

REVIEW OF DAVID
BRAKKE'S *THE GNOSTICS*

The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity.
By David Brakke. Cambridge
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Vasilije Vranić
St. Sava School of Theology,
Libertyville, USA
(vasilije.vranic@cantab.net)

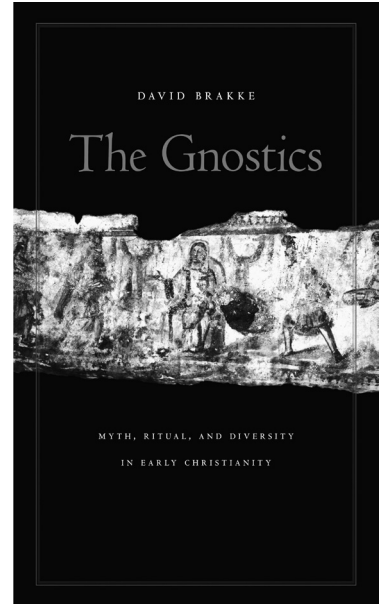
David Brakke's book on the Gnostics is an indispensable contribution to the study of early Christianity and the debate about the nature and identity of Gnosticism. The skeptic reader ought not be put off by the size of the book, since Brakke managed to brilliantly pack an impressive amount of sound scholarship in five short chapters (which amount to less than 150 pages). Rather, the size of the book makes it more inviting to the beginners and advanced students of the period in question, and both freshmen and experts will find it unavoidable in the future study of Gnosticism.

Brakke's view of the Gnostics and their origins challenges the established, conventional scholarship in many ways. He sees

Gnosticism as a diverse movement that coexisted with a variety of schools of thought of early Christianity. Early Christianity in the second-century Rome is presented as a confederation of house-churches. This variety

of churches brought about diversity in the interpretation of Jesus' teachings. Thus, the Gnostic movement cannot be conceived as a sect that competed with a „mainstream Christianity“ or „proto-orthodoxy“ for authority; rather, Gnosticism was one among a variety of Christian schools of thought in Rome (p. 90–1).

Brakke defines the boundaries of Gnosticism, rather narrowly, as a religious community that built its religious beliefs around a common myth. He frequently claims that the conventional lumping of various religious movements into one category of Gnosticism is not viable, since a lack of continuity in „mythology, ritual, or social institutions“ is evident and prevents the notion



of an organized religion. Based on the study of Irenaeus (AH 1.29 and 1.31.1), Brakke identifies the Gnostic myth with the teachings of the Sethian Gnostics, while other groups traditionally placed into this category (e. g., Marcionites, Valentinians, etc.) are excluded (p. 31). Brakke's main sources for the study of Gnosticism can be divided into two groups (pp. 50–1):

1. Primary sources: *The Secret Book According to John*, *Zostrianos*, *The Foreigner*, *Book of Zoroaster*, *Gospel of Judas*, *The Revelation of Adam*, *The Reality of Rulers*, *First Thought in Three Forms*, *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* or *The Egyptian Gospel*, *The Three Tablets of Seth*, *Marsanes*, *Melchizedek*, *The Thought of Norea*.

2. Secondary sources: Irenaeus of Lyons (*Against the Heresies*, Book 1), Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* (Chapter 16), and Epiphanius' *Against Heresies* (chapters 25–6).

Gnosticism is presented as a relatively small religious movement in second-century Rome. Nonetheless, it was fully formed, with its own rituals (Baptism – instituted by Jesus, involved water and promised eternal life, but was not in the name of Jesus Christ) and doctrinal system (p. 85).

One particularly valuable feature of the book is Brakke's masterly summary of the Gnostic system. Its extraction from a plethora of sources required a great amount of skill. The Gnostic myth is here presented as a combination of Jewish scriptures, Platonic mythological speculations, and revelatory meditations on the structure of the human mind. Its purpose was to utilize the human intellect, which has capacity for establishing a connection with the divine, in providing a map of the divine intellect (p. 52). The conventional picture of Gnosticism as a movement marked by dualism, alienation, esotericism, etc., is rejected as secondary to the notion that „God had acted to save people from machinations of evil forces that surround them“ (p. 53).

The Gnostic God is presented as an utterly transcendent and unknowable intellect or *Invisible Spirit* whose main activity of „thinking“ results in the creation of *aeons*. The *aeons* can simultaneously be actors, places, extents of time, and modes of thought (p. 54). They usually have names of ideal qualities: *Intelligence*, *Truth*, *Form*, *Afterthought*, *Wisdom*, etc. The *aeons* make up the *Entirety* or *Pleroma*. The immediate emanation of God is the *Second Principle* or *Barbelo* or *Forethought* who has a capacity to reveal God

to humans (pp. 53–4). *Aeons* can further devolve into emanations/*aeons*. Barbelo, for instance, has three emanations: *Concealed*, *First-Manifest*, and *Self-Originate*. In several versions of the myth, *Self-Originate* is identified with Christ and is attended by four *aeons*, while he is praised by the remaining *aeons* (p. 56). According to the myth, *Barbelo* conceives Christ by gazing unto the *First Principle*, i. e., God (Ap. John II 6:10–18) (p. 55).

The creation of the material world is not an act of an evil deity, but is the result of a mistake. All *aeons* have a gender and are paired to create balance between femininity and masculinity. The *aeon* Wisdom, the last (24th) *aeon* and the farthest emanation from God, imprudently decided to engender a thought without the consent of her male counterpart. This resulted in the creation of a malformed thought – *Ialdabaoth*, who is shunned and cast out from the *Entirety*. *Ialdabaoth* creates the material world (p. 58). Thus, Brakke concludes, the Gnostics were not dualists in the strict sense of the word (p. 62), since they do not posit an evil deity equal to God, but for them everything comes from God through a series of emanations, while the material world is an infelicitous act of a fallacious emanation.

Equally, elucidating is Brakke's explanation of the role of

gnosis. In the material world, which for Gnostics is „corporeal darkness, animate chaos, and desirous femininity“ (Zos. 1: 11–13), an enlightened person could still experience God through mystical contemplation. This experience is known as *gnosis*; it is rare, it comes suddenly, and is short in duration (p. 63).

Brakke also dedicated a section on the study of three early Christian theologians: Marcion, Valentinus, and Justin as a proof of diversity in early Christianity. All three are characterized as Christians whose schools competed for authority in second-century Rome (p. 110–1). Contrary to traditional scholarship, neither Marcion nor Valentinus could be counted as Gnostics, since Marcion rejected the Old Testament altogether and considered the material world to be a creation of an evil god. The Gnosticism, on the other hand, did not reject the Christian Scriptures (i. e., the Old Testament) and did not postulate existence of an evil god. Valentinus is presented as a Christian teacher who merely adopted and included Gnostic teachings rather than rejecting them, creating a religious movement based on personal authority and visionary insight (p. 99–101 and 104).

Finally, Brakke discusses strategies of self-differentiation used by various groups of early Christi-

ans, e. g., Montanists, Valentini-ans, and Irenaeus of Lyons. The system of Irenaeus, which portrayed bishops and presbyters as authoritative guardians of genuine Christianity, dominated the second and third century Christianity. By that time, the practice of a single bishop in a city was adopted in order to ensure unity between Christian communities (p. 134). Later Christian authoritative teachers, e. g., Clement of Alexandria (p. 126) and Origen (p. 132), enjoyed certain autonomy with regard to their teaching, but still aligned themselves with the growing authority of their bishops and wider ecclesial communities (pp. 125–32). Brakke concludes that the role of bishops as authoritative guardians of true Apostolic Christianity came to play the decisive role in the self-differentiation process of the early Christians.

Finally, Brakke concludes that the Gnostics have not disappeared from the stage of history as result of a lost theological battle to „proto-orthodoxy“ or the teachings of Justin or Irenaeus, since their teachings have not survived either. Moreover, Brakke argues that some traces of Gnostic thought continue to exist and have influenced Christian mysticism and the monastic movement. Therefore, the Gnostics were a small group, but they nonetheless played

an important role in the ongoing process in which Christians „continually reinvent themselves, their ideas, and their communities in light of their experience of Jesus Christ“ (p. 137).

Undoubtedly, Brakke's work on the Gnostics is as informative as it is entertaining due to author's sharp intellect and wit. The author easily navigates through the labyrinth of the Gnostic „pantheon“ and presents his findings in a manner that is simultaneously comprehensive to the expert and the occasional reader alike.

Brakke's argument is compelling and the scholarship is stellar. It would be difficult to claim, however, that he has pronounced the final verdict on the Gnostic movement. The claim that only the Sethian Gnostics properly bear that name is particularly unconvincing in this book. It remains unclear why would the Christian house churches in the second-century Rome be accepted as members of the same category of „Christianity“ despite their profound diversity (which Brakke argues for in chapter 4), while the groups with variations on the Gnostic myth, e. g., Marcionites and Valentinians, could not be accepted as variants of the Gnostic family. In other words, is Brakke painting a too clean and neat picture of Gnosticism? □