CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

QUESTIONS OF GNOSTIC INFLUENCE ON EARLY ISLAM

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Over the course of at least the past two centuries, scholars have devoted a number of studies to the discernible roles played by ideologies associated with constituents of the "Gnostic World" in the conceptual and historical development of both the Jewish and the Christian religions. Less attention, however, has been given to the ways in which Islam may have interacted with some of these same gnostic movements. The present essay offers a brief survey of this understudied topic. But before addressing questions about possible gnostic currents flowing through early Islam, we need to specify the spatial and temporal parameters of the materials this particular essay will discuss.

"Early Islam" serves herein as a marker for religious movements arising during the seventh through tenth centuries of the Common Era within the Near and Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia who privilege the prophetic office of Muḥammad and accept the revelatory status of the distinctive scripture which his adherents were promulgating. We will in other words not confine our presentation to a restricted geographic or chronological locale like that of the Ḥijāz in the seventh century, but will instead endeavor to provide coverage of a broader area and time period than is customarily the case in such studies.

A term like "Gnostic" presents a potentially more complicated problem, given the rightly recognized issues which surround the scholarly use of labels like "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism" as taxonomic categories for characterizing certain types of religious texts and behaviors (Williams 1996; King 2003; Burns 2016). In the present essay, we avoid using the noun "Gnosticism" as an unqualified marker, but we will employ the adjective "Gnostic" when speaking about a type of religious stance or attitude which values individual or communal possession of a particular kind of "Gnosis" whose sponsors and articulated claims begin to attract a broad literary notice in the Mediterranean world during the first few centuries of the Common Era. The more generic "gnostic" will be used when tendencies rather than specific movements are denoted.

"Gnosis" can be succinctly defined as the invocation of a "revealed knowledge" (Greek *gnōsis*) about the origins and structure of the divine and material worlds and the nature of their mutual commerce. It is a conceptual constant in those

epistemological systems which privilege supernatural revelation over the other kinds of knowledge that people themselves can produce through observation, experiment, or logic. This distinct category of revealed knowledge is foundational for religions like Judaism, Christianity, or Islam that ground their doctrinal systems in the impartation of a corpus of teachings whose ultimate source lies in the supernal realm. But Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not typically cast as "Gnostic" religions in the sense we are employing. The literature assigned to "classical gnosis" – the kind of gnosis exemplified within the eastern Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity (i.e., the Nag Hammadi corpus and other Coptic writings from the Berlin, Bruce, Askew, and Tchacos codices) – displays a distinctive discursive style which permits its isolation from the other systems and modes of speech within which it typically lurks. It is non-egalitarian and intellectualist, and it is deliberately couched to appeal to the small circles of literati who could appreciate the subtle complexities and ambiguities of written texts and their polysemous interpretative possibilities. It organizes and maps the orders of existence according to a largely stable set of simple binary oppositions such as those of light and darkness, good and evil, male and female, knowledge and ignorance, and spirit and matter. It also typically displays at least three principal notions: (1) an assertion that the highest deity is not identical with the entity(s) who created the material universe; (2) a claim that the spiritual component of the human body is akin to that highest deity and/or its immaterial realm; and (3) an assurance that the Gnosis acquired about this troubling situation is salvific and redemptive (Marjanen 2008: 204, 210–11). It furthermore possesses notable overlaps in interest and expression with the often-associated currents of apocalypticism, esotericism, mysticism, cultural elitism, and pseudepigraphy (or false authorship).

By and large classical Gnosis wields an idiom of articulation wherein there come to the fore certain actors, characters, and events drawn from the Biblical universe of discourse, where the term "Biblical" here connotes its broadest possible scope, encompassing both canonical and non-canonical writings and traditions (Bowley and Reeves 2003; Reeves 2010). These components are, however, divested of their ethnic or nationalist significance in favor of one that is trenchantly mythological and cosmic in scope. Gnostic proclivities appear to flourish among Biblically based communities especially within some factions of the Jesus-oriented movements of the first few centuries of the Common Era, only to fade from the literary register after the rise and imposition of the post-Constantinian varieties of Christian "Orthodoxy" in the West and in Byzantium. To judge from the heresiological literature, Gnostic groups seem to retain their vitality in the Christian East for a much longer period of time, and there is suggestive evidence that their communities and texts continued to survive, circulate, and even provoke fresh avenues of philosophical inquiry and religious speculation within the Islamicate world well into the medieval period.

Additional religious movements which, rightly or wrongly, are sometimes brought under the umbrella of Late Antique "Gnosis" include Greco-Egyptian Hermeticism, Marcionite Christianity, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism (e.g., Jonas 1963). The Hermetic corpus, consisting of both philosophical and technical treatises associated with the teachings of Thoth/Hermes (Struck 2004), had a major impact upon the development of the occult sciences in the Islamicate world. Since its influence therein has been well documented elsewhere (e.g., van Bladel 2009), no further discussion is required here. While neither Marcionism nor Manichaeism meet all three of the criteria

listed above for the delineation of a "Gnostic" brand of religiosity (Marcion rejected a divine affiliation for humanity, whereas Mani taught that the physical universe was planned and created by agents of the Realm of Light), Islamicate sources very frequently subsume discussions of Marcionite and Manichaean teachings and practices under classificatory labels that also incorporate more obscure local representatives of what appear to be authentically Gnostic forms of religious expression. These same discussions moreover sometimes include recognizable descriptions of Mandaeism, an indubitably Gnostic form of religious expression and practice attested in central and southern Iraq and southwestern Iran whose historical roots remain obscure, but which may be reliant upon the merger or convergence of an indigenous Mesopotamian sect with "a Palestinian gnostic group that came to Babylonia" (Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro 2013: 6). In our discussion below, we therefore expand the scope of our marker "Gnostic" in order to embrace these outliers.

THE QUR'ĀN AND GNOSTIC CURRENTS

Since we have discernible "Gnostic" interest in Jewish and Christian scriptural formulations, and since the Qur'ān is firmly emplotted within a Biblical universe of discourse (Reeves 2003; Reynolds 2010), it seems only natural to ask whether there are any Qur'ānic episodes, locutions, or structural elements that echo textual materials associated with classical Gnosticism, or with conceptually allied contemporary movements like those mentioned above. A possible nexus between the birth of Islam and "gnostische Judenchristenthum" was strongly endorsed by the influential church historian Adolf von Harnack (1909: 529–38). Attempts, however, to explain Qur'ānic vocabulary in terms of Gnostic antecedents or alleged parallels have not proven particularly compelling (e.g., Widengren 1955: 162–77). Does the curious reference to "nineteen" angels who oversee the punitive fire of Jahannam (Qur 74:26–31) echo the sinister role which the seven planets and twelve zodiacal signs (12 + 7 = 19) play in certain Gnostic cosmologies (Ahrens 1935: 30–1)? The parallel is admittedly intriguing, but ultimately inconclusive. On the face of it, the Qur'ānic emphasis upon the unicity of God (*tawḥīd*) argues against such dependence (Halm 1982: 6–7; Madigan 2006: 80–1). On the other hand, the strident polemic directed against those who mistakenly or deliberately associate other divine powers or beings with God (*mushrikūn*), usually thought to be polytheists and/or adherents to various binitarian or trinitarian theologies among seventh-century monotheistic groups, works equally well against devotees of Gnostic systems, which typically situate multiple powers or divine worlds (aeons) in Heaven.

The unconventionality of certain aspects of the Qur'ān's teachings about Jesus, such as its allusions to legends emanating from apocryphal works (e.g., the animation of clay birds in 3:49; 5:110) and its seemingly heterodox understanding of the crucifixion and resurrection (4:157–9), has prompted some scholars to point to contacts with Biblically allied sectarian groups who espoused Christological doctrines which were rejected by advocates for what became acceptable articulations of orthodox Christian dogma. Such groups, commonly labeled "Jewish-Christian," in that they are described as combining belief in the special status of Jesus together with most elements of traditional Jewish practice, "often [exhibit] … some easily identifiable Gnostic theologoumena" (Stroumsa 2015b: 141; Crone 2015; 2016). A lingering

presence of "Jewish-Christian" groups in the wilderness regions of Syria, Palestine, Arabia, and Mesopotamia long after the triumph of orthodoxy in the West is sporadically attested by writers like Hippolytus, Epiphanius, Jerome, John Damascene, Theodore bar Konai, and Ibn al-Nadīm (Reeves 1996: 42). Since the Qur'ān also refers at three places (2:62; 5:69; 22:17) to a contemporary scripturally based religious community it terms the "Ṣābians," a group whose historical identity in the context of seventh-century Arabia was already opaque to the earliest authors of *tafsīr*, but whose name can be plausibly connected with common Semitic stems for "ritual baptism" (*ṣb'/ṣb'*), scholars have not been shy in attempting to connect both these "Jewish-Christian" groups and the Qur'ānic Ṣābians with "baptizing" Jewish-Christian sects such as the Ebionites or Elchasaites (the latter an orientation dubbed "gnostischer Ebionitismus" (by Schoeps 1949: 325; cf. Roncaglia 1971: 104), or simply "all forms of gnosticism" (Pedersen 1922: 390), or even later groups who arguably emerged from such behavioral milieux, such as the Mandaeans or even the Manichaeans (Gil 1992: 14–22; de Blois 1995). Here we must be mindful of Kurt Rudolph's warning that "baptist" and "gnostic" are hardly synonymous modifiers (Rudolph 1999: 473; cf. Strecker 1971: 270), and we should also resist facilely equating vague terms such as "apocryphal" with "gnostic." Yet there is at least one distinctive teaching espoused in nascent Islam that is especially reminiscent of this quasi-gnostic Jewish-Christian soil.

The most suggestive affinity between Jewish-Christian sects like the Elchasaites, certain religions like Manichaeism, and the conceptual world of the Qur'ān lies in the realm of prophetology. One ideology which their discursive realms share is that of an official series of divinely vested messengers or prophets who have been dispatched to the physical world in order to communicate a set of revelatory truths to humanity. This notion is sometimes couched in terms which view these prophets as the bearers of what is essentially a common message that requires periodic renewals or updating due to lapses in observance, distortions of language, and corruptions in content that have eroded the core of the revelation over the course of history (cf. above ch. 3). An authoritative articulation of this message in a written scriptural format is often held to be the most effective way of protecting its integrity, although even an ostensibly fixed registration in this tangible form is still subject to both accidental and deliberate, even malicious, tamperings and omissions. Fortunately a pristine archival copy is permanently housed in Heaven which can serve as a template for the religious reforms and renewals announced by the succession of prophets (Ahrens 1935: 52; Widengren 1955: 115–61). These approved chains of prophetic succession vary in their structural details among the different groups for whom we possess reliable evidence about their advocacy of such prophetological schemes, but practically all of them accord prominent roles to Adam, Jesus, and the last named prophet in their sequential rosters. Virtually all of this pre-Islamic prophetic ideology possesses suggestive parallels within the Qur'ān, wherein we learn that Muḥammad shares and replicates the experiences of his prophetic predecessors (e.g., 4:163), that each prophet revealed the same message and book to humanity (e.g., 2:213; 42:13), and that Muḥammad himself constitutes the final link in the chain of prophetic succession as the "seal of the prophets" (*khātam al-nabiyyīn*; 33:40). This title is especially interesting in view of certain testimonies about its application to the third-century Babylonian prophet Mani, as well as the way in which the language of "sealing" is rhetorically exploited

by both Jewish-Christian and Manichaean sources (de Blois 2004; Rubin 2014; Stroumsa 2015a).

The possibility that early Islam may be specifically indebted to Manichaeism for some of its prophetological and scriptural fixations is one that some scholars have explored (Friedlaender 1910–1913: 238–9, 246–54; Clemen 1921; Schaeder 1925: 213–18; Ahrens 1935: 130–2; Andrae 1960: 100–8; Reeves 1996: 209–11; Powers 2015). Of especial interest in this connection then is a report found in the ninth-century historian (d. *ca*. 820) Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, a respected and oft-cited authority on pre-Islamic Arabian religious customs. He transmits a roster which identifies certain Arab tribes or various individuals inhabiting Mecca as Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian prior to the advent of Islam. He continues by relating the following intriguing information about Muḥammad's tribe:

> *Zandaqa* (Manichaeism?) was practiced by some members of the tribe of Quraysh. 'Uqba b. Abī Mu'aỵ, Ubayy b. Khalaf, al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith, Munabbih and Nubayh, both sons of al-Ḥajjāj, al-'Aṣ b. Wā'il, and al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra were *zanādiqa*. Mujāhid reports: 'I asked Ibn 'Abbās, Where was it that they encountered *zandaqa*?' He answered, 'In Ḥīra. They would market their wares there, and (there) they met Christians who instructed them (in *zandaqa*).'
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> (Monnot 1986: 32–3)

Zandaqa is a term of disputed origin that was used by 'Abbāsid jurists "to denote a broad spectrum of dualist speculation and antinomian behavior" (Reeves 2011: 18) and especially Manichaeans. This tradition is persistently echoed by later tradents, who often identify these same individuals as *zanādiqa*, but whose value as independent witnesses to a Manichaean presence in early seventh-century Mecca is correspondingly suspect. Nevertheless, their allegations about *zindīq* members of the tribe of Quraysh at Mecca – who supposedly learned their heresy at Ḥīra – during the late sixth and early seventh centuries may possess significance for an assessment of the spread of Manichaeism throughout the Arabian peninsula. Muhammad Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 860) in a pericope entitled "*Zandaqa* among the Qurayshites" lists the names and eventual fates of eight individuals allegedly involved in *zandaqa*: Abū Sufyān, 'Uqba b. Abī Mu'aỵ, Ubayy b. Khalaf, al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith, Munabbih and Nubayh, both sons of al-Ḥajjāj, al-'Aṣ b. Wā'il, and al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra. With the exception of Abū Sufyān, these are the same *zanādiqa* mentioned by Hishām ibn al-Kalbī. Ibn Ḥabīb concludes by stating that "they learned *zandaqa* from the Christians of Ḥīra, and none of them (the aforementioned tribal members) embraced Islam except for Abū Sufyān" (Taqīzādeh and Šīrāzī 1956: 337). Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) reports "and *zandaqa* was present among the Quraysh which they adopted from Ḥīra" (Taqīzādeh and Šīrāzī 1956: 102).

If this information is accurate (it should be noted that Ibn al-Kalbī reportedly consulted archival documents stored by Christian churches and monasteries in Ḥīra), it still need not be the case that the *zandaqa* allegedly embraced by the Banū Quraysh was bona fide Manichaean. As noted above, the term *zandaqa* was wielded by later Muslim writers as a pejorative label to brand a wide variety of dualist religious speculation, only some of which was genuinely Manichaean, and it was also used by them to denote outrageously libertine behavior, a signification which would ill fit an authentically Manichaean connotation. The literary context of

Hishām ibn al-Kalbī's report would suggest that an organized religious community is intended, but in the absence of independent evidence it remains unclear just which dualist system or moral aberration lurks behind the *zindīq* label. The thirteenth-century historian Ibn Sa'īd al-Andalusī explicitly equates the Sasanian ruler Kavād I's (488–531) temporary flirtation with the Mazdakite movement, a Zoroastrian sect founded by Mazdak in the early sixth century, with a conversion to *zandaqa*, and Ibn Sa'īd records an effort by that monarch to promulgate this novel ideology among the vassal Arab tribes in Ḥīra and the Arabian peninsula (*Našwat al-ʿarab fī ta'rīkh jāhilyyat al-ʿarab* ['Abdul-Rahman, 1982], vol. 1, p. 327). It is hence possible that the *zandaqa* reportedly rampant among the Quraysh was not actually Manichaean, but Mazdakite in nature. However, one would hardly expect to learn about Mazdakite teachings from "Christian teachers," whereas Manichaeism is consciously Christian in its prophetology, exegetical grounding, and eschatology. Given the now attested early presence of Manichaean emissaries in Ḥīra (Tardieu 1992), it seems more plausible to conclude that the *zandaqa* promulgated from that center by Christian tradents would have been indeed Manichaean in identity.

It must, however, be borne in mind that Hishām ibn al-Kalbī's specific application of the label *zandaqa* to certain members of the Banū Quraysh may reflect a retrojected 'Abbāsid polemical attack upon that movement's political adversaries. Melhem Chokr has perceptively recognized that the individuals accused of *zandaqa* in his report are viciously castigated in the *sīra*-literature as enemies of the mission of the prophet Muḥammad; moreover, several of them would have familial or political connections with the overthrown Umayyad caliphate (Chokr 1993: 309–15). Perhaps the charge of *zandaqa* functions in this report as a belated rhetorical caricature with no historical substance, much like the employment of the congeners "Manichee" or "Gnostic" in the vocabulary of Christian heresiography. If this is in fact the case, scholars can no longer blithely appeal to the testimony of al-Kalbī as indisputable evidence for the proliferation of Manichaean doctrines in pre-Islamic Mecca.

TRACES OF GNOSTIC CURRENTS IN THE WORLD OF EARLY ISLAM

While the evidence for Gnostic influence upon Muḥammad or the Qur'ān remains tenuous, it is indisputable that Gnostic literature of various stripes continued to circulate and win admirers within the Islamicate world during the first few centuries. One can easily demonstrate the vitality of recognizably gnostic streams of religiosity among a variety of religious communities in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran during Late Antiquity and the initial centuries of Islamicate sovereignty. A fascinating issue in their study lies in trying to frame a plausible historical explanation for their lingering presence in the East. Were gnostic currents simply indigenous to this region? Or is their presence there due primarily to an eastern flight and resettlement of peoples and ideas from an increasingly less tolerant West (e.g., Drower 1953)? Or should some combination of these two explanations be envisioned?

It has been argued by some scholars that a number of the writings attested in Coptic translation among the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic texts are ultimately of Syro-Mesopotamian origin because they exhibit linguistic and cultural features suggesting such a provenance. The cycle of traditions surrounding the apostle

Thomas (*Gospel of Thomas*, *Acts of Thomas*, et al.) falls into this category (Layton 1987: 360–4). Many of the so-called "Sethian" Gnostic texts (such as the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Apocalypse of Adam*) may also emanate from this region (Koester 1995–2000: 2:212–24). The Coptic *Paraphrase of Shem* (NHC VII,1), a work possibly known in the West by "Hippolytus" (*Refutatio* 5.19–22) under the name *The Paraphrase of Seth*, exhibits some intriguing linkages with Syro-Mesopotamian dualist thought (Roberge 2010). The odd appearance of the character string "Shālt" (*š'lt*) in an "Adam and Eve book" attributed to the early Muslim tradent Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 652/653?) might be the result of an accidental corruption of the Gnostic cognomen "Sethel/Shitil" (*štyl*), an angelic designation which is often used in place of the name Seth among Syro-Mesopotamian Gnostic circles (Al-Hasan al-Hamdānī, *Al-Iklil* [930s] [Löfgren] 1:25.12ff.). Equally fascinating is a report found in the writings of the early eleventh-century Iranian *qāḍī* 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) about a particular religious group "maintaining that they are of the religion (*dīn*) of Seth and that he had been sent to them. In their possession is his book which God revealed to him" ('Abd al-Jabbār, *Al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa'l-'adl* [Husayn], vol. 5, p. 152, lns. 15–16). Also suggestive in this regard is the important role assigned to Seth in early Ismā'īlī thought as the *waṣī* ("deputy" or "legatee") to Adam in his capacity as the first of a sequence of prophets proclaiming a revelatory religion to humankind: Seth taught a small group of initiates the "secret meaning" (*bāṭin*) of this religion's rites and behavioral precepts (Halm 2004: 166). Some gnostic traditions associated with the "Sethian" brand were apparently known in the East.

Another sect of undisputed Syro-Mesopotamian pedigree, the 'Audians, reportedly utilized textual traditions that eerily echo those that were subsequently recovered by modern scholars within the Nag Hammadi collection of tractates. According to Theodore bar Konai, the late eighth-century Nestorian bishop of the southern Mesopotamian city of Kashkar, the 'Audians utilized in addition to the Bible certain pseudepigraphic apocalypses, and he proceeds to provide his reader with several representative citations from these suspect works (Theodore bar Konai, *Liber Scholiorum* [Scher, vol. 1], 2:319.29–320.24):

> Writing in an apocalypse which bears the name of Abraham, one of the creators speaks thusly: 'The world and the created order were made by Darkness and six other powers.' It says moreover: 'They beheld by how many divinities the soul is purified, and by how many divinities the body was formed.' It says further: 'They asked, Who compelled the angels and powers to form the body?' And in an apocalypse attributed to John, it says: '(As for) those rulers that I saw, my body was created by them,' and it lists the names of the holy creators, when it says: 'My wisdom created flesh, understanding created skin, Elohim created bones, my kingdom created blood, Adonai created sinews, anger created hair, and thought created marrow.' This (material) was taken from Chaldean doctrines … It states in the *Book of the Strangers* in characterizing God: 'God said to Eve, Conceive a child with me before the creators of Adam come to you!' And the *Book of Questions* says in representing the rulers: 'Come, let us lie with Eve, for that one who is born will be ours!' It goes on to say that 'the rulers led Eve (away) and lay with her before she could come to Adam.' And when characterizing the rulers, the *Apocalypse of the Strangers* states: 'Come, let us cast our seed in her,

> and let us do it with her first so that the one who will be born from her will be under our control.' And it says moreover: 'They led Eve away from Adam's presence and had sexual intercourse with her.'

Related less verbose testimonies about the apocryphal library of the 'Audians are found in the universal chronicles of the eastern Christian writers Agapius (Vasiliev 1911: 562.6–4.2) and Bar Hebraeus (Nau 1919: 259.9–60.7). Almost all of the quotations which Theodore bar Konai or these later chroniclers cite have been successfully correlated with much earlier Gnostic works like the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and the *Books of the Strangers* which were independently known from the Nag Hammadi discovery or the reports of critics like Porphyry and Epiphanius (Puech 1978: 1:271–300). The crucial difference is that these works are being quoted in the Islamicate world in the late eighth century and thereafter in Syriac and Arabic language versions, as opposed to the Greek and Coptic renditions circulating in the West during the third and fourth centuries. And inasmuch as the information which Theodore bar Konai provides about eastern dualist sects, such as the Manichaeans and the Mandaeans, is congruent with the surviving literature produced by such groups, his testimony shows that authentic specimens of recognizable gnostic works continued to circulate in the Muslim East during the final centuries of the first millennium CE.

Within the ninth chapter of the remarkable Arabic-language encyclopedia of authors and books entitled *Kitāb al-Fihrist* compiled by the tenth-century Baghdadī bookseller Abū'l-Faraj Muḥammad b. Isḥāq al-Warrāq (d. 995?), a bibliophile usually referred to by scholars as Ibn al-Nadīm, occurs a sequential presentation of what he dubbed "the schools of Chaldean dualists" (*madhāhib al-thanawiyya al-kaldāniyyūn*), a felicitous taxonomic rubric that neatly encapsulates these groups' local connections, linguistic proclivities, and alleged conceptual affinities. Among his descriptions of these *madhāhib* (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* [Tajaddud], pp. 391–408; [Dodge trans.], vol. 2, pp. 773–825) we find what is certainly the most prolix and arguably the most valuable Arabophonic treatment of the Manichaeans, a religious movement that continued to harbor adherents even in Ibn al-Nadīm's day. He also includes therein discussions of the *Dayṣāniyya*; i.e., the followers of the teachings of the second-century Edessan philosopher Bardaiṣan (d. 222); the *Marqiyūniyya* (Marcionites), descendants of the followers of what may have been the earliest form of the Christian *kerygma* to penetrate certain regions of Roman and Persian Mesopotamia; local "baptist" communities like the *Mughtasila* and the so-called "Ṣābians of the marshlands" (this latter movement probably the group we know as the Mandaeans); certain rogue Zoroastrian reformist movements like those set in motion by the social agitators Mazdak and Bihāfarīd; and at least a dozen other smaller non-monotheistic collectives devoted to the pronouncements of individual teachers or the instantiation of curious doctrines. One of these, the *Dustīyūn* (Dositheans), is credited with a cosmogony that displays certain affinities with the one that is described in much greater detail within the Coptic language *Paraphrase of Shem* (Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist* p, 403, lns. 18–21). While Ibn al-Nadīm is expressly reliant on earlier authorities or sources for much of the information which he imparts about these formally aberrant groups, he also provides us with unique materials alongside some valuable first-hand observations and anecdotes about the fortunes of these groups and the survival of their writings and ideological

interests within contemporary Muslim society at the beginning of the second millennium CE. Like Theodore bar Konai two centuries before him, he serves as a valuable witness to the persistent vitality of gnostic groups, ideas, and literary articulations in and around the ʻAbbāsid capital.

The arresting information imparted by later eastern tradents like Theodore bar Konai and Ibn al-Nadīm raises some intriguing questions. What was the fate of those biblically allied authors and communities who were the producers and the consumers of recognizably Gnostic works like the *Apocryphon of John* or the *Paraphrase of Shem*? Were they completely engulfed by the rising tide of what was institutionally defined as acceptably orthodox patterns of practice and discourse? Are there any indications that a studied dissembling within and among orthodox groups afforded opportunities for the preservation of a gnostic orientation within the hardening boundaries of the mainstream religions? Theodore bar Konai and Ibn al-Nadīm certainly provide some critical evidence for the regional survival of factions, ideologies, and perhaps most importantly, scriptures and interpretative traditions that are intimately linked with classical Gnostic expressions.

GNOSTIC CURRENTS AND EARLY SECTARIANISM IN ISLAM

The most frequent appeal to the possible influence of gnostic concepts or ideologies in Islamic theological discourse can be found in the modern scholarship surrounding the early formulation of Shīʾite Islam in southern Mesopotamia, particularly among those groups who were labeled as "extremists" (*ghulāt*) by their critics. Even prior to the explosion of interest in Gnostic literature facilitated by the twentieth-century discoveries and publications of primary sources, important insights about the likely nexus between gnostic thought and early Shīʿism had been made by Israel Friedlaender and Michelangelo Guidi (Friedlaender 1907; 1908; Guidi 1935). These and subsequent scholars highlighted conceptual similarities visible between formally distinct textual corpora, with a common vocabulary exploiting binary oppositions such as light and darkness or spirit and matter, with a common interest in viewing authority figures and community leaders as pre-existent emissaries or emanations of the divine realm, a shared fascination with a cyclical progression of a fixed number of authoritative teachers, some of whom may temporarily experience removal ("occultation") from human society (see ch. 3) and a common tendency toward dissimulation (*taqiyya*) as a social survival tactic.

One figure that has been branded as "possibly the most ancient of Shiite gnostics" (Corbin 1993: 76) is Mughīra b. Saʿīd al-ʿIjlī (d. 737), a *ghulūw* teacher who propounded a distinctive theosophy, cosmogony, and anthropogony that exhibits a number of intriguing overlaps with the ideas and themes found in some gnostic texts (Tucker 1975b; 2008: 52–70; Wasserstrom 1985–1986). According to Mughīra, God was a "Man of Light" wearing a "crown" on his head and possessing a body whose parts corresponded with the letters of the *ʾabjād* alphabet. In the Creation story that is attached to his name, it is said that two seas (cf. Qur 25:53) were formed from God's perspiration, one dark and salty and the other luminous and sweet. Catching sight of his "shadow" in the water, he attempted to grab it, but it flew off. Eventually capturing it, he destroyed it, saying: "It is not appropriate that there should be with

me a god who is other than me!" He then created the whole of the created order from those two seas, and he also created the "shadows" (*aẓilla*) of human beings, which are the ethereal celestial prototypes of those who would eventually be born into the material world (Crone 2013: 210–14). The first human "shadow" to be created was Muḥammad (according to Shahrastānī, Mughīra taught that the first human beings were Muḥammad and ʿAlī), and he was sent as Prophet by God to humanity while still in this "shadow" state. Finally, Mughīra put great emphasis upon having knowledge of the "Greatest Name of God": those who were in possession of it would be able to resurrect the dead.

Yet another early extremist figure and self-proclaimed prophet was Bayān b. Samʿān (d. 737). Much of his peculiar doctrine was generated from a literal reading of scriptural texts. He taught that there were two gods, one who was greater and who inhabited heaven, and one who was on earth. This bifurcation has reminded some scholars of analogous claims purportedly found in Marcionism (e.g., Tucker 2008: 44–5), yet it is more likely the result of a literalist exegesis of Qur 43:84 ("He Who is God in heaven, and God on earth"), where the repetition of the lexeme "God" was read by Bayān as referring to two distinct divine entities. He taught that the occurrence of the word *bayān* ("manifestation") in Qur 3:138 was actually a coded reference to himself and the advent of his own prophetic mission. Like Mughīra, he taught that God had an anthropomorphic form (memorably a strong feature of Audianism), but he insisted that this form was destined to disappear, except for God's "face" (cf. Qur 28:88; 55:26–7). He was also reportedly an adept in the magical manipulation of the Greatest Name of God (Tucker 1975a).

Other *ghulāt* figures and sectarian groups also overlap in fascinating ways with earlier or contemporary forms of gnostic religious expression. Abū Manṣūr al-ʿIjlī (d. 742) claimed that God made him ascend into His presence in heaven, addressed him as "My Son" using the Syriac language, and patted him on his head. He also asserted that the "fragment" (*kisf*) which fell from heaven that is mentioned in the Qur'ān (52:44) was actually himself (Tucker 1977; 2008: 71–87). A group such as the Khaṭṭābiyya (Halm 1982: 199–217), an early Shīʿite messianist sect reportedly founded by one Abu'l-Khaṭṭāb (d. 755), was initially associated with Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, the sixth imam of Twelver Shīʿism, but Abu'l-Khaṭṭāb was reportedly repudiated by the imam when he "deified" Jaʿfar. This same sect is identified by some sources with the Mukhammisa or "Pentadists" (Halm 1982: 218–25) and with nascent Ismāʿīlism (Sevener Shīʿism), where "pentads" or five-fold sets of entities or terms play a prominent role in some of their cosmogonical and cosmological traditions, a structural principle shared with Manichaeism. This same Abu'l-Khaṭṭāb may also be identical with the character bearing that name who occurs several times in the *Umm al-Kitāb* (cf. Qur 3:7; 13:39; 43:4), a curious treatise "shrouded in mystery" which appears to have originated among proto-Shīʿī sects in southern Mesopotamia, but which now only survives in a few Persian manuscripts that were preserved in central Asia by certain extremist groups (coming to Western scholarly attention in the early twentieth century) (Ivanow 1932; 1936; Halm 1978: 142–68; 1982: 113–98).

The *Umm al-Kitāb* displays a number of themes and motifs that scholars have sought to link with various currents of Syro-Mesopotamian Gnostic thought, especially Manichaeism. As in the theosophical teachings associated with Mughīra, God has an anthropoid "body of light" which manifests in pentadal extensions termed five

"limbs," five "primal lights," and five "excellent (or pure) ones" who are identified with Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn. These important characters are also likened to the "five trees in Paradise," an image that occurs in both Thomasine and Manichaean literature. The fixation on pentads recalls the *ghulāt* sect of the Mukhammisa or "Pentadists," and one might compare the "five limbs" or "shekinahs" ascribed to the Manichaean Father of Greatness (Theodore bar Konai, *Lib. Schol.*, 2:313.15–17), or the similar pentadal conceptions of the Godhead found in the Syrian Gnostic teacher Basilides, the *Acts of Thomas*, or the Coptic *Apocryphon of John* (Halm 1982: 194–5). The movement in creation from immaterial light through "shadows" to eventually material bodies is a process that is fueled by sexual lust and procreation. Human souls are fallen sparks of light, and their exile on earth is a punishment for their forgetfulness about their divine origin. Salmān, the first of the seven planetary angels, serves as the prototype of the rescued or redeemed human who acquires true gnosis. He is portrayed as engaged in a struggle with an adversarial entity named ʿAzāzi'īl, a label which possesses obvious connections with Jewish Enochic and other esoteric tractates (Halm 1978: 105–7; Wasserstrom 1994: 101–3) and also used of Iblis (Satan) in some Islamic traditions (Jarîr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh* [920s] [Rosenthal, vol. 1], p. 254). The vertical layers of the cosmos are each imagined as inhabited by a pentad of persons, angels, or symbolic forms, and with a distinct color, separated from one another by "veils" but each joined to all the others by "chains of light." It has even been argued that some portions of the *Umm al-Kitāb* may have been adapted or translated from an earlier Manichaean writing in Middle Persian or Sogdian (Bausani 2000: 151–7). Continued close study of the *Umm al-Kitāb* along with kindred *ghulāt* treatises like the *Kitāb al-ashbāḥ wa'l-aẓilla* or "Book of Phantoms and Shadows" (Asatryan 2015) should yield rich rewards to those seeking to uncover further possible connections with earlier or contemporaneous strands of gnostic religiosity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Isolating specific gnostic contributions to the religious thought of Muḥammad and the diction of the Qur'ān remains a problematic enterprise. But the persistent and recurrent flowering over the course of the last half of the first millennium within the Islamicate world of a bewildering variety of seemingly indigenous forms of gnostic thought – e.g., Manichaeism, Mazdakism, Mandaeism, the Islamic extremist *ghulāt* sects, and the still shadowy Jewish groups associated with the production of esoteric apocalypses and the *maʿaseh bereshit* literature (with *Sefer Yeṣirah*, and the hypothesized eastern sources of *Sefer ha-Bahir*) – signals the vibrant vitality of gnostic and quasi-gnostic ideologies in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran during this period. These movements find their most compelling analogues and most plausible root of origin within the ideological and exegetical traditions produced, treasured, studied, and transmitted during the Late Antique and early medieval eras among an indeterminate number of Biblically based and allied fringe movements that flourished in certain regions of the Ḥawrān, the Transjordan, the Negev, the Ḥijāz, and Maysān, the last named area once aptly characterized by Han Drijvers as a "crucible of religions" (Drijvers 1966: 204). A number of scholars have rightly remarked upon the manifold linguistic, thematic, and literary linkages that are visible among these movements, and

it seems likely that a continued close comparative study of their textual productions will yield yet further instances of the catalytic role played by gnostic currents in these intriguing cross-cultural interactions. It is our hope that the ideas discussed in the present essay will actively encourage and stimulate such efforts.

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