, go, our son and our image. . . . The place to which thou goest—grievous suffering awaits thee in those worlds of darkness. Generation after generation shalt thou remain there, until we forget thee. Thy form will remain there, until we read for thee the mass for the dead" (G 152 f.).

one and kept to myself, I was a stranger to my fellow-dwellers in the inn" ("Hymn of the Pearl" in the *Acta Thomae*).

The same expressions can refer also to the body, which is eminently the "house" of life and the instrument of the world's power over the Life that is enclosed in it. More particularly, "tent" and "garment" denote the body as a passing earthly form encasing the soul; these too, however, can also be applied to the world. A garment is donned and doffed and changed, the earthly garment for that of light.

Cut off from its fountainhead, the Life languishes in the bodily garment:

I am a Mana⁴ of the great Life. Who has made me live in the Tibil,⁵ who has thrown me into the body-stump? (G 454)

A Mana am I of the great Life. Who has thrown me into the suffering of the worlds, who has transported me to the evil darkness? So long I endured and dwelt in the world, so long I dwelt among the works of my hands. (G 457f.)

Grief and woe I suffer in the body-garment into which they transported and cast me. How often must I put it off, how often put it on, must ever and again settle my strife⁶ and not behold the Life in its sh'kina.⁷

(G 461)

From all this arises the question addressed to the great Life: "Why hast thou created this world, why hast thou ordered the tribes [of Life] into it out of thy midst?" (G 437). The answer to such questions differs from system to system: the questions themselves are more basic than any particular doctrine and immediately reflect the underlying human condition.

⁴ See Glossary at end of chapter, pp. 97-99.

⁵ See Glossary, p. 98.

⁶ "Settle my strife"; formula for "die."

⁷ See Glossary, p. 98.

(c) "LIGHT" AND "DARKNESS," "LIFE" AND "DEATH"

We have to add a few words about the antithesis of light and darkness that is so constant a feature in this account. Its symbolism meets us everywhere in gnostic literature, but for reasons we shall discuss later its most emphatic and doctrinally important use is to be found in what we shall call the *Iranian* strain of Gnosticism, which is also one component of Mandaeen thought. Most of the following examples are taken from this area and therefore imply the Iranian version of gnostic dualism. Irrespective of the theoretical context, however, the symbolism reflects a universal gnostic attitude. The first alien Life is the "King of Light," whose world is "a world of splendor and of light without darkness," "a world of mildness without rebellion, a world of righteousness without turbulence, a world of eternal life without decay and death, a world of goodness without evil. . . . A pure world unmingled with ill" (G 10). Opposed to it is the "world of darkness, utterly full of evil, . . . full of devouring fire . . . full of falsehood and deceit. . . . A world of turbulence without steadfastness, a world of darkness without light . . . a world of death without eternal life, a world in which the good things perish and plans come to naught" (G 14). Mani, who most completely adopted the Iranian version of dualism, commences his doctrine of origins, as reported in the *Fihrist*, an Arabic source, as follows: "Two beings were at the beginning of the world, the one Light, the other Darkness." On this assumption the existing world, "this" world, is a mixture of light and darkness, yet with a preponderance of darkness: its main substance is darkness, its foreign admixture, light. In the given state of things, the duality of darkness and light coincides with that of "this world" and "the other world," since darkness has embodied its whole essence and power in this world, which now therefore is *the* world of darkness.⁸ The equation "world (cos-

⁸ The king of primal darkness is even in the pre-cosmic stage called "the King of this world" and "of these aeons," although according to the system the "world" stems only from a mingling of the two principles. A Mandaeen parallel to Mani's teaching about the origins whose opening sentence we quoted above reads: "Two kings there were, two natures were created: one king of this world and one king of outside the worlds. The king of these aeons put on a sword and a crown

mos) = darkness" is in fact independent of and more basic than the particular theory of origins just exemplified, and as an expression of the given condition admits of widely divergent types of derivation, as we shall see later. The equation as such is symbolically valid for Gnosticism in general. In the Hermetic Corpus we find the exhortation, "Turn ye away from the dark light" (C.H. I. 28), where the paradoxical combination drives home the point that even the light so called in this world is in truth darkness. "For the cosmos is the fulness of evil, God the fulness of good" (C.H. VI. 4); and as "darkness" and "evil," so is "death" a symbol of the world as such. "He who is born of the mother is brought forth into death and the cosmos: he who is reborn of Christ is transported into life and the Eight [i.e., removed from the power of the Seven]" (Exc. Theod. 80. 1). Thus we understand the Hermetic statement quoted in Macrobius (*In somn. Scip.* I. 11) that the soul "through as many deaths as she passes spheres descends to what on earth is called life."

(f) "MIXTURE," "DISPERSAL," THE "ONE," AND THE "MANY"

To return once more to the Iranian conception, the idea of two original and opposite entities leads to the metaphor of "mixture" for the origin and composition of this world. The mixture is, however, an uneven one, and the term essentially denotes the tragedy of the portions of the Light separated from its main body and immersed in the foreign element.

I am I, the son of the mild ones [i.e., the beings of Light]. Mingled am I, and lamentation I see. Lead me out of the embracement of death.
(Turfan fragment M 7)

They brought living water⁹ and poured it into the turbid water,⁹ they brought shining light and cast it into the dense darkness. They of darkness [etc.] (J 55). Logically speaking, this is inconsistent; but symbolically it is more genuinely gnostic than Mani's abstraction, since the principle of "darkness" is here from the outset *defined* as that of the "world" from whose gnostic experience it had first been conceived. "World" is determined by darkness, and "darkness" solely by world.

⁹ See Glossary, pp. 97 and 99, respectively.

brought the refreshing wind and cast it into the scorching wind. They brought the living fire and cast it into the devouring fire. They brought the soul, the pure Mana, and cast it into the worthless body.
(J 56)

The mixing is here expressed in terms of the five basic elements of the Manichaeic scheme, which obviously underlies this Manichaeic text.

Thou hast taken the treasure of Life and cast it onto the worthless earth. Thou hast taken the word of Life and cast it into the word of mortality.
(G 362)

As it entered the turbid water, the living water lamented and wept. . . . As he mingled the living water with the turbid, darkness entered the light.
(J 216)

Even the messenger is subject to the fate of mixture:

Then the living fire in him became changed. . . . His splendor was impaired and dulled. . . . See how the splendor of the alien man is diminished!
(G 98 f.)

In Manichaeism the doctrine of mixing, with its counterpart of unmixing, forms the basis of the whole cosmological and soteriological system, as will be shown in a later chapter.

Closely connected with the idea of "mixing" is that of "dispersal." If portions of the Light or the first Life have been separated from it and mixed in with the darkness, then an original unity has been split up and given over to plurality: the splinters are the sparks dispersed throughout the creation. "Who took the song of praise, broke it asunder and cast it hither and thither?" (J 13). The very creation of Eve and the scheme of reproduction initiated by it subserve the indefinite further dispersion of the particles of light which the powers of darkness have succeeded in engulfing and by this means endeavor to retain the more securely. Consequently, salvation involves a process of gathering in, of re-collection of what has been so dispersed, and salvation aims at the restoration of the original unity.

I am thou and thou art I, and where thou art I am, and in all things am I dispersed. And from wherever thou wilt thou gatherest me; but in gathering me thou gatherest thyself.¹⁰

This self-gathering is regarded as proceeding *pari passu* with the progress of "knowledge," and its completion as a condition for the ultimate release from the world:

He who attains to this gnosis and gathers himself from the cosmos . . . is no longer detained here but rises above the Archons;¹¹

and by proclaiming this very feat the ascending soul answers the challenge of the celestial gatekeepers:

I have come to know myself and have gathered myself from everywhere. . . .¹²

It is easy to see from these quotations that the concept of unity and unification, like that of plurality, diversity, and dispersal, has an inward as well as metaphysical aspect, i.e., applies to the individual self as it does to universal being. It is a mark of the higher, or more philosophical, forms of Gnosis that these two aspects, complementary from the beginning, come to ever more complete coincidence; and that the increasing realization of the internal aspect purifies the metaphysical one of the cruder mythological meanings it had to begin with. To the Valentinians, whose spiritualized symbolism marks an important step on the road of de-mythologizing, "unification" is the very definition of what the "knowledge of the Father" is to achieve for "each one":

It is by means of Unity that each one shall receive himself back again. Through knowledge he shall purify himself of diversity with a view to Unity, by engulfing (devouring) the Matter within himself like a flame, Darkness by Light and Death by Life.

(GT 25:10-19)

It must be noted that in the Valentinian system the same achievement is ascribed to *gnosis* on the plane of universal being where

¹⁰ From a fragment of the gnostic Gospel of Eve preserved by Epiphanius (*Haer.* 26. 3).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26. 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26. 13; the passage is quoted below in full, p. 168.

the "restoring of Unity" and the "engulfing of Matter" mean no less than the actual dissolution of the whole lower world, i.e., sensible nature as such—not by an act of external force but solely by an inner event of mind: "knowledge" on a transcendental scale. We shall see later (Ch. 8) by what speculative principle the Valentinians established this objective and ontological efficacy of what at first sight seems to be a merely private and subjective act; and how their doctrine justified the equating of individual unification with the reuniting of the universe with God.

Both the universal (metaphysical) and the individual (mystical) aspects of the idea of unity and its opposites became abiding themes of succeeding speculation as it moved even farther away from mythology. Origen, whose proximity to gnostic thought is obvious in his system (duly anathematized by the Church), viewed the whole movement of reality in the categories of the loss and recovery of metaphysical Unity.¹³ But it was Plotinus who in his speculation drew the full mystical conclusions from the metaphysics of "Unity versus Plurality." Dispersal and gathering, ontological categories of total reality, are at the same time action-patterns of each soul's potential experience, and unification within *is* union with the One. Thus emerges the Neoplatonic scheme of the inner ascent from the Many to the One that is ethical on the first rungs of the ladder, then theoretical, and at the culminating stage mystical.

Endeavor to ascend into thyself, gathering in from the body all thy members which have been dispersed and scattered into multiplicity from that unity which once abounded in the greatness of its power. Bring together and unify the inborn ideas and try to articulate those that are confused and to draw into light those that are obscured.

(Porphyr. *Ad Marcell.* x)

It was probably through the writings of Porphyry that this Neoplatonic conception of unification as a principle of personal life came to Augustine, in whose intensely subjective manner the emphasis at last shifts from the metaphysical aspect entirely to the moral one.

¹³ See Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, II, 1, pp. 175-223.

Since through the iniquity of godlessness we have seceded and dissented and fallen away from the one true and highest God and dissipated ourselves into the many, split up by the many and cleaving to the many: it was necessary that . . . the many should have joined in clamor for the coming of One (Christ) . . . and that we, disencumbered from the many, should come to One . . . and, justified in the justice of One, be made One.

(*Trin.* IV. 11)

By continence we are collected into the One from which we have declined to the many.

(*Confess.* X. 14; cf. *Ord.* I. 3)

The "dispersal" has finally received what we should nowadays call an existentialist meaning: that of the soul's "distraction" by the manifold concerns and lures of the world acting through the senses of the body; that is, it has been turned into a psychological and ethical concept within the scheme of individual salvation.

(g) "FALL," "SINKING," "CAPTURE"

For the manner in which life has got into its present plight there are a number of expressions, most of them describing the process as a passive one, some giving it a more active turn. "The tribe of souls¹⁴ was transported here from the house of Life" (G 24); "the treasure of Life which was fetched from there" (G 96), or "which was brought here." More drastic is the image of falling: the soul or spirit, a part of the first Life or of the Light, fell into the world or into the body. This is one of the fundamental symbols of Gnosticism: a pre-cosmic fall of part of the divine principle underlies the genesis of the world and of human existence in the majority of gnostic systems. "The Light fell into the darkness" signifies an early phase of the same divine drama of which "the Light shone in the darkness" can be said to signify a later phase. How this fall originated and by what stages it proceeded is the subject of greatly divergent speculations. Except in Manichaeism and related Iranian types, where the whole process is initiated by the powers of darkness, there is a voluntary element in

¹⁴ See Glossary, p. 98.

the downward movement of the divine: a guilty "inclination" of the Soul (as a mythical entity) toward the lower realms, with various motivations such as curiosity, vanity, sensual desire, is the gnostic equivalent of original sin. The fall is a pre-cosmic one, and one of its consequences is the world itself, another the condition and fate of the individual souls in the world.

The Soul once turned toward matter, she became enamored of it, and burning with the desire to experience the pleasures of the body, she no longer wanted to disengage herself from it. Thus the world was born. From that moment the Soul forgot herself. She forgot her original habitation, her true center, her eternal being.¹⁵

Once separated from the divine realm and engulfed by the alien medium, the movement of the Soul continues in the downward direction in which it started and is described as "sinking": "How long shall I sink within all the worlds?" (J 196). Frequently, however, an element of violence is added to this description of the fall, as in the metaphors relating to captivity, of which we shall see more when we study the Manichaean system. Here some Mandaeen examples will suffice. "Who has carried me into captivity away from my place and my abode, from the household of my parents who brought me up?" (G 323). "Why did ye carry me away from my abode into captivity and cast me into the stinking body?" (G 388).¹⁶

The term "cast" or "thrown" occurring in the last quotation requires some comment. Its use, as we have seen before, is not confined to the metaphor of captivity: it is an image in its own right and of very wide application—life has been cast (thrown) into the world and into the body. We have met the expression associated with the symbolism of the "mixture," where it is used for the origin of the cosmos as well as for that of man: "Ptahil¹⁷ threw the form which the Second [Life] had formed into the world of darkness. He made creations and formed tribes outside the Life" (G 242). This passage refers to the cosmogonic activity of the demiurge: in the anthropogony the image is repeated, and it is there that it has

¹⁵ El Châtibî of the Harranites: for continuation of this text, see below, p. 162, note 15.

¹⁶ Prison, ball and chain, bond, and knot are frequent symbols for the body.

¹⁷ See Glossary, p. 98.

shall later learn what these negative answers mean in terms of a positive mythology. Gnostic myth is precisely concerned with translating the brute factuality experienced in the gnostic vision of existence, and directly expressed in those queries and their negative answers, into terms of an explanatory scheme which derives the given state from its origins and at the same time holds out the promise of overcoming it.

The Life thus "thrown" into the world expresses its condition and mood there in a group of metaphors which we shall now consider. For the most part these refer in the gnostic sources, not to "man" in the ordinary sense, but to a symbolic-mythological being, a divine figure dwelling in the world in a peculiar and tragic role as victim and savior at once. Since, however, this figure according to the meaning of the system is the prototype of man, whose destiny in its full force he suffers in his own person (frequently his name is Man, though the figure can also be female), we are justified in taking the first-person accounts of his suffering as projections of the experience of those who make him speak thus, even if such statements refer to pre-cosmic events. In the following account we shall accordingly not differentiate, and shall think of man's existence in the world, to whatever phase or personage of the mythical drama the statement may refer.

(h) FORLORNNESS, DREAD, HOMESICKNESS

All the emotional implications which our initial analysis revealed in the concept of the "alien" as such find explicit utterance in gnostic myth and poetry. Mandaeen narratives and hymns, the Valentinian fantasies about the adventures of the erring Sophia, the long-drawn-out lamentations of the *Pistis Sophia*, abound with expressions of the frightened and nostalgic state of the soul forlorn in the world. We select a few examples.

Manda d'Hayye²⁰ spake unto Anosh:²⁰ Fear not and be not dismayed, and say not, They have left me alone in this world of the evil ones. For soon I will come to thee. . . . [Anosh, left alone in the world, meditates upon the created world, especially upon the planets and their

²⁰ See Glossary, pp. 98 and 97, respectively.

its main significance. "Pthil took a hidden Mana which was given to him from the house of Life, brought it hither and threw it into Adam and Eve" (*ibid.*). This is the constantly recurring expression for the ensouling of man by his unauthorized creator. That this is not an event planned in the scheme of Life but a violence done to it and to the divine order is evident from the remorse which the demiurge feels afterwards. "Who has stultified me, so that I was a fool and cast the soul into the body?" (G 393).¹⁸ Even in the Valentinian formula quoted before (see p. 45), though it belongs to a branch of Gnosticism inclined to categories more of internal motivation than of external force to expound the prehistory of the Soul, we encountered the expression "whereinto we have been thrown." The jarring note which this concrete term introduces into the series of abstract and neutral verbs preceding it in the formula (forms of "to be" and "to become") is certainly intended. The impact of the image has itself a symbolic value in the gnostic account of human existence. It would be of great interest to compare its use in Gnosticism with its use in a very recent philosophical analysis of existence, that of Martin Heidegger.¹⁹ All we wish to say here is that in both cases "to have been thrown" is not merely a description of the past but an attribute qualifying the given existential situation as determined by that past. It is from the gnostic experience of the present situation of life that this dramatic image of its genesis has been projected into the past, and it is part of the mythological expression of this experience. "Who has cast me into the affliction of the worlds, who transported me into the evil darkness?" (G 457) asks the Life; and it implores, "Save us out of the darkness of this world into which we are thrown" (G 254). To the question the Great Life replies, "It is not according to the will of the Great Life that thou hast come there" (G 329): "That house in which thou dwellest, not Life has built it" (G 379): "This world was not created according to the wish of the Life" (G 247). We

¹⁸ The remorse of the creator is also encountered in Christian Gnosticism. In the *Book of Baruch* we even see him pleading—unsuccessfully—with the supreme God, "Lord, let me destroy the world which I made, for my spirit [*pneuma*] is fettered into the human beings and I will deliver it thence" (Hippol. V. 26. 17).

¹⁹ For *Geworfenheit* see his *Sein und Zeit*, Halle, 1927, pp. 175 ff. A comparison of gnostic and existentialist views is attempted below in the Epilogue, pp. 320-340.

various gifts and influences: he is overcome with fear and the desolation of loneliness:] The evil ones conspire against me. . . . They say to one another, In our own world the call of Life shall not be heard, it [the world] shall be ours. . . . Day in, day out I seek to escape them, as I stand alone in this world. I lift up mine eyes unto Manda d'Hayye, who said unto me, Soon I come to thee. . . . Daily I lift mine eyes to the way upon which my brothers walk, to the path upon which Manda d'Hayye shall come. . . . Manda d'Hayye came, called to me, and said unto me, Little Enosh, why art thou afraid, why didst thou tremble? . . . Since terror overcame thee in this world, I came to enlighten thee. Be not afraid of the evil powers of this world.

(G 261 ff.)

Looking forward to its liberation, the abandoned Soul speaks:

O how shall I rejoice then, who am now afflicted and afraid in the dwelling of the evil ones! O how shall my heart rejoice outside the works which I have made in this world! How long shall I wander, and how long sink within all the worlds?

(J 196)

The forlornness of the Life from beyond sojourning in the world is movingly expressed:

A vine am I, a lonely one, that stands in the world. I have no sublime planter, no keeper, no mild helper to come and instruct me about every thing.

(G 346)

The feeling of having been forgotten in the foreign land by those of the other world recurs again and again:

The Seven oppressed me and the Twelve became my persecution. The First [Life] has forgotten me, and the Second does not enquire after me.

(J 62)

The question form which so conspicuously abounds in Mandaeen literature reflects with peculiar vividness the groping and helplessness of the Life lost in the alien world. Some passages in the following extracts have been quoted before:

I consider in my mind how this has come about. Who has carried me into captivity away from my place and my abode, from the household of my parents who brought me up? Who brought me to the guilty ones, the sons of the vain dwelling? Who brought me to the rebels who make war day after day?

(G 328)

I am a Mana of the great Life. I am a Mana of the mighty Life. Who has made me live in the Tibil, who has thrown me into the body-stump? . . . My eyes, which were opened from the abode of light, now belong to the stump. My heart, which longs for the Life, came here and was made part of the stump. It is the path of the stump, the Seven will not let me go my own path. How I must obey, how endure, how must I quiet my mind! How I must hear of the seven and twelve mysteries, how must I groan! How must my mild Father's Word dwell among the creatures of the dark!

(G 454 f.)

These will suffice as examples from Mandaeen literature. We note the tone of lamentation which is a characteristic of the Eastern sources.

We have quoted before (sec. c) from the Naassene "Psalm of the Soul." Of all the Greek sources it most dramatically describes the plight of the Soul in the labyrinth of the hostile world. The text is hopelessly corrupted, and any rendering of it can only be tentative: the general content, however, is sufficiently clear. The Soul, a third principle somehow placed between the first two of Spirit and Chaos, has become immersed in the latter. In the unworthy form in which she has been clothed she struggles and toils. A prey of Death, she now has regal power and beholds the light, now is plunged into misery and weeps. Lamented²¹ she rejoices, lamenting she is condemned, condemned she dies, forever to be reborn. Thus she wanders about in a labyrinth of evils and finds no way out. It is for her sake that Jesus asks the Father to send him forth with the seals that enable him to pass through the Aeons and to unlock their Mysteries (Hippol. V. 10. 2).

Finally we quote some of the lamentations of the *Pistis Sophia*, chap. 32:

²¹ Sc., at bodily death? The three clauses beginning here make up the most doubtful passage in the whole text.

to man his situation, hitherto hidden from him, and causes an outburst of dread and despair; yet in some way these must have been at work already in the preceding state of ignorance, in that life shows a tendency to hold fast to it and to resist the awakening.

How did the state of unconsciousness come about, and in what concrete terms is it described? The "throw" as such would account for a numbness of the fallen soul; but the alien medium itself, the world as a demonic entity, has an active share in it. In the Manichaean cosmogony as related by Theodore bar Konai we read:

As the Sons of Darkness had devoured them, the five Luminous Gods [the sons of the Primal Man, and the substance of all the souls later dispersed in the world] were deprived of understanding, and through the poison of the Sons of Darkness they became like a man who has been bitten by a mad dog or a serpent.²³

The unconsciousness is thus a veritable infection by the poison of darkness. We are dealing here, as in the whole group of the metaphors of sleeping, not with a mythological detail, a mere episode in a narrative, but with a fundamental feature of existence in the world to which the whole redemptional enterprise of the extramundane deity is related. The "world" on its part makes elaborate efforts to create and maintain this state in its victims and to counteract the operation of awakening: its power, even its existence, is at stake.

They mixed me drink with their cunning and gave me to taste of their meat. I forgot that I was a king's son, and served their king. I forgot the Pearl for which my parents had sent me. Through the heaviness of their nourishment I sank into deep slumber.

(*"Hymn of the Pearl"* in the *Acta Thomae*)

Of the most constant and widest use is probably the image of "sleep." The Soul slumbers in Matter. Adam, the "head" of the race and at the same time symbol of mankind, lies in deep slumber, of a very different kind from that of the biblical Adam: men in

²³ See also the parallel description in a Turfan fragment: "[Ahriman] captured the fair Soul and fettered it within the impurity. Since he had made it blind and deaf, it was unconscious and confused, so that [at first] it did not know its true origin" (Salemman, *Bull. Acad. Impér. des Sciences St.-Petersbourg*, 1912). [See below, p. 341, "Corrections and Additions."]

O Light of Lights, in which I have had faith from the beginning, hearken now to my repentance.²² Deliver me, O Light, for evil thoughts have entered into me. . . . I went, and found myself in the darkness which is in the chaos beneath, and I was powerless to hasten away and to return to my place, for I was afflicted by all the Emanations of the Authades [the Arrogant One]. . . . And I cried for help, but my voice did not carry out of the darkness, and I looked upwards so that the Light in which I had faith might come to my help. . . . And I was in that place, mourning and seeking the Light that I had seen on high. And the watchmen of the gates of the Aeons sought me, and all those who stay within their Mystery mocked me. . . . Now, O Light of Lights, I am afflicted in the darkness of the chaos. . . . Deliver me out of the matter of this darkness, so that I shall not be submerged in it. . . . My strength looked up from the midst of the chaos and from the midst of the darknesses, and I waited for my spouse, that he might come and fight for me, and he came not.

(z) NUMBNESS, SLEEP, INTOXICATION

The emotional categories of the last section may be said to reflect general human experiences which may spring up and find expression anywhere, though rarely in such emphatic forms. Another series of metaphors referring to the human condition in the world is more uniquely gnostic and recurs with great regularity throughout the whole range of gnostic utterance, regardless of linguistic boundaries. While earthly existence is on the one hand, as we just saw, characterized by the feelings of forlornness, dread, nostalgia, it is on the other hand described also as "numbness," "sleep," "drunkenness," and "oblivion": that is to say, it has assumed (if we except drunkenness) all the characteristics which a former time ascribed to the state of the dead in the underworld. Indeed, we shall find that in gnostic thought the world takes the place of the traditional underworld and is itself already the realm of the dead, that is, of those who have to be raised to life again. In some respects this series of metaphors contradicts the previous one: unconsciousness excludes fear. This is not overlooked in the detailed narrative of the myths: it is only the awakening from the state of unconsciousness ("ignorance"), effected from without, that reveals

²² A guilty fall has taken place.

general are "asleep" in the world. The metaphor expresses man's total abandonment to the world. Certain figures of speech underline this spiritual and moral aspect. Men are not just asleep but "love" the sleep ("Why will ye love the sleep, and stumble with them that stumble?"—G 181); they have abandoned themselves to sleep as well as to drunkenness (C.H. I. 27). Even realizing that sleep is the great danger of existence in the world is not enough to keep one awake, but it prompts the prayer:

According to what thou, great Life, saidst unto me, would that a voice might come daily to me to awaken me, that I may not stumble. If thou callest unto me, the evil worlds will not entrap me and I shall not fall prey to the Aeons. (G 485)

The metaphor of sleep may equally serve to discount the sensations of "life here" as mere illusions and dreams, though nightmares, which we are powerless to control; and there the similes of "sleep" join with those of "erring" and "dread":

What, then, is that which He desires man to think? This: "I am as the shadows and phantoms of the Night." When the light of dawn appears, then this man understands that the Terror which had seized upon him, was nothing. . . . As long as Ignorance inspired them with terror and confusion, and left them unstable, torn and divided, there were many illusions by which they were haunted, and empty fictions, as if they were sunk in sleep and as if they found themselves a prey to troubled dreams. Either they are fleeing somewhere, or are driven ineffectually to pursue others; or they find themselves involved in brawls, giving blows or receiving blows; or they are falling from great heights . . . [etc., etc.]: until the moment when those who are passing through all these things, wake up. Then, those who have been experiencing all these confusions, suddenly see nothing. For they are nothing—namely, phantasmagoria of this kind. (GT 28:24-29:32)

Since the gnostic message conceives itself as the counter-move to the design of the world, as the call intended to break its spell, the metaphor of sleep, or its equivalents, is a constant component of the typical gnostic appeals to man, which accordingly present them-

selves as calls of "awakening." We shall therefore meet these metaphors again and again when we deal with the "call."

The metaphors of intoxication require special comment. The "drunkenness" of the world is a phenomenon peculiarly characteristic of the spiritual aspect of what the Gnostics understood by the term "world." It is induced by the "wine of ignorance" (C.H. VII. 1), which the world everywhere proffers to man. The metaphor makes it clear that ignorance is not a neutral state, the mere absence of knowledge, but is itself a positive counter-condition to that of knowledge, actively induced and maintained to prevent it. The ignorance of drunkenness is the soul's ignorance of itself, its origin, and its situation in the alien world: it is precisely the awareness of alienness which the intoxication is meant to suppress; man drawn into the whirlpool and made oblivious of his true being is to be made one of the children of this world. This is the avowed purpose of the powers of the world in proffering their wine and holding their "feast." The drunkenness of ignorance is opposed by the "sobriety" of knowledge, a religious formula sometimes intensified to the paradox of "sober drunkenness."²⁴ Thus in the Odes of Solomon we read:

From the Lord's spring came speaking water in abundance to my lips. I drank and was drunken with the water of everlasting life, yet my drunkenness was not that of ignorance, but I turned away from vanity. (Ode XI. 6-8)

He who thus possesses knowledge . . . [is like] a person who, having been intoxicated, becomes sober and having come to himself reaffirms that which is essentially his own. (GT 22:13-20)

The orgiastic feast prepared by the world for the seduction of man, or more generally of the alien Life from beyond, is repeatedly described in extensive scenes in Mandaean writings. The following example occupies many pages in the original and is here greatly

²⁴ Probably a coinage of Philo Judaeus which gained wide currency in mystical literature: cf. Hans Lewy, *Sobria ebrietas (Beihfte zur ZNW 9*, Giessen, 1929).

spiritual man shall recognize himself as immortal, and love as the cause of death" (*CH.* I. 17); "He who has cherished the body issued from the error of love, he remains in the darkness erring, suffering in his senses the dispensations of death" (*ibid.* 19). More than sexual love is involved in this role of *eros* as the principle of mortality (to Plato it was the principle of the striving for immortality). The lust for the things of this world in general may take on many forms, and by all of them the soul is turned away from its true goal and kept under the spell of its alien abode.

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

(I John 2:15-16)

The three propensities mentioned here, "the lust of the flesh," "the lust of the eyes," and "the pride of life," later serve Augustine as main categories of the general "temptation" of the world (see *Confess.* X. 41 ff.). The "mystery of love" in the Mandaeen text is a mythological version of the same idea.

(g) THE NOISE OF THE WORLD

The Mandaeen scene of the conspiracy of the world prompts an additional observation. The orgiastic feast, intended to draw man into its drunken whirl, has besides intoxication another aspect: its noise is to drown out the "call of Life" and deafen man to the voice of the alien Man.

They shall not hear the words of the alien Man who has come here. . . . Since we have created Adam, he shall come and obey us and our father Prahil.

(G 244)

Come let us make him hear a great upheaval, that he may forget the heavenly voices.

(J 62)

However, as in view of the essential foolishness of the world-powers might be expected, the din has also a very different and ultimately self-defeating effect:

abridged. For the reader unfamiliar with Mandaeen mythology we may just explain that Ruha is the demonic mother of the Planets and as the evil spirit of this world the main adversary of the sons of light.²⁵

Ruha and the Planets began to forge plans and said, "We will entrap Adam and catch him and detain him with us in the Tibil. When he eats and drinks, we will entrap the world. We will practise embracing in the world and found a community in the world. We will entrap him with horns and flutes, so that he may not break away from us. . . . We will seduce the tribe of life and cut it off with us in the world. . . . [G 113 f.]. Arise, let us make a celebration: arise, let us make a drinking-feast. Let us practise the mysteries of love and seduce the whole world! . . . The call of Life we will silence, we will cast strife into the house, which shall not be settled in all eternity. We will kill the Stranger. We will make Adam our adherent and see who then will be his deliverer. . . . We will confound his party, the party that the Stranger has founded, so that he may have no share in the world. The whole house shall be ours alone. . . . What has the Stranger done in the house, that he could found himself a party therein?" They took the living water and poured turbid [water] into it. They took the head of the tribe and practised on him the mystery of love and of lust, through which all the worlds are inflamed. They practised on him seduction, by which all the worlds are seduced. They practised on him the mystery of drunkenness, by which all the worlds are made drunken. . . . The worlds are made drunk by it and turn their faces to the Suf-
Sea.²⁶ (G 120 ff.)

We have only a few remarks to add to this powerful scene. The main weapon of the world in its great seduction is "love." Here we encounter a widespread motif of gnostic thought: the mistrust of sexual love and sensual pleasure in general. It is seen as the eminent form of man's ensnarement by the world: "The

²⁵ Ruha, literally "spirit." The perversion of this term to denote the highest personification of evil is an interesting episode in the history of religion, all the more paradoxical in view of the fact that the full title of this anti-divine figure is Ruha d'Qu'dsha, i.e., "the Holy Spirit." But this very paradox indicates the cause: the violent hostility to Christian doctrine, whose Founder according to Mandaeen tradition had stolen and falsified the message of his master, John the Baptist. But an ambivalence in the figure of the "Holy Spirit," understood as female, is noticeable also in Christian Gnosticism, as will be seen when we deal with the Sophia speculation.

²⁶ See Glossary, p. 98.