
The Human Image in the Nag Hammadi Library

Jae Hyung Cho

Korea Christian University, South Korea

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the human image in the Nag Hammadi library by using the history of ideas that traces the origin of a certain idea or thought over time in history.¹ The Nag Hammadi library is an important source of Gnosticism and it is a valuable resource for the study of historical Jesus and anthropology.² The texts in the Nag Hammadi library are fifty-two documents, and all of them were Coptic translations from originally written in Greek. Since the library was discovered in 1945 in Upper Egypt, many scholars have not only conducted a great deal of research into Christian origin, but also defined Gnosticism.³ Before the discovery of the texts, the study of Gnosticism heavily depends on the writings of church fathers and a few fragments of gnostic texts. Although the study of the library is a relatively new field compared to that of other ancient Mediterranean religions,⁴ some documents have attracted much attention in connection with the study of anthropology (the human image) and Christology (*The Gospel of Thomas*, *Apocryphon of John*, *The Apocryphon of James*).⁵ The human image in the Nag Hammadi library seems to be diverse. It figuratively appears as a god, Adam, or beast(lion).⁶ For further discussion of them, I will first deal with the relationship between the Nag Hammadi library and Gnosticism. Then, I will

1. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936; repr., 1948), 1-21; according to him, "there is a great deal more that is common to more than one of these provinces than is usually recognized, that the same idea often appears, sometimes considerably disguised, in the most diverse regions of the intellectual world." Lovejoy, 14-15; In particular, "unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrines or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers." Lovejoy, 19.

2. Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 22.

3. The Nag Hammadi Library not only gives valuable information on New Testament theology but also on the gnostic movement of the 2nd-4th centuries. Furthermore, it presents a new challenge to methodology of the New Testament, the study of the New Testament Apocrypha, and Q document as well as Coptic.

4. David Brakke, "Nag Hammadi," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6398.

5. In relating this topic, scholars also pay attention to The Gospel of Judas and The Gospel of Mary, though they do not belong to the Nag Hammadi library.

6. James M. Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 127 and 319 .

look into the human nature and the journey of the soul in the Nag Hammadi library.

2. The Nag Hammadi Library and Gnosticism

Most texts of the Nag Hammadi library have gnostic elements. However, not all scholars agree with this. They pose a problem of the gnostic characters on some texts of *Plato Republic 588a-589b*, *Zostrianos*, *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving*, *The Teaching of Silvanus*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*. This may be right or wrong depending on how to define Gnosticism.

There are many kinds of Gnosticism not only in other religious traditions, but also in the Christian tradition. Karen King wrote a book, “What is Gnosticism?”⁷ She does not answer because she tries to find one typical Gnosticism, after enumerating all information of gnostic feature, rather than tracing the core of Gnosticism. Other scholars also fail to consistently define Gnosticism because Sethian Gnosticism, Valentinian Gnosticism, Thomas’ Gnosticism, and Basilides’ Gnosticism are different, although they have common factors that often are unaddressed by scholars.

The Nag Hammadi library presents specific and various characteristics of Christian and non-Christian Gnosticism, but some scholars define Gnosticism in a restrictive perspective that simply implies a Jewish and Christian heretical movement from the second to fourth centuries, which is mostly dependent on the writings of famous church fathers (Irenaeus, Origen, Justin, Tertullian, and etc). Other scholars trace Gnosticism from the Jewish background, but it comes from Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Xenophanes, Plato and Aristotle.⁸ Particularly, in *Parmenides* (137. d), Plato delineates that the conception of the Monad that does not belong to the material world. In addition, in the story of the cave, he describes the enlightened human who comprehends the true knowledge. Thus, one can say that Plato provides all philosophical foundation of Gnosticism. In general, Gnosticism was also influenced by the Old Testament, Zoroastrians, Mesopotamian religion, and Greco-Roman religions as well as Greek philosophy.

Based on the above arguments, I define that Gnosticism is a religion of enlightenment, in comparison with the religion of law, or grace. The term Gnosticism comes from Greek adjective *gnōstikos* (Plato’s *Statesman* 258e),⁹ which refers to a kind of science or the meaning of “knowledge” that gives enlightenment and true salvation.¹⁰ The most important features of Gnosticism are the notion of the Monad and the journey of the soul.¹¹ Gnosticism begins to pursue the invisible,

7. Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003)

8. See Frank N. Magill, ed. *Dictionary of World Biography: The Ancient World, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 729; Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, *Philosophic Classics Volume I: Ancient Philosophy*, 3 ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2000), 12-15.

9. Hdith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, Bollingen Series, vol. LXXI (New York: pantheon books, 1961), 1021.

10. Pearson, 11.

11. Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 42-48.

imperishable, everlasting, perfect, unknowable, omnipresent, and spiritual god, (*Eugnostos* 71.14-72.20 and *Apocryphon of John* 4.2-9) that philosophers have named "the Monad". This notion of Monad came from ancient philosophy and science. The Monad is not jealous, but overflowing, which constitutes many spiritual layers (*pleroma*).¹² Thus, every spiritual being originates from the Monad in the gnostic system. Thus, Gnosticism gives a revolutionary view to the history of religion, because it focuses on spirit founded on the geo-centric universe and the body and soul dualism. Unlike the gods of the Old Testament and Homer who have bodies and appear in human forms living in the three story universe, the god, the Monad is spiritually dwelling in the geo-centric universe. In this regard, the true part of human beings is the soul and it originates from the Monad in this system.

Looking at the concepts of the Monad and the journey of the soul in *Plato Republic 588a-589b*, *Zostrianos*, *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving*, *The Teaching of Silvanus*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*, one finds that these belong to the Gnostic document. For example, *Plato Republic 588a-589b* seems to be a part of Plato's *Republic*, which is far from the Gnostic movement of from the second to fourth centuries, but it implies "the rationality of soul" and the journey of the soul.¹³ *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* explicitly means that the soul travels through the seven spheres. After passing through these areas, it will travel to the eighth and ninth spheres where soul can experience true blessings.¹⁴ Here, the Monad without a birth and the distinct journey of the soul are clearly described.¹⁵ *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* also contains the journey of the soul, as one can see it from the beginning of the first sentence, "Every soul and heart is lifted up to You." The statement, "We rejoice because while we were in (the) body, You have made us divine through Your knowledge" indicates that the knowledge of God made the human being divine, which also reveals the gnostic characteristics.¹⁶ Some scholars evaluate *The Teaching of Silvanus* as having the most non-gnostic character among the Nag Hammadi texts, though it appears to be late Stoicism and Middle Platonism.¹⁷ This document, however, says, "God is the spiritual one. Man has taken shape from the substance of God. The divine soul shares partly in this One (God); furthermore, it shares partly in the flesh."¹⁸ The text also claims that the essence of humans is the soul, and God has given it to humans.¹⁹

The Gospel of Thomas shares many of the verses parallel to that of the canonical Gospels, and it does not include the important gnostic terms such as "Aeon," "demiurge," "pleroma," and "The myth of Sophia." Thus, some scholars view that it is not a gnostic work from its

12. Riley, 46-47.

13. Robinson, 319.

14. Robinson, 321.

15. Robinson, 327.

16. Robinson, 329.

17. Robinson, 379.

18. Robinson, 385.

19. Robinson, 384.

beginning.²⁰ On the other hand, Helmut Koester, Elaine Pagels, Howard M. Jackson, and James D. G. Dunn see it as a gnostic document, because *the Gospel of Thomas* contains the middle Platonic thought that emphasizes the soul.²¹ The implication of the Monad appears in the text, and the chosen soul comes from heaven and return to heaven, which shows the journey of the soul.²² In *the Gospel of Thomas* 49, Jesus says, “Blessed (*machrios*) are the solitary (*monachos*), and elect, for you shall find the Kingdom; because you come from it, (and) you shall go there again (*parin*).”²³ The author of *the Gospel of Thomas* often mentions those who are ‘alone’ (16; 49; 75), ‘one’ (22; 106), and ‘only one’ (4; 22) entering the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, the texts of the Nag Hammadi library have often mentioned the journey of the soul and the monolithic Monad. If one looks at the Nag Hammadi library with these two concepts, one will find that they have made many contacts with ancient gnostic ideas that explain the human image in the particle of the Monad. In this regard, because human souls come from and return to the Monad, the notion of the journey of the soul deeply connects the human image with God in the Nag Hammadi library.

3. The Human Nature in the Nag Hammadi Library

The gnostic view of the world starts out from a strict cosmic dualism. Life and death, truth and falsehood, salvation and ruin of human life are anchored in the cosmos. In the primeval time, a part of the light fell into the power of the darkness. In order to be able to maintain their hold on the light, the evil powers created the world and human bodies. They confine them in the physical world. In order to redeem and bring home the lost creatures of the light, the good God of life sends the saving knowledge (gnosis) into the world. By illuminating humans as to their true origin and true being, this knowledge bestows on them the power to return to the heavenly homeland after they take off their body. In this connection the figure of a Redeemer is often met with the one that is sent by the Father, mostly in the primeval time, to impart the knowledge. Under this gnosis, humans put themselves into either the children of light who are from the above, or the children of darkness who do not bear any soul of light in themselves. After his completed work of redemption, the Redeemer ascends again and so makes a way for the elements of light that follow him. This Redeemer’s descending and ascending is reflected in the journey of the soul.

The dualistic view of the world has influenced the gnostic view of the human image. While the material world is the “demonistic conception of the world,” the spiritual domain is the kingdom of the “unknown God.” Likewise, the human body as “demonistic conception” for the soul, which

20. Pearson, 257 and 67.

21. See Stephen J. Patterson, “Jesus Meets Plato: The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas and Middle Platonism,” in *Thomasevangelium: Entstehung, Rezeption, Theologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 181-205.

22. Although Pearson acknowledges the soul’s journey, but he denies that *the Gospel of Thomas* is a gnostic document. Pearson, 266.

23. Antoine Guillaumont, ed. *The Gospel According to Thomas* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1959), 29.

is compared with the soul as the “seed of light” in human beings.²⁴ Alongside the body and soul dualism, gnostic anthropology presents tripartite human classes: spiritual(*pneumatic*), soul(*psychic*), and fleshly(*sarkic*), or also called material(*hylic*).²⁵ While the spiritual human is a gnostic who knows the true God and one’s origin, the fleshly human is ignorant of the true God and forgets one’s origin and divine spark in oneself. The psychic belongs to the middle position between the spiritual and the fleshly.

In the *On the Origin of the World* 117.28-35, the author of this text clearly states this:

Now the first Adam, (Adam) of Light, is spirit-endowed(*pnematikos*) and appeared on the first day. The second Adam is soul-endowed(*psykhikos*) and appeared on the sixth day, which is called Aphrodite. The third Adam is a creature of the earth(*khoikos*), that is, the man of the law, and he appeared on the eighth day [... the] tranquility (*anapausis*) of poverty, which is called Sunday (*hēmera Hēliou*).

The author distinguishes three Adam figures. “All three have indeed originated in succession, but they are united in the one first man; they form the three constituents of every man.”²⁶ Although the psychics seem to have possibilities to be redeemed, strictly “only the pneumatics are gnostics and capable of redemption.”²⁷ Thus, because Adam represents three human classes, “the gnostic sees in Adam his own destiny (fall, knowledge, redemption) anticipated.”²⁸ *The Apocryphon of James* describes the relationship among spirit, soul, and body, saying “For it is the spirit that raises the soul, but the body that kills it” (12.7-9).²⁹

The Apocryphon of John explains how the fall happens and what the human condition is. The true human nature is soul, not body. To understand the human nature properly, one needs to understand the creation of the material world and physical human beings. As I mentioned earlier, soul that has the true human nature comes from the Monad. According to *the Apocryphon of John*, Yaldabaoth, the material god, creates this material world and the human body according to the pattern of the Monad, and imprisons soul into body. In his “Introduction” to *the Apocryphon of John*, Frederik Wisse writes, “Thus begins a continuous struggle between the powers of light and the powers of darkness for the possession of the divine particles in man.”³⁰ The Monad hides Epinoia (the seed of light) in Adam.³¹

24. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. R. McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 88.

25. Rudolph, 91-92.

26. Rudolph, 92.

27. Rudolph, 92.

28. Rudolph, 102.

29. Robinson, 35.

30. Robinson, 104.

31. In the Nag Hammadi Library, Epinoia, Sophia, Pistis, Pistis Sophia, Zoe, Protennoia, and Norea are the different names of the seed of the monad or ‘spark’ of God.

And he sent, through his beneficent Spirit and his great mercy, a helper to Adam, luminous Epinoia which comes out of him, who is called Life. And she assists the whole creature, by toiling with him and by restoring him to his fullness and by teaching him about the descent of his seed (and) by teaching him about the way of ascent, (which is) the way he came down. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam, in order that the archons might not know her, but that the Epinoia might be a correction of the deficiency of the mother. (*The Apocryphon of John* 20.15-29).³²

In the Gnostic system, thus, although the cosmos is evil due to the creation of material gods (Yaldabaoth or demiurge), the human image is positive for those who belong to *pneumatic*, and skeptical for those who are *psychic*, but negative for those who are *sarkic*.

4. The Human Image in the Journey of the Soul

Although human beings consist of the body and soul, the true identity of humans is the soul, not the body. The human body is a tomb for the soul in Gnosticism. Like sun's emanation, the human soul is emanated from the Monad and the layers of emanation are countless. While the emanation of the Monad stops at the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition, the emanation continues to endlessness in the gnostic tradition. Due to this various spiritual levels, the goal of human beings is to cultivate their soul and let their soul return to the true spirit, the Monad, after their bodies perish. *The Hymn of the Pearl* beautifully describes this journey of the soul.³³ It is a "Hellenistic myth of the human soul's entry into bodily incarnation and its eventual disengagement from the body."³⁴ Likewise, *The Exegesis on the Soul* states the journey of the soul "from her fall into the world to her return to heaven."³⁵ Here, the soul is described a female image. After she fell down into the body and came to this earthly life, her life was defiled and abused by many robbers. Throughout the reunion with her brother in the bridal chamber, she can ascend heaven. The text narrates, "Then when she becomes young again she will ascend, praising the father and her brother, by whom she was rescued. Thus it is by being born again that the soul will be saved" (134:26-30).³⁶

5. Conclusion

In the Nag Hammadi library, the human image appears in the various forms. The basic human image is *pneumatic*, *psychic*, and *sarkic*, which emphasizes the soul as the true human nature.

32. Robinson, 116.

33. It does not belong to the Nag Hammadi Library, but its text is attested as a part of *The Acts of Thomas*. See Bentley Layton, ed. *The Gnostic Scriptures: Ancient Wisdom for the New Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 367-69.

34. Layton, 366.

35. Robinson, 192.

36. Robinson, 196.

The body and soul dualism is reflected by the dualistic world view. To find the human image in the Nag Hammadi library, I have tried to define Gnosticism whose core is the notion of the Monad and the journey of the soul. Here, God appears as the Monad that is only 'one' from which every spiritual being originates. In this definition of Gnosticism, the all texts of the Nag Hammadi library belong to Gnosticism. Thus, the library divides humans into three classes. Adam represents these three at the same time. Although Adam was created by the material god, he possessed the spark of the Monad. Based on the journey of the soul, the soul of all three classes begins its travel to the Monad after its outer body perishes. There are many obstacles waiting for the soul during its journey. The only selected soul (pneumatic) who knows gnosis can be saved. Therefore, the human image in the library is ambivalence and paradoxical. On the one hand, the human image is positive because the soul contains the spark of the Monad. On the other hand, the human image is negative or pessimistic because the soul is imprisoned in the body that was created by the material god who confirms humans into the material world. The three classes of human beings indicate that the gnostic human view is elitism that the selected who know gnosis are saved only.

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