

Syncretism and Transformation in the *Gospel of Truth*

by
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In the study of Gnosticism, syncretism has been almost inextricably bound up with the question of the origin(s) of Gnosticism. In order to state the aim and scope of this paper, a few remarks on method concerning the phenomena 'origin' and 'syncretism' and the way they have been studied as part of the same complex will therefore be necessary.

The study of Gnosticism has also depended upon Christian conceptions of origin and tradition. It is almost a dogmatic truth, not only a theological but also an historical one, that Christianity originated in Judaism and, at least as far as origins and syncretism are concerned, Gnosticism has been understood and described within the general framework set up for Christian origins, i.e. by comparison with Judaism and Christianity.

To a certain extent, Christian conceptions of origin have become the paradigm for historical explanations. Not only is the very idea of history part of our cultural heritage from Judaism and Christianity, but within Christian theology, history has become the testimony for religious argumentations. Historical investigations into early Christianity that fail to recognize this pattern, are liable to mix historical Christianity with paradigmatic theological Christianity. In a recent book, Burton Mack (1993) suggests that considerations concerning the manifold and diverging interpretations and transformations of the Jesus narrations must also be included in the study of early Christianity. He presents a novel and far more Hellenized and even syncretistic picture of early Jesus-movements in

the light of the social and cultural climate of first century Galilee by presenting the Jesus of Q as a Cynic-like sage¹. Whether one accepts Mack's theory of Q or not, it is worth noticing his understanding of early Christian writings as "specific junctures of a group's social history", and "as an expression of a particular group's thought and discourse at that time"². Accordingly, the Christian gospels are the results of "early Christian mythmaking"³, which must then be seen as the result of a kind of social experiment taking place as a reaction to the pressure of social and cultural changes at the time. A mythic world is an imaginary construct, of course, but as such it is particularly flexible to changes and innovations on its own discursive level, as it can itself "be explored and rearranged in hopes of finding some new perspective that can clarify the times"⁴.

If we pose questions like *How did the development from Judaism to Christianity happen?* or *How did a new Hellenistic religion emerge from a Jewish messianic movement?* we must consider the complexity of these questions carefully if we want to get a full picture of the different levels of knowledge that these Christian texts represent, as Mack has demonstrated. And, if we accept early Christian mythmaking as representations of discourses and social experimentation taking part in an overall syncretistic and Hellenized atmosphere, a new dimension is thus given to the discussion concerning Gnostic origins. It helps to rid Gnosticism of the 'strait-jacket' of a much later Christian historical paradigm. The conflict between the Christian

Gnostics and the church should not, therefore, only be answered from a genealogical viewpoint, since it was just as much a difference caused by conflicting mythological paradigms. If we, then, follow Burton Mack's conclusion, the myth of Jesus was already a myth before it became the history we know from the Gospels:

"A myth projects the agreements that have been reached about the proper way to do things and what to value in human relationships. By a marvellous use of metaphor, dislocation, and visual transformation, myth combines these agreements with a people's memory traditions and recasts its history as a storied world"⁵.

Burton Mack's approach to the study of early Christianity has a bearing on the study of syncretism in Gnostic texts. Rather than considering the origins of each and every idea put forward in Gnostic texts, we should focus on their "interpretation-paradigms", i.e. the ideas that control the interpretation and transformation of motifs in Gnostic texts, thus crediting Gnostic texts with the same paradigmatic authenticity as Christian texts; that is, a recognition of the Gnostic myths as having paradigmatic value for a religious group.⁶

What I propose to do is to redefine the category of syncretism for use in an analysis of Gnostic transformations of religious themes which they share with other traditions. The dynamics of syncretism must be viewed as a kind of innovative process, which cannot be explained exclusively from a historical angle. If we want to understand syncretism as more than a 'Scheltwort' for mere parasitic borrowings, we need to confront different levels of knowledge, empirical as well as theoretical. A redefinition of the category of syncretism also concerns the category Gnosticism/Gnostic, since syncretism has been used as an abusive term to characterize Gnostic religion(s) as impure and parasitic.

This issue is debated by Kurt Rudolph, who has pointed out that we need to consider syncretism as a dynamic process determined by two courses⁷:

»Die historisch-politischen und sozialen Vorgänge bestimmen dabei vielfach den Verlauf, sind aber gleichzeitig als ideologischer Ausdruck eben dieser Vorgänge auch von Wirkung auf diese selbst, so dass die Steuerung des synkretistischen Wandels in den Religionen von zwei Seiten erfolgt: von der Praxis und der Theorie.«⁸

And:

»Es ist die »Begegnung«, der »Kontakt«, einschliesslich der »Konfrontation«, der die universale Voraussetzung und das Movens des Synkretismus ist.«⁹

As much as I agree with Rudolph, I still think that in order to understand the innovative process of syncretism, we have to consider the semantic aspects involved in the syncretistic "Konfrontation": How do we best describe a transformation-process of different religious elements interacting within a textual universe? For this purpose I have found help and inspiration in Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and his definition of the categories "Langue" and "Parole". Briefly, the dichotomy of Langue and Parole corresponds to what Saussure describes as synchronic and diachronic perspectives of language. Applied to the study of syncretism, this would imply that historical, sociological and psychological considerations, which are all connected to diachronical sequences, must be kept in their proper perspective vis-à-vis the 'synchronic structure' of the text: the set of rules which generate the text or the pattern into which the text organizes the different motifs into a semantically coherent system. Kurt Rudolph has demonstrated the historical and

sociological conditions for a syncretistic process, but to describe the pattern or system that mediates the process, structural analysis will be necessary.

It is with this pattern that I shall deal in the following specimen analysis, undertaken to show how the interpretation paradigm of a text is able to transform culturally determined relations. This ‘semantic’ approach to syncretism should also throw some light on the innovative key ideas in Gnostic myth-making.

As a specimen for my analysis I have chosen The Gospel of Truth¹⁰, and as a theme or motif shared with other Christian groups I have chosen Jesus as a soteriological figure or paradigm. I shall compare this motif with examples from Irenaeus’ christological and soteriological statements in *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*¹¹ to demonstrate how the different ‘languages’ or ‘interpretation-paradigms’ of these two texts affect their arrangement and transformation of the motifs concerning Jesus as a soteriological figure. Finally, I hope to demonstrate, by this comparison, that syncretism is not just a question of integrating ‘borrowed’ ideas, but rather that it is a type of innovation that evolves from rearranging and transforming shared themes into new discourses. The phenomenon of syncretism may thus be compared to the kind of social experimentation envisaged by Burton Mack.

In my analysis of the Gospel of Truth¹² and Irenaeus’ *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*,¹³ metaphor and metonymy will be the key analytic concepts in accounting for the construction and transformation of meaning: Metaphor and metonymy in the two texts represent different paradigms for an interpretation of Jesus as a soteriological motif.

In the Gospel of Truth,¹⁴ the use of metaphor is the dominant tool for transformation and innovation. The term metaphor describes a linguistic phenomenon, in which a motif is transferred from one domain to another to create new meaning. Where religious

ideas are concerned we might say from one world to another, for in religious texts, mythological motifs may metaphorically denote social entities. A metaphor should furthermore be seen in both perspectives – that of ‘langue’ and that of ‘parole’. It is part of the structure of langue by creating analogies through “a play of similarities mingling with dissimilarities.”¹⁵ The metaphor enters parole by being both the bearer and the producer of cultural meaning.¹⁶ The metaphor may thus prove a useful instrument in showing how structures characteristic of the system of language function together with the process of culture and the production of meaning.

1a. World-view in the Gospel of Truth

The Gospel of Truth introduces an extremely abstract myth in which the actors are named: ‘*the Father*’, ‘*the totality*’, ‘*ignorance*’, ‘*error*’, ‘*oblivion*’ and ‘*the deficiency*’. We recognize fragments of the Valentinian myth of “Sophia’s fall”. But the pleromatic drama in the Gospel of Truth excludes the known mythical “*dramatis personae*”, and appears as an abstract representation of the human condition in life. It is tempting to call the myth in the Gospel of Truth a ‘psychological cosmology’, for its cosmology is both a metaphor and a function of man’s spiritual captivity in the world. We are informed in 24.21-22 that the form of the deficiency is the world as a result of ignorance and error. Reduced to psychological terms, the world is drained of reality; it is transformed into a mere projection of ignorance.

1b. World-view in Irenaeus

Irenaeus proclaims that the world is God’s creation by referring to Genesis. The creative word of God is identified with the Son of God (Ch.10: 54): “This God, then, is glorified by His Word, who is His Son”, and: “He has estab-

lished with the Word the whole world". Man is made as an image of God (Ch.11: 54). And Irenaeus interprets the idea from Genesis like this: Man is made lord of the earth (Ch12: 55): "But the man was a little one, and his discretion still undeveloped, wherefore also he was easily misled by the deceiver."

The Fall of man and the introduction of death happens because of man's disobedience to God (Ch.15-16: 56-57). But the reason for God's prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge is, according to Irenaeus, that Adam was a child, "and should not have thoughts of grandeur, and become lifted up, as if he had no Lord". (Ch.15: 56). Thus, the Fall of man marks the beginning of a restoration history, in which prohibitions and the introduction of death are part of God's educational scheme for man's gradual recovery of the likeness to God. Irenaeus employs an educational reasoning on fall and redemption, whereas the Gospel of Truth expresses a psychological view.

To sum up: The view of the world expressed in *The Gospel of Truth* is based on the metaphorical relation between 1) a pleromatic drama and 2) man's ignorance and suffering. Thus the world is drained of reality, and what to Irenaeus is history becomes transmutable into images of a pleromatic drama.

The view of the world in *Irenaeus* emphasizes metonymic relationships: the world participates in God because it is his creation, and man participates in God because he was made in the image of God. In the framework of this father/child metonymic relationship, the Fall of man is understood as part of God's educational scheme for Adam.

2a. The Jesus figure in the Gospel of Truth

In the Gospel of Truth, Jesus as Christ is mentioned with only fragmentary references (NHC I,18.12) to the events narrated in the New Tes-

tament gospels. It is through these references, however, that the myth of 'oblivion' and 'error' told by the gospel of Truth acquires the character of an interpretation of these events. In this way, motifs of the narrative of Jesus are turned into metaphors for the abstract myth of 'oblivion', 'error', and 'knowledge': "He was nailed to a tree (and) he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father." (NHC I,18.25) This refers both to the Crucifixion-story, Genesis and the Valentinian mythology of the Gospel of Truth. In this very complex perspective, whoever picks the fruit of knowledge undoes the fall of Adam, and instead of *resurrection* the Gospel of Truth speaks of *recognition* and *knowledge*. A *historical interpretation* is replaced by a *metaphorical interpretation*. The crucifixion functions as an image of knowledge. The act of redemption it denotes is a mental restoration, not an event in 'flesh and blood'.

The passion of Jesus is also given a new meaning: "For this reason the merciful one, the faithful one, Jesus, was patient in accepting sufferings" (NHC I, 20.11), and: "He published the edict of the Father on the cross. O such great teaching! He draws himself down to death though life eternal clothes him" (NHC I, 20.26-28). "Accepting sufferings" is an image of the humiliation which the enlightened Jesus is suffering by being in the world and in the flesh, which is synonymous with death. His death on the Cross serves as an image of the Father's edict as a metaphorical 'action' referring, simultaneously, to the pleromatic drama and the individual's search for knowledge.

By these examples I have demonstrated how a new context, *in casu* the abstract, spiritualized mythology of the Gospel of Truth, functions as an interpretation paradigm of the inserted fragments of the Jesus narrative. The result is a transformation of the meaning of the redeeming acts of Jesus.

2b. The Jesus figure in Irenaeus

According to Irenaeus the passion of Jesus and his death on the Cross constitute an incarnation by which not only God but also his restoration scheme become flesh (Ch.31-32: 67-68): "So the Lord, summing up afresh this man, reproduced the scheme of his incarnation, being born of a virgin by the Will and Wisdom of God, that He too might copy the incarnation of Adam, and man might be made, as was written in the beginning, according to the image and likeness of God."

The scheme of salvation is mimetically conditioned, but constitutes a metonymic relationship. When Jesus takes part in Adam's body and death, he then restores Adam's disobedience by his own obedience. And since death originated because of disobedience it is annulled by obedience. Irenaeus interprets the crucifixion story as an inversion of the myth of Adam's fall: "So by the obedience, whereby He obeyed unto death, hanging on the tree, He undid the old disobedience wrought in the tree." (Ch.34: 69-70)

Through his interpretation of Genesis as the mythological context for the resurrection narrative, Irenaeus creates a metonymic connection between myth and history that accounts for the soteriological meaning of the Passion and the Crucifixion. The very idea of salvation is thus conditioned by metonymy and history.

According to the *Gospel of Truth*, Jesus as a soteriological motif is metaphorical because 1) Jesus' passion and crucifixion is an image of the Pleromatic drama and the individual's search for knowledge, and 2) redemption is a mental action and has no meaning 'in the flesh'. Salvation is thus determined by metaphors denoting 'knowledge', just as the world and the flesh are metaphors for 'error' and 'oblivion'

According to *Irenaeus*, Jesus' passion and crucifixion is metonymically related to: 1)

Adam's body, disobedience and the origin of death, and 2) redemption as an inversion of Adam's sin.

Salvation is thus metonymically determined by the historical interpretation of the worldly and mythical acts of Jesus 'in the flesh'.

3a. Soteriology in the Gospel of Truth

In the Gospel of Truth, Jesus represents *the word* (NHC I, 16.34), *the Son*, and *the name of the Father*, that is the *hidden mystery* (NHC I, 18.15) which the gospel intends to reveal. *The son* who is *the name of the Father* (NHC I, 38.7) is pre-existent in the Father "before he brought forth the aeons" (NHC I, 38.35). Jesus represents the visible part of the Father's name in the world (NHC I, 38.19).

We have already seen that the figure of Jesus serves simultaneously as an image of the pleromatic drama and as a metaphor for salvation. The way to salvation depends on the ability to acknowledge the truth behind the historical representation which is revealed through the Father's naming of the son: "He [the father] gave him [the son] his name which belonged to him;" and: "His is the name; his is the son" (NHC I, 38.13). Through the act of naming, the son partakes in the Father's name just as the Father partakes in the son's name. For the Gnostic, true knowledge, the goal of salvation, is an act of participation in the Father and thus a relationship as metonymic as the chain of Irenaeus, but it can only be achieved through a metaphorical conception of the world and worldly existence. The act of naming functions as a metaphor for the act of salvation of each individual: "So that one who has knowledge is the one whose name the Father has uttered." (NHC I, 21.28). To be named is to partake in the name of the father and the son and thereby become one of *the sons of the name* (NHC I, 38.28). The result of the achieved knowledge is a metonymic relationship. But the condition

for achieving knowledge is metaphorical throughout: first the adept must acknowledge that the form of the deficiency is the world, and that as a part of the world he is part of the deficiency as well, and has ... *come into being like the shadows and the phantoms of the night.*" (NHC I, 28.27).

The use of the negative metaphors describing worldly matters serves to annihilate the metonymic relationship man has to the world. It is substituted by a chain of positive metaphors functioning as images of knowledge to guide the individual to the new metonymic relationship in the participation of the name of the Father and the son. This is the only significant and necessary metonymic relationship occurring in the Gospel of Truth, and once it is reached the metaphors may dissolve. The knowledge, which is salvation or *true existence*, is beyond the limits of the world and language itself.

3b. Soteriology in Irenaeus

Irenaeus places Jesus Christ inside the genealogy of the Old Testament. In the Genesis as the Word and God's co-creator (Ch.5: 50), and in the Garden of Eden (Ch.12: 55), where: "the Word of God was constantly walking in it; He would walk round and talk with the man, prefiguring what was to come to pass in the future". The works of Jesus are part of God's plan and preexistent according to Irenaeus, who uses references to the Old Testament, the prophets and the apostles as historical proof of the solidity of God's plan: "This, beloved, is the preaching of the truth, and this is the manner of our salvation, and this is the way of life, announced by the prophets and ratified by Christ and handed over by the apostles and handed down by the church in the whole world to the children" (Ch.98: 108).

The place of salvation is the world, and it takes place in history as a part of God's plan.

There is a metonymic chain running from the time before creation until the time of the church. Obviously, it is a metaphorical construction, as for instance the comparison of Christ with the word of God, but Irenaeus' persistent historical argumentation rejects any metaphorical or symbolic interpretation. Irenaeus understands reality and existence as connected with the world and the body: "... the Word establishes, that is, works bodily and consolidates being" (Ch.5: 50). Salvation requires continuity of the metonymic chain from the time before creation until the time of the church, which has the responsibility to administer salvation. To partake in salvation is to become one of the sons of the church. It could be argued, of course, that the chain is held together by metaphorical relationships, but what Irenaeus does is to insist on metonymic relations throughout the chain.

The Gospel of Truth differs from the Irenaeian and ecclesiastic Christianity by transforming, through a metaphorical interpretation, the Christian theme of salvation in the flesh into a mental paradigm representing the act of knowledge.

Conclusion

My intention was to demonstrate how religious themes shared with other traditions are transformed and given a new meaning by *the interpretation paradigm* of the new context. The interpretation paradigm in the Gospel of Truth is the idea that the world and everything in it are but images that need to be deciphered in order to acknowledge the true essence behind. Even language is just a metaphorical representation. And consequently so is the language in the Gospel of Truth¹⁷. But by its ability to construct images the language in the Gospel of Truth has the power to make the adept see through the images of the world and into the essence of knowledge. This idea is what I would

venture to characterize as a general paradigm in Gnostic myth-making. In principle, any other mythical element or image from the surrounding philosophical or religious traditions might serve as images of knowledge. But gnostic myth-making did not evolve as the consequence of borrowings, rather gnostic myth-making should be characterized as type of innovation taking part in a larger religious discourse of the time. The Gospel of Truth thus represents a discourse different from that of Irenaeus, although they share elements of a more general discourse (the Jesus-narrative and Genesis-myth). The two texts represent different systems of thought; or, to return to Saussurian terms, the Gospel of Truth may be classified as a ‘Langue’ governed by metaphors, in

contrast to Irenaeus who represents a ‘Langue’ governed by metonyms.

The present analysis demonstrates that syncretism functions as a kind of *innovative method* to bring about a new religious identity out of shared themes and traditions. Syncretism must be understood as an active tool for the expression of new paradigms in the encounter of different religious discourses. Accordingly, the different elements in a syncretistic text should be explained not only in terms of their genealogy, but also according to the type of discourse the text represents, i.e. with a view to discovering the interpretation paradigm which has governed and generated the arrangement and the transformations of motifs shared with other traditions.

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Notes

1. Mack 1993: 114-21.
2. Mack 1993: 10.
3. Mack 1993: 10. Mack argues in the light of the Q-re-

search the need for a revised understanding of early Christian history, and that “The narrative gospels can no longer be viewed as the trustworthy accounts of

unique and stupendous historical events at the foundation of the Christian faith. The gospels must now be seen as the result of early Christian mythmaking."

4. Mack 1993: 209.
5. Mack 1993: 208-9.
6. Cf. Rudolph 1982: 26: "The Gnostic 'spirit of late antiquity' lacks neither body nor shape, but bears the stamp of a quite specific religious view of the world." Since I gave this paper in 1995 Michael A. Williams has argued convincingly against the term 'gnosticism' and many of the theories and connotations connected to the term in *Rethinking "Gnosticism". An argument for dismantling a dubious category*, Princeton 1996. Williams agrees with Rudolph, as do I, to dispense with the term 'gnosticism' and replace it with 'gnostic' or 'gnosis', because as Rudolph argues "research has to use general terms". But as Williams most rightly points out it is not just the term that is problematic but the category (see "Conclusion", pp.262-66). And I admit that after reading *Rethinking gnosticism*, I too had to 'rethink' some of my own stereotypes concerning the gnostics.
7. Rudolph 1992.
8. Rudolph 1992: 213.
9. Rudolph 1992: 209.
10. Translated by Attridge, Harold W. & George W. MacRae 1985:82-117.
11. Translated by Joseph P. Smith, 1952.
12. N.H.C. I, 3. Translated by Attridge & MacRae 1985.
13. Translated by Smith 1952.
14. My analysis of GT presupposes 'the fall of Sophia', the Valentinian mythical theme, to be the model for the myth presented in GT, as does Hans Jonas (1962:102). Recently, Jan Helderma (1998) has challenged this theory, defending the much discussed assumption, that Valentinus is the author of GT. According to Helderma the mythical theme in G.T. is modelled on the wandering Isis as described in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* 54 (1998:59-60). He states that: "The significance of the Isis-Planè hypothesis is that it makes it probable that the author [Valentinus] of GT was acquainted with Hellenistic-Alexandrian *Bildungsgut*". Helderma's hypothesis does not necessarily exclude the relevance of the fall of Sophia. In my opinion the Gospel of Truth does not only represent the author's mind and biography, but also a certain Valentinian-Gnostic inter-discursivity. If we accept the Isis-hypothesis, it is because Isis represents, together with the Jewish Sophia (as the consort of Yahweh in Jewish Wisdom literature), a model of the feminine principle which is reflected in the Gnostic cosmology as a response to a shared discourse on fate and cosmology in the late Hellenistic period. For the Hellenistic image of goddesses see Martin 1987: 58-84.
15. Eco 1984: 95.
16. Eco (1984:102) emphasizes that "the best metaphors are those in which the cultural process, the dynamics itself of semiosis, shows through." Cf. also p. 88: "The inner nature of metaphors produces a shifting of the linguistic explanation onto semiotic mechanisms that are not peculiar to spoken languages."
17. N.H.C. I, 22.38-23.10. Attridge and MacRae 1985: 43.