

# Gnosis and Mysticism as illustrated by Eugnostos the Blessed

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In the second volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Hans Jonas (1954, 222) expressed penetrating insights into what he called the anticipatory function of gnostic mythological teachings: the idea that cosmological mythology may already account for the mystic ascent of the soul to higher forms of consciousness. The very process of gnostic mythology, the emanatory scheme, is self-contained and autonomous in character. The All or the primeval spirit develops or unwraps itself without intervention from outside, and the energy or principle of movement which gives rise to the whole process “ist geistig-seelischer Natur und entfaltet sich auch beim Übergang in die Mannigfaltigkeit ständig in geistig-seelischen Kategorien, die die innere, die wahre Seite der erscheinenden Wirklichkeit, als eigentliche Zustände des Urgeistes, bedeuten” (Jonas 1954, 156). The leading concepts of *gnosis* and *agnoia* add an intellectual aspect of gnostic mythology; the stages in the emanatory scheme are stages in the life of gnosis, i.e. degrees of knowledge (Jonas 1954, 157). Original gnosis is thus contrasted with present *agnoia* and divided from it by a number of intermediate stages. This mythological or metaphysical foundation of gnosis clearly exhibits the redemptory function of gnosis in the life of the individual; to obtain gnosis is also to return to an unpolluted original condition.

As an account of the descent of original reality to the present deplorable condition, the gnostic cosmological myth is also—by its self-contained, spiritual and intellectual character—a potential account of the mystic way back to the thrones of pre-existence. According to Jonas, however, this potentiality was not realized before the 3rd century; Origen was still a non-mystic, whose philosophical system was later turned into a mystical canon. Whatever the validity of Jonas’ analysis of Origen and of his outline of the development of gnosticism from the first to the third century, it is a major achievement to have shown the mystic potentiality of gnostic mythology and systems of thought. When ecstasy entered gnosticism, a path was already blazed for it in gnostic mythology—or perhaps it is better to say

that mysticism, including ecstasy, was the natural outcome of intellectual work with gnostic mythology (Jonas 1954, 219 ff.).<sup>1</sup>

For the demonstration of such insights into the relation between gnostic mythology and ecstatic gnosis, the *Letter of Eugnostos* is a far better piece of evidence than anything that was available to Jonas, when he wrote *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*.

The *Letter of Eugnostos* or *Eugnostos the Blessed* as the text is usually called, has come down to us in two copies, one in *Nag Hammadi Codex III* and another less well preserved in *Codex V*. The text has aroused considerable interest as a possible sample of so-called pre-Christian gnosis (Yamauchi 1978, 104–107 incl. further refs.). The present paper, however, will not deal with historical considerations of this kind, its only subject being the content of the letter.

Writing under the programmatic name *Eugnostos* and the more common *Makarios*, the author addresses his pupils or adepts to teach them about god. He starts by refuting three propositions about the nature of the world which to him represent the basic shortcomings of contemporary philosophy, or perhaps of philosophy as such: (1) the world is governed by itself, (2) by a providence, or (3) is subject to predestination. His refutation is neither philosophical in the proper sense of that word, nor does it deal with the implications of these propositions in detail: That which is from itself leads an empty life, providence is foolish, and that which is subject to destiny or fate is something that does not attain knowledge. According to Eugnostos, real insight is not reached through philosophy; what matters is to be able to refute the propositions of philosophy and by means of another proposition to gain access to and reveal the god of truth. The attainment of this, he says, means to be immortal amidst the mortals.

The following, which forms the substance of the text, should thus be taken as an attempt to provide the material for this effort. Philosophical criticism gives place to theological and cosmological discourse of the kind that is common in gnostic literature. We are taught about the eternal, uncreated, nameless and inconceivable god, his antopoi and his intricate emanations with their male and female aspects, about the imperishable aeons, their heavens and firmaments etc. Copious and circumstantial as it is, this cosmology is not complete. The world of perishableness is mentioned and even brought out as opposed to the imperishable aeons, but not elaborated and based on cosmology. Eugnostos deliberately stops before he “leaves the world of imperishableness”. It should also be noticed that any

<sup>1</sup> These insights as well as the outline of the development of gnosticism from myth to mysticism have been reformulated in Jonas

1974, 291–304, and are utilized on Nag Hammadi texts in Turner 1980.

escatological perspective is absent from the text. Limitations of this kind are probably motivated by the pedagogical aims of the letter; the accounts of cosmology given by Eugnostos are characterized by himself as “beginnings of knowledge” (*arkhēnsown*) i.e. the text itself is seen by its author as leading towards gnosis. Already the introduction speaks about the importance of being able to provide an alternative to replace the propositions of philosophy and thus to reveal the god of truth and reach immortality. At the end it is stated that the teachings have been adapted to the background and needs of the receiver:

“But all this, which I have told you above, I have told in such a way that you will be able to bear it, until that which cannot be taught is revealed in you—and all this shall it tell you in joy and in pure knowledge (*sown*).”<sup>2</sup>

Gnostic texts do not often provide information about their *Sitz im Leben*, but the *Letter of Eugnostos* does not leave any doubt. The text is the material for revealing the god of truth, it is preconceived as leading towards that crucial experience where that which cannot be taught is revealed in the pupil. This experience will also comprise what is said in the text “in joy and pure knowledge”, i.e. what in the text appears as intricate theology and copious cosmology is supposed, in the experience, to illuminate the pupil from within. This description of *sown* or gnosis clearly points to an experience of the ecstatic type and the *Letter of Eugnostos* can thus be seen as a technique of ecstasy.

The main line of thought in the text is this: In the eternal, unborn, nameless father of the all, all greatesses and powers pre-exist, and the sources of the wholenesses, i.e. the aeons, are present in him. He does not personally execute the work of creation, but like a reflection of him in a mirror, an antopos, called *Autopator* and *Autogenetor*, appears, and gives origin to an immortal androgynous man.

The male aspect of immortal man is called *perfect Nous*, the female *pansophos Sophia, the mother*. Immortal man becomes the possessor of an aeon, creates gods, archangels and angels and becomes the origin of the next level of emanation, *Son of Man*.

Through the correspondence of Son of Man with his female aspect, *first-born Sophia, mother of the All*, the next level of emanation, a great androgynous light, is generated. Its male aspect is *Sõtēr, the creator of everything*, its female *Sophia pangenetira* also called *Pistis*. From this pair are generated 6 pneumatic pairs reflecting earlier levels of emanation. Their male names point back to the *antopos* of the father, immortal man, Son of

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<sup>2</sup> *NHC III*, 90, 4ff. I follow Krause's translation in *Gnosis* 1971; 2, 37ff. Parrott (1977, 225) translates: “until the one who does not need to be taught is revealed among you.”

Man, and Sōtēr himself; the female names repeat those of the earlier Sophia's. This kind of redundance is what ensures the continuity of the system. Also 6 aeons, to which we shall return later, come into existence. From the 6 pneumatic pairs or 12 powers 36 pairs or 72 powers are generated through processes more arithmetical than sexual in nature. The 72 in turn generate 5 pneumatic beings each, so that the number 360 is reached.

By now we have reached the point where the reflections of imperishableness in the world known by us can be accounted for; our aeon is the reflection (τύπος) of immortal man, time the reflection of the *first-beggetter*, i.e. Son of Man, his son again is reflected in some notion of time, regrettably lost in a lacuna. The 12 months of the year reflect the 12 powers or 6 pairs, the 360 days the 360 powers just mentioned. Imperishableness is thus present in our notions of time, not as tangible reality but as τύποι which may be perceived and interpreted.

For the benefit of the 72 powers 12 aeons come into being, so that each aeon may be occupied by 6 powers. In this way 72 heavens originate, each divided into 5 firmaments, so that the number 360 is once more the result. The 3 first aeons are identified as immortal man, Son of Man, and Sōtēr. The first of them is also called *Unity* and *Quietude*.

The rest of the text is a hasty, not very elaborated discourse on the origin of gods, archangels and angels and a few hints as to the further development of aeons, worlds, realms, heavens and firmaments according to earlier prototypes, and their reflections in chaos, the world of becoming and perishableness. In the imperishable part, from the unbegotten farther to the beginning of the revealed part called chaos, everything is light without shade and joy beyond description.

Already Underhill (1930, 97 ff.) emphasized how a doctrine of emanation may serve as a diagram for the mystic, and it is well known that the way of the mystic, his passage through a number of stages on his way towards the thrones of pre-existence, is often seen as a road backwards along the line designed by creation.

To show the diagrammatic function of the emanatory doctrine set forth by Eugnostos it is above all necessary to ascertain what combines the single links of his chain of emanations. In saying that a certain redundance is what holds his system together we have already hinted at this; in a way which is typical for gnostic literature, names, functions, structures are repeated from level to level in the emanatory process, the earlier ones serving as prototypes of the later ones. The system unfolds and develops through processes devoid of any notion of time or action: mirroring, correspondence, or simple multiplication. Of the father an antopos is formed, the

male and female aspects "correspond" and thus carry on the emanatory process, powers, heavens and firmaments unfold in uniform schemes as multipla of 6. Even the aeons, originally notions of time, are generated in this timeless manner. The whole emanatory development is governed by processes which in the world known by us occur only in the human brain.

Everything is solidly connected and continuous within one single moment, and plurality is nothing but the kaleidoscopic image of unity—but still the text insists on the division into all the levels and stages of the system. The text can be seen as mediating this basic opposition, and in so doing it contributes explicitly to the theory of this opposition. An important part of the connecting redundancy is a chain of psychological concepts, six in number, which—with minor variations—occurs three times. The eternal unbegotten father of the all consists entirely of νοῦς, ἔννοια, ἐνθύμησις, φρόνησις, λογισμός and δύναμις. These elements of the first knowledge of the unbegotten one are sources of the wholenesses, i.e. of the aeons that emanate from the father. They are said to be equal powers, but as imperishable they have a decisive advantage (διαφορά) as compared with everything perishable.

Immortal man, as a reflection of the father, possesses his own νοῦς, ἔννοια, ἐνθύμησις, etc. At this stage the concepts are called equal as far as imperishableness is concerned, but with regard to power there is a διαφορά, a difference, or perhaps better: a hierarchic order between them as a father is related to a son, a son to a thought (ἔννοια) and a thought to the rest. The chain of concepts is hierarchically structured according to the principle which governs the successive levels in the emanatory process. This is further illustrated by pointing out the superiority of oneness to duality, duality to threefoldness, tens to hundreds, etc.

Διαφορά in the first instance denotes the fundamental difference between imperishable and perishable; in the second it denotes the hierarchy of stages merging into or generating each other. The use of the word illustrates the mediating capacity of the system. In its course of development, the system mediates the basic opposition between dispartateness and continuity.

This principle is further illustrated in what follows: at the level of the *Sōtēr* the psychological chain unfolds as aeons, this time in a slightly changed form. As an indication of a somewhat lower level νοῦς has disappeared and the aeons now succeed each other in the following order: ἔννοια, ἐνθύμησις, φρόνησις, λογισμός, θέλησις, λόγος.

Such chains of psychological concepts occur several times in gnostic literature. A chain very similar to the one just mentioned is found in a Chinese manichaeian treatise (Chavannes-Pelliot 1911). Puech (1978, 2,

100 ff.) regarded such chains as lists of the parts of νοῦς, and they may be so explained in Eugnostos too. The διαφορά-principle set forth in this text, however, necessitates the consideration of the chain as a hierarchical order. In the Chinese treatise the psychological concepts are seen as correlated with levels in manichaeic education; in Eugnostos we shall try to show that, taken backwards from λόγος to ἔννοια and νοῦς, they describe the way or the ladder of the mystic towards the thrones of pre-existence, towards ecstasy. It is well known that νοῦς in a gnostic context denotes the highest, the most comprehensive form of consciousness; λόγος may be conceived as opposed to νοῦς—Sallustius, the Neoplatonist, has it that “Mind (νοῦς) sees all things at once”, while speech (λόγος) has to express “some first and others after” (*IV*; transl. Murray 1955, 195). The intermediary concepts may then be seen as bridging the gap between λόγος and νοῦς. Θέλησις, will, would thus denote a striving or strong motivation brought about by λόγος and leading towards λογισμός, the conscious, painstaking work with logical and philosophical entities. Φρόνησις, insight, may be seen as the resulting maturity of mind, the necessary basis for the next level, ἐνθύμησις. Ἐνθύμησις in all probability denotes an extreme concentration or the like; ἐνθυμείσθαι means to consider something with regard to its importance, value, or dangerousness, thus implying an effort or at least a commitment. But while ἐνθύμησις may denote the mental process or effort without necessarily including its result, ἔννοια seems clearly to denote an insight gained, a principle realized, an accomplished inner thought or concept. In Plutarch, ἔννοια may denote the human knowledge of the gods (*De placitis philosophorum* I, 6 [Moralia XI]). The chain of psychological concepts seems, then, to describe a way towards still higher forms of consciousness, culminating in νοῦς, the human receiver of gnosis which in Eugnostos' doctrine of emanation is identical with immortal man. The mystic's way towards the thrones of pre-existence is also the road to immortality and to the aeon called *Unity* and *Quietude*.

The text of Eugnostos does not permit any statement about the precise psychological nature of the various stages, let alone the psychology of ecstasy as modern psychology sees it. The importance of the text lies very much in the information as to its *Sitz im Leben* given in its introductory and concluding remarks. This information puts us in a position to see the text as a technique of ecstasy. The copious and circumstantial cosmology set up by Eugnostos is no philosophical theory of the world, but a kind of mandala, which by its very structure exalts the reader above the logos level. By mediating disparateness and continuity the text establishes a road towards the thrones of pre-existence; by integrating psychology and cosmology it brings a whole cosmic drama into the soul—in joy and pure

knowledge. Seen as a technique of ecstasy the very copiousness and prolixity of the cosmology makes sense, and the *Letter of Eugnostos* will thus, with its valuable information about its own *Sitz im Leben*, provide an argument for the explanatory value of ecstasy in dealing with gnostic cosmology and emanatory doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The explanatory value of mysticism in dealing with complicated religio-philosophical texts is repeatedly stressed in Staal 1975, notably pp. 47–48 and 90–95.