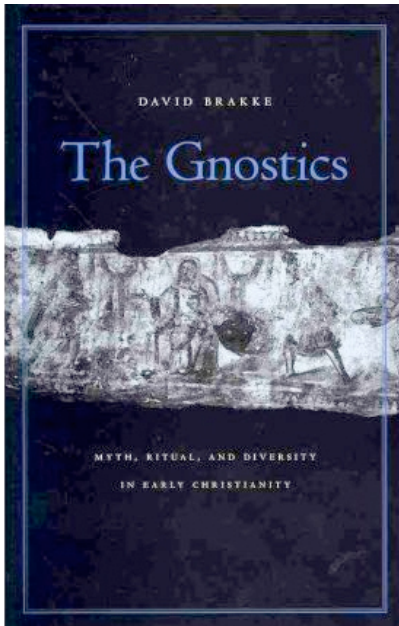


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Brakke, David

The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity

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David Brakke's *The Gnostics* represents an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of the applicability of terms such as “gnostic” and “Gnosticism” and the appropriate definition for those terms if it is felt that they should be used at all. Brakke steers a middle course between the extremes of avoiding the label “gnostic” altogether and using it broadly for a wide range of different texts and viewpoints.

The first chapter presents the key methodological issues and some background to the subject. After a brief mention of recent discoveries, such as the Gospel of Judas, Brakke quickly turns his attention to Irenaeus, the ancient Christian author whose use of the term “gnostics” has shaped subsequent usage. While the information Irenaeus provides will be the focus of attention in chapter 2, in the first chapter the primary concern is methodological, surveying and evaluating scholars' use of terminology and models. After a long period in which the field was dominated by the church fathers' own model of orthodoxy and unity preceding heresy and division, Brakke points out the major change brought about by Walter Bauer's classic 1934 study. Although nearly every precise detail of Bauer's specific reconstructions have been called into question, his model continues to be influential in leading scholars to presuppose initial diversity rather than unity. Brakke

uses an analogy offered by Philip Rousseau, likening the study of early Christianity from this perspective to watching a rerun of a horse race. We will tend to keep our eye on the horse that we know will win, even when it is not in the lead (7). Yet Brakke notes that, unlike a horse race, early Christian groups did not have the clear boundaries separating one from another that horses have. Further, while the latter model is preferable to the older one, it is not without its shortcomings. Brakke proposes that the perspective of postcolonial studies, especially regarding hybridity, rhetoric, and ethnicity, can help us improve upon it. "Our goal should be to see neither how a single Christianity expressed itself in diverse ways, nor how one group of Christians emerged as the winner in a struggle, but how multiple Christian identities and communities were continually created and transformed" (15).

Brakke suggests that some of the confusion about terminology in relation to "Christianity" and "Gnosticism" is due to confusion about which of two types of categories these are. Heuristic categories are ones that help modern scholars make sense of data, speaking, for instance, of "apocalyptic Judaism" even though members of the Qumran group and Paul the apostle would probably not either have self-identified as such or have considered themselves part of "the same movement." Social categories, on the other hand, seek to describe, however imperfectly, "how ancient people actually saw and organized themselves" (16). Although the two can overlap, the distinction remains important, and Brakke writes that Gnosticism "is an outstanding example of a scholarly category that, thanks to confusion about what it is supposed to do, has lost its utility and must be either abandoned or reformed" (19).

Henry More coined the term "Gnosticism" (as well as the term "monotheism") in the seventeenth century as a designation for the array of views that Irenaeus and other ancient heresiologists wrote about. Brakke indicates, on the one hand, the need not to treat Irenaeus uncritically and to strive to get behind and beyond the face value of his use of the term "gnostic." On the other hand, Brakke emphasizes that Irenaeus is clearly not completely wrong nor simply making everything that he says up, so a complete dismissal of the information from Irenaeus is unjustified. Thus in chapter 2 Brakke returns his attention to Irenaeus and makes the case that one particular group, which scholars have frequently designated "Sethians," are in fact the original group that referred to itself as "gnostics." While most ancient thinkers emphasized gnosis, knowledge of some particular sort, the use of *gnostikoi* in reference to people was unusual. The term itself was also a positive one. So Brakke makes the case that Irenaeus would not have volunteered a positive designation of this sort for those with whom he disagreed. Therefore the moniker *gnostikoi* most likely reflects the group's own usage. Irenaeus's broader application of the term sometimes hints that it is being used by extension in those instances or that the other groups are offshoots or borrowers from that primal form of Gnosticism. Porphyry's

independent testimony to the group and its status as a *hairesis* or “school of thought” is also important evidence.

Brakke argues that, since ideas and characters are frequently shared between otherwise divergent groups, the best way to search for the distinctive identity of the original gnostics is by describing their mythological system.

The myth-oriented method of collecting works that originated among the Gnostics differs significantly ... from the typological approach. It does not extract ideas, characters, or motifs from their mythic contexts and then study them in isolation, nor does it rely on general concepts or spiritual attitudes that may flow from any number of different sacred narratives (for example, an emphasis on *gnōsis* rather than faith). Rather, it looks for a shared myth of origins, fall, and salvation (and, we shall see, a shared ritual as well), which could serve to establish and to maintain the unique identity of a distinct religious movement over time.
(44)

So Brakke proceeds using those works that Irenaeus and Porphyry explicitly connect with the gnostics and then by extension other works that share the same mythical elements. While this still does not leave a body of literature that fits together without discrepancies, it does provide a core that can be associated with a single movement or group, to the same extent that the works included in the New Testament can. The gnostic school of thought, like the broader phenomenon of Christianity, was characterized by unity as well as diversity, as is to be expected.

Chapter 3 then proceeds to describe the myth set forth in the relevant works. In the process, Brakke highlights the fact that some elements, such as creation by a demiurge, were not unique to gnostics. Genuine distinctive features include the sheer number and complexity of their system of mediating principles and the ignorant/malicious character of their craftsman god (61). Important details are pointed out in the process of presenting the gnostic myth, such as the importance of gender in their stories and the fact that, contrary to what is often asserted, gnostic texts do not consistently view Jesus in a Docetic fashion. On the contrary, the flesh may be something negative, and a temporary abode of the Christ, but still be considered real and important.

Although Brakke notes that the identity of the incarnate redeemer is often not specified in gnostic texts, he nevertheless views Gnosticism as a fundamentally Christian phenomenon (68). This is in keeping with his focus on the gnostics as known to Irenaeus, who clearly represented what we would recognize as a form of Christianity. Later in the chapter (83–85) he considers and rejects the view that Gnosticism first appeared in non-

Christian Judaism. The chapter also includes discussion of evidence related to distinctive gnostic rites, in particular baptism.

In chapter 4 Brakke's begins with the New Testament evidence for debates over circumcision and uses this as a stepping-off point for a discussion of unity and diversity in the church in second-century Rome, where we know that Gnosticism was among the available religious options. Three examples of the diversity in that time and place are offered: Marcion, Valentinus, and Justin, each of whom is to be distinguished from, and viewed as reacting and responding to, the gnostic school of thought. Brakke argues that not only lumping Marcion and Valentinus with gnostics but also categorizing Justin as proto-orthodox is problematic. "The vehemence with which Justin denounced Marcion and Valentinus as 'heretics' is an indication of their similarity to him as much as their distance" (111).

Chapter 5 focuses on how Christians differentiated themselves from others and from one another. Brakke points out that familiar ways of speaking, such as "why the church rejected Gnosticism," are problematic, because there was no unified entity such as "the church" that could accept or reject anything, and "the dynamics of self-differentiation and boundary formation in which the Gnostics and their opponents participated was far more complex than simple 'rejection' of one party by another" (113). In this chapter Brakke's attention focuses on the examples of the Valentinian school, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Those who participated in a Christian group with a Valentinian teacher probably had no sense that the views they were being exposed to were outside "the mainstream" (115-16). While the gnostics often rewrote Scripture in their retellings, Valentinians, on the other hand, were pioneers in exegesis of Jewish and Christian sacred texts and in the production of commentaries (118). All the individuals discussed in this chapter, and the communities of which they were a part, used many of the same strategies, such as claims to apostolic tradition, allegorical interpretation of the emerging canon, and withdrawal of communion (132).

Although it seems somewhat ironic that more direct attention is given here to individuals and groups that Brakke does *not* consider gnostics, he uses the evidence from the second and third centuries to make the case that the emergence of more explicitly Christian teachings of a variety of sorts, on the one hand, and the appearance of gnostics on the radar of the Platonists, on the other, during this same period, suggests that the gnostics may have been losing ground to others in the process of Christian mutual self-definition (133). But the process whereby this occurred was not the simple one that envisages a proto-orthodoxy, on the one hand, and views that were gnostic or indebted to the gnostics, on the other. The structures and networks that were forged in this period were

crucial in the emergence of a “universal” church in the longer term. But even then attempts to forge and enforce unity and uniformity were not entirely successful.

In concluding, Brakke notes that, if Christians today are not Marcionites and Valentinians, neither are they Origenists or Justinians. “No forms of Christianity that existed in the second and third centuries have survived intact today; rather, they have all contributed, in greater and lesser ways, to the ongoing development of Christianities” (136).

Brakke manages to provide both a broad introduction to past scholarship and some creative suggestions for new directions in a relatively slender volume. But certainly there are arguments that could have done with further expansion and detail. For instance, it might be asked whether, in limiting the term “gnostics” to the group scholars refer to by the designation “Sethians,” Brakke is not in danger of re-essentializing the phenomenon, in a manner not entirely unlike what defenders of “orthodoxy” have done with respect to Christianity. Can the term “Christian” be denied to later wearers of the label, simply because they are later offshoots of the original movement and do not entirely maintain its beliefs and practices? The orthodox Christianity of the fourth century might have to surrender the label, if that is the standard. In the case of Gnosticism, however, the situation differs, since we do not know that any later group embraced the term “gnostics,” although one proposed etymology of the term “Mandaean” is that it means precisely that.

On the question of whether Gnosticism had Jewish origins, Brakke’s case may also be found unpersuasive by some. While Brakke regards the fact that parallels between Jewish and gnostic literature and ideas often have in mind significantly later Jewish sources, some may see this as an argument *in favor of* rather than against a Jewish origin for Gnosticism. Is it more likely that later Jewish authors borrowed from a specifically Christian movement or that Jewish Gnosticism influenced both Christian and non-Christian forms of Judaism? At the very least, those who find the case for Jewish Gnosticism compelling will probably not find reason to change their mind in Brakke’s brief treatment of this topic, although they will certainly find much stimulating food for thought.

Be that as it may, as an overview of what we know about gnostics from insider and outsider sources, and of the methodological issues related to the scholarly study of this ancient religious phenomenon, Brakke’s book provides both an excellent introduction as well as some innovative proposals that are bound to stimulate further discussion. The volume is certainly one that students and scholars are going to need to familiarize themselves with and engage in the years to come.