The Gnostic World

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Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315561608-4
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Published online on: 11 Oct 2018

How to cite: - Garry W. Trompf. 11 Oct 2018, Gnostics and temporality: from myth to macrohistory from: The Gnostic World Routledge
Accessed on: 12 Apr 2021
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315561608-4

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CHAPTER THREE

GNOSTICS AND TEMPORALITY: FROM MYTH TO MACROHISTORY

Garry W. Trompf

How history is conceived in Gnostic strains of thought is enigmatic. Setting down a narrative order of human events is rarely a key concern of those seeking a deep knowledge of celestial arrangements and the path to the eternally non-contingent. Gnostics’ treatments of what are normally recognizable as historical materials are typically extensions of cosmogonic unfoldings and cosmological outworkings rather than matters of detailed interest and narratological expression for their own sake. The literary and semantic quality of Gnostic approaches to human temporal change, then, almost always enshrouds the past in some mythos or in a cosmically significant, patterned frame in which all ephemerides (the myriad of mere happenings) get bundled and explained within “overarching visions.” This chapter analyzes this general tendency, although it also shows that, over centuries, attention to “received, known history” increases in this trajectory of thought. Despite this slow and special historicizing process, though, the mythic element remains pronounced: it is just that matters of historicity become more addressed and accommodated. Macrohistory, as a heuristic concept, captures the adventurous visioning of the human past as a whole, in god-like panoramic regard or “the mind’s eye,” often including a sense of where humanity is heading (to an imminent End or Transformation, for example, or an “open future,” whether of progress, regress or recurrence) (Trompf 1979a: 71).

Macrohistory is the term that can best cover how human affairs are synoptically conceived by relevant parties, from Antiquity’s Gnostic myths – otherwise called cosmo- or myth-histories, or mythical narrations (Heehs 1994; Perkins 1993: 14–15) – to the time when a modern Gnostical thinker, such as Rudolf Steiner, can be rated among macrohistorians, or exponents of “big history” like Gibbon, Spengler, and Toynbee (Scharmer 1997: 90–7). “Gnostic,” for its part, is accepted as a generic term used today (yet with roots in ancient appellations) that covers a persisting temper of thought and “ways to immortality” introduced in the previous chapters. Already incipient as far back as the Upanishads and pre-Socratic Orphism, it has received modern rehabilitations, most strikingly through The Theosophical Society (cf. Casadio 1993; Quispel 1996).
THE GNOSTIC MYTH

In what can serve here as a key signpost, one mythic structure most characterizes Gnostic approaches to human events: that of cosmic descent and then (re-)ascent. The universe issues from the Divine (typically a One or Father), and in stages of emanation from higher to lower cosmic states of being, the material world is formed, and, as refractions of the heavenly Source, human beings (or at least some of them) are capable of ascending and returning to their true Home. This we name the primary Gnostic Myth; it is shared by a number of schools of thought in Antiquity (including Platonism and Hermetism). With “classic” (most often Christianizing) Gnostic speculation from the second century CE it comes with recognizable distinctness. Humans need to be saved by a Redeemer out of the world of matter and physical corporeality, brought about by a “cosmic mistake” in the lower heavens by a demiurgic figure, a false deity responsible for creating a bad world (often identified as the God of the Jews). Jesus/Christ/Son is almost invariably the necessary savior, descending from the hidden, highest Being, bypassing and thwarting threats of heavenly powers potentially inimical to humans’ Return-to-the-Source, and teaching them on earth the path of escape. Gnostic soteriology is thus mostly a saving from an “alien cosmos” and, if saving from sin is admitted (as in Valentinianism), it is from the sin of willful ignorance about the human condition (e.g., Desjardins 1990: 131; Havrda 2007). In that at least select humans are the farthest extensions of a divine unfolding (through increasingly lesser aeonic emanations), and retain a divine spark against the wishes of a baleful Artificer (Christie-Murray 1989: 21–2), they are souls which have descended from above and are capable of reascending, unless they have become completely trapped in materiality (e.g., Hypostases of the Archons [NHC = Nag Hammadi Codices II.4], 94–7). The redeemer mythos fulfills and eases what is already potential or forgotten in each psychē, unfortunately cast out into cosmic dis-location, and thus salvific action reintegrates the soul into the divine process.

Because celestial events are disturbed by temporal contingencies in classic Gnostic views (those rebutted in Patristic writing as heresy and those dominant in NHC), the motion of “issuing out” and “returning to” forms a broken circle, marred by changeability as well as materiality, and an “overwhelming of souls for a time” before their reascent, in Macrobius’s terms (Commentarium in Somnium Scipionis 1.12.17). What results from the time-lapse between eternity and recovered everlastingness is best encapsulated as a cosmic “U-curve” (Trompf 2013: 388): the temporal gap provides the space in which narrating the human predicament can occur, indeed potentially the filling out of a history. In the classic Gnostic case, mind you, this is an awful space – initiates are “acosmic” or radically “anti-cosmic” (Jonas 1963: 264–5; Tröger 1981: 88) in rejecting this evil realm of the soul’s bodily entombment (Bianchi 1982: 228) and in realizing not all can escape – and yet the alien condition necessarily has to be addressed.

Now, one should not forget that “mental toolkits” for handling such terrestrial events were already (relatively) accessible. If diverse, one may summarily list a relevant pre-existing repertory thus:

- Historia as the kind of historiographical writing we find in classical Hebrew and Graeco-Roman literature (e.g., the Deuteronomists or Herodotus), which can claim its own “light of truth” (Livy, Ab urbe condita 1.prolog.10).
Platonism (with certain Orphic and Pythagorean frames affecting it), including ideas of the demiourgos bridging the ideal and made worlds but not overcoming “primeval matter-connected evils” (*Timaeus* 41A-42D; *Political* 273B), of the soul falling from the highest heavens (*Phaedrus* 245C-246E), of unforgetting one’s divine origins and “returning back to the original” (*Phaedo* 71B-72C), reincarnation of the worthy (69B; Gorgias 523A), and Middle Platonic visions of general cosmic emanation, descent and return to the Divine Source, but with no redeemer-figure involved (e.g., Numenius and Cronius apud Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum* 22–28; Alcinous, *Epitome doctrinae Platonicae*) (Plotinus being strong on cosmic descent but weaker on ascent, through stressing a never-changing World-Soul). Cf. Manilius, *Astronomica* 2: 107–8 for related astrological ideas, some also in Mithraism (Ulansey 1989: 60–3).

Alexandrian Hermetism, itself a Gnosis, perhaps with Jewish mystical touches, in which primordial, “mythic” Man has presence in all earthly humans, as key to their Return (*Poimandres* 12–16, 24–6; cf. Holzhausen 1994), with sadness that the world and “heaven’s image” shown in Egypt is expiring (after “millions of years”), yet hope in a cosmic restoration (*Asclepius* 25–6).

Zoroastrianism, in which (over twelve successive Ages of equal length, or three greater cosmic Ages), Good and Evil (or the two great spirits Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu) battle for supremacy over the cosmos, again with a Primal Man (*Gayomard*), who has to be sacrificed to make the creation of all humans possible, these being challenged to choose right over bad. The cosmic process is moving toward resolution in Good’s favor, to be heralded by the coming of a spiritual savior (*Sayoshant*) (esp. [Greater] *Bundahishn* 1, 3–4, 30, 34 [a late-dated text usually held to hold archaic materials, Boyce 1989: 285–7]) [See also ch. 23.].

Jewish speculative and apocalyptic beliefs, with the roles of such key Genesis figures as Adam, his son Seth (who makes up for Cain’s evil), Enoch (who can visit different heavens), and Shem (Noah’s blessed son) taken to foreshadow spiritual election, as all divinely ordered “human generations” pass toward Judgement (*Jubilees* 4:20, 24b; *4 Ezra* 5:41–2), a time of cosmic crisis needing the ultimate Redeemer (e.g., *Dan* 7:13) from “the Lord over all the Ages” and all heaven-recorded human labor (*1* *Enoch* 9:4; *3* *Enoch* 45:1–2). In Zoroastrianism and Judaism climactic rewards to the righteous and punishments to evildoers were commonly projected, and in these together with Hellenistic philosophy and historiography divine Providence was upheld (Trompf 1979b: 92–111, 116–18, 165–96).

The recognizable classic Gnostic response to temporality is to mythologize it, so that it falls subservient to “a cosmic framing,” or stands as a mere appendage to a cosmo-history of emanations, or as the terrestrial setting in which the story of cosmic power relations is taught (usually by Jesus). If we use the NHCs as indicative, Biblical material is embraced, but the overwhelming concentration is on the primal family, especially Adam and Eve and their third son Seth, and on the consummating event of Christ’s Coming. Adam and Eve, expectedly, can be contemplated in their ideal spiritual existence, escaping the contamination befalling the earthly couple from evil principalities (*NHC* V.5; cf. Tardieu 1974: 100–22). In between Adam and Christ, figures of the Flood Noah and Shem get some treatment, with light touches
of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses, and Solomon, and barely anything on David and the prophets, though “at the other end of the story” come varied details of (extra-canonical) interactions between Jesus and his disciples, most noticeably Peter, Mary the Mother, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, John, and Judas, and almost always after the Resurrection (cf. Acts 1:3). It is not as if there is a mixture of mythos and concern for historical detail, as in the New Testament. (Ponder the high Christology of Paul in Col 1:15–2:23 yet his genuine interest in historical details in Gal 2:4, or of the Evangelist John’s Prologue and yet his narratives with geographical accuracy.) It almost always happens with the Gnostics’ Jesus that he acts as “the climax of a play” or some drama in which the personae are never convincingly “historistic” (Barrett 1972: 67), and other Biblical protagonists are uniformly archetypal.

Different explanations are given for these proclivities – that for Gnostics “ordinary history” was a pseudos, a bearer of falsehood concerned with mutability (e.g., Puech 1951: 76–113); that Gnostics rewrote Bible beginnings and its Christic highpoint while taking the account of Jewish affairs in between as about a people serving the evil Demiurge (e.g., Bayme 1997: 122); or that Gnostics concentrated on overcoming the imagined “continually present predicament” because Biblical eschatological dreams disappointed and the Parousia (Christ’s Second Coming in glory) did not transpire (e.g., Faessel 2006: 27). However, since degrees of attention and diverse conceptual approaches to time by classic (mainly Christian) Gnostics make these generalities too simple, alternative factors have to be considered. As insisted earlier, classic “Gnosticism” is but one Hellenistic grouping of belief and ritual concerned with the “journey of the soul [back] to heaven” (Bousset 1901; Colpe 1967), and in working out their positions beside Hermetists, Platonists, astrological magicians, even possibly Alexandrian theologians, and partly adapting their outlooks to them, Gnostics chose a Biblical-affected path ostensibly to be recognized by other camps more as Christians than not (Culianu 1983: 5–15; Tervahauta 2015: 177–99). In my own long-argued view, Gnostic approaches to history are “unacculturated,” and earthly events sit squashed as in a retracted telescope between a Primordium (to all intents and purposes enshrouding everything from “just back around the corner” in time) and the recent coming of the Redeemer. Outside Jewry, history (as against mythology and poetry) was not a school subject among Gentile elites, and Hellenistic responses to the Christian message could not be expected to involve the ready imbibing of “Jewish historical baggage” – the product of an alien, if still attractively mysterious “tribe.” Against this difficulty, and in accepting Scriptural continuity from the Old Testament into the New, from nomad Abram to voyaging “apostle” Paul in Rome, the “normative Christians” became “the evangelists of history,” beginning a crucial cross-cultural shift in the collective consciousness of positive human temporality, not only being evangelizers of Christ’s salvific role (Trompf 1989: 644–8). But it would be hard to imagine all early Hellenistic Christianities as capable of avoiding the pressure of mythicizing attitudes, or resisting popular ways of philosophizing that had no use of detailing or celebrating culturally irrelevant events.

Insofar as Gnosticizing writers faced up to the historical emphasis in the Bible their manner was very schematic. Biblical characters after Moses are treated as markers. “The righteous ones and prophets” of “the Hebrew race,” according to The Tripartite Tractate (TT [by Heracleon?]), avoided the misguided Demiurge’s “Law” and spoke “each one by the power at work within him,” sometimes “as if” through the Savior
Himself (NHC I.5.111, 113, cf. 105, 113.5); while Irenaeus informs us that for the Ophites and/or Sethians specific prophets worked by the power of specified principalities – Moses, Amos and Habakkuk from Ialdabaoth, Samuel and Micah from Iao, etc. – the contents of their messages being unimportant (Adversus haereses 1.30.11). Even when Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, Isaiah, the Psalms, and Paul are quoted in The Exegesis of the Soul it is more for oracular effect beside Homer’s Odyssey (NHC III.6) in a text not convincingly Christian anyway. A rarity has a skeleton of Israel’s history offered (Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, the prophets, with Moses (misplaced) and John the Baptist) (Second Treatise of the Great Seth [NHC VII.2.62–64]) but only that. With Sethianism (see ch. 11) some Age-like periodization appears, for we learn of “three missions” of the divine Barbelo to enlighten Adam, impart the saving seed to Seth so as to help Noah during the Flood, and then send the resurrected Christ to explain such significant macrohistorical shifts for a new time to come (Apocryphon of John [II.1] 20–31). But on further stupendous events (even “kingdoms”) allusively covered in related texts, such as The Apocalypse of Adam and The Gospel of the Egyptians, one can never be convinced that they are terrestrial; their unfolding over “thousands of years” seem more supernal, including the Flood and Sodonic Conflagration, as if what is worked out among the aeons (in thirteen heavens) affects happenings on earth (NHC V.5.70–82; III.2.56–65, esp. 56.10–25; cf. Turner 2001: 93–6; cf. ch. 10).

When we find talk then of the Valentinian “theology of history” (Marrou 1967), or Sethian “salvation history” (Stroumsa 1984: 81–103), or that TT presents a “grandiose concept of world history” (Quiispel 1992: 4), this could be misleading if it is not clarified that in classic Gnostic texts what we are calling cosmo-history, or the narrative of the mythic Urzeit (very affected by Jewish Genesis traditions) and of the heavenly Redeemer, simply dominates (reflect on Evans, Webb, and Wiebe 1993). The Christ, who most often avoids embodiment (e.g., Gilhus 1985), explains why the world is evil (a concern shared early with Marcionism), how it is affected by “sympathetic forces” (see Knox 1961: 46–54, 61–5), and how the soul can escape the cosmic predicament.

THE INCIPIENCE AND EMERGENCE OF GNOSTIC MACROHISTORY

Signs of “more rootedness in historical reality,” and also hopes of a future apocalyptic dénouement on earth, only come through greater seepage from (or accepting of) more standard, less mythicized human happenings in the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. Some interesting shifts occur with the Mandaeans. Certainly they teach an elaborate cosmo-history of emanations (esp. Ginza Rba GY III [Lidzbarski 66–70]), and distinguish strongly (as do various NHC texts) between the primal heavenly Adam (Adam Kasia) and the earthly one (Adam Pagria), the latter being partly put together by the demiurgic Ptahil. However, they make more of Biblical and wider human affairs, their “macrohistory” filling out new narrative details – of Shitil (Seth), the first human to die and go to heaven; Shem bravely holding on outside the floating Ark; Abraham unfortunately self-circumcising because of leprosy; the Nasoraian Mandaeans helping and dying for the Pharaoh against Moses at the Red Sea; John the Baptist’s really broken relations with Jesus; the faithful fleeing Judea at the time of the Jewish
War; etc. Indeed, the Mandaeans’ intriguing Rivers Scroll (Diwan Nahrawata) offers a great pictograph of the cosmic Jordan (Yardna) running from the celestial Light-worlds and then separating out into streams that run to named nations of the earth. And while some attention is paid to astro-zodiacal influences, greater focus falls on long drawn-out Ages, punctuated by four great catastrophes of sword, fire, flood, and (in the future) air, the first coming 216,000 years after Creation, for example, with 100,000 years between fire and deluge (Nasoraia and Trompf 2010–11: 399–423).

If matter is looked on negatively, as in most other early “Gnosticisms,” Living Water is the saving element in the universe, circulating Life for souls between heaven and earth through regular baptizing (this still surviving Gnostic tradition extolling John the Baptist) (see ch. 16). Such inter-connectedness by water persuaded Kurt Rudolph (1978) that Gnostic systems reflect a cyclic framing akin to our formulation of the U-curve, for apart from the varying fate of souls down here the whole material order eventually draws back into the divine.

Such circulation is also suggested in Gnostic systems accepting metempsychosis (e.g., Epiphanius, Panarion 26.1–10; NHC II.1.26; VIII.1.45–6). Mandaeism, however, denies reincarnation and also teaches an eschatology, a sliding into corruption and disorder akin to Jewish-Christian apocalyptic visions, a 50,000-year earthly reign under their Gabriel-figure ending with the Dark triumphant and only Nasoreans surviving (esp. Harran Gawaita [Drower], [pp.] 14–21). As the End was delayed, the long listing of past kings (especially Persian) was apparently injected (into Ginza Rba XVIII, reflecting Zoroastrian and Christian apocalyptic sources) to accommodate maturing historical perspectives and the seventh-century Islamic eruption (cf. Shapira 2010).

By comparison with Mandaeism, the cosmogonies and macrohistory of the Manichaean was initially more Zoroastrian-influenced, their Endzeit pictures looking to the overcoming of the “False Mithra,” victory for the Manichaean righteous, the coming of the “Great King,” and the Last Judgement to separate “the sheep from the goats” (esp. Coptic Homilies [Polotsky] 28; with Widengren 1965: 66–7). The Manichaean view of cosmic unfolding, admittedly, is enshrouded in the myth of cosmic sacrifice, with the Primal Man (the eternal Christ) prepared to bridge the chasm between Light and Dark, giving Himself to allow for the ascent of souls and holding the universe from falling into evil until the final resolution (esp. Mani, Psalm 219; Kephalaia 7; Theodore bar Konai, Liber Scholiorum [Scher, pt. 1] [pp.] 235–41). This relates back to Zurvanist, even Mazdaist ideas of primordial sacrifice before Creation can occur (Eznik of Kolb, Refutationes 2.1; cf. Bundahishn 4.20) as well as to three great Moments of separateness, intermingling, and the return of separation between Light and Darkness, with a final victory for Ahura Mazda in the battle against Angra Mainyu (e.g., Bundahishn 1.29; Zatspram 34.52). Mani talked of Three Great Days of “Beginning, Mixture, and End” (apud Augustine, Contra Felicem Manichaem 1.6), stressing final victory. The great Satan-figure looming in Manichaean texts mirrors the dual cosmic conflict in Zoroastrianism, whereas in classic Gnosticism the Devil (Satan, Samael, etc.) can be muted among other aeons. Yet Manichaism is more Jewish/Christian than Zoroastrian for expecting an imminent End, while in standard Zoroastrianism the cosmic consummation is put afar off (Schweizer 1956: 485–501; against Cohn 2001: 96–9, 102–4).

Manichaean’s definitely paid attention to terrestrial events, as in writing on Mani’s and his disciplets’ missions (Cologne Mani Codex [Koenen and Römer], pp. 107–91),
but most famously on a succession of “God’s Apostles” in various lands. Allegedly incarnating Persia’s Zoroaster, the Buddha in India, and Jesus, Mani then taught self-professedly as the promised Paraclete (esp. *Shabuhragan* apud Al-Biruni, *Chronologia* 8; *Keph.* 1; cf. Jn. 14:16). This model perhaps derives from Mani’s background among the Jewish-Christian Elchasites, who had Christ taking human form whenever he wished (“Hippolytus,” *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 10.29; cf. pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 3.20). Serious usage of Jewish story materials, though, relates to Genesis, Mani’s *Book of Giants*, possibly based on access to 1 Enoch, apparently explaining the entrance to devils on earth (cf. Gen. 6:4). For Mani Jewish history was that of a devil-god, and even the prophets are all devils (Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai* 12; Al-Nadim, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* [970s] 9.1). To call all this a “world history,” mind you (Jonas 1963: 226–31), is misleading. If obviously “macro,” the unfolding drama is highly “mythopoeic” and tied into an idiosyncratically conceived (“esoteric”) cosmologic process (cf. Luttikhuizen 1997: 96–9), and into the “history of the [collective] living-soul” (Gardner 2010: 334) through which “the Elect” can be saved, the “Soldiers” helping the Elect have to reincarnate continually, and “the Sinners” are doomed to Hell (Mani, *Book of Mysteries* 2–5 apud Al-Nadim, *Fihrist* 9.1). If Bardesanes allegedly influenced the Manichaeans, when he calculated 6,000 years of world history and planetary movement (*Coniunctiones astrorum* [Patrologia Syriaca vol. 2, cols. 611–15], he was more recognizably historicizing than Mani, indeed useful to orthodox Christians for framing all human affairs within a Great Week, with each Day a millennium (Trompf 1979b: 207–11; cf. 2 Pet 3:8; with [pseudo-]Barnabas, *Epistolae* 15.3–80).

The central difference between these highly distinctive Gnostic forms of macrohistory and those emergent within settling trajectories of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is that these latter accepted and defended the definite goodness of God’s (initial) Creation (*Bund*. 2–3; Gen 1:31; Jn 1:3–4; Qur’an 32:7–8) despite earthly vicissitudes and human weakness. Adopting Platonic and Hermetic conceits in these traditions was admissible because the problems of the material universe were read as more to do with mutability and irregularity than any intrinsic evil, and Middle Platonists took the descent of souls in the world very positively (e.g., Festugière 1949: 125–6; Turner 2001: 454–8). When Origen presented the first Christian systematic theology (ca. 230), all immortal souls pre-exist the wonder of Creation, suffer from the Fall, and are offered redemption though the Incarnation, but can require purging by rebirth into many worlds (not the same one as this) until the final Restoration and Return into God (*De Principiis* 1.6.2–5; 2.3.5; 3.1.23–4, 6.1–9). Under this vision of an “overall progress,” even the Devil can ultimately be saved (3.6.6), parallel to a Gnostic motif of Sophia or the Mandaean Queen of Darkness, Rua, being “rehabilitated” (*Pistis Sophia* 2.74–6; *Ginza* V–VI). But of course Origen is renowned for his acceptance of the whole Bible, for accepting the continuity of the Old and New Testament God in his commentaries, and for learned treatment of historical issues (e.g., *Contra Celsum* 1.16–29; *Commentarius in Matthaeum* 10.7). History is telescoped out fully, not just wrapped within a mythic envelope. The great Mosaic legislation is placed long before Plato, with very ancient events recountable through the help of the Jews Josephus and Philo Alexandrinus (e.g., *Vita Mosis*).

In the Jewish-Christian-Islamic trajectory from then on, harboring as it has developing Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and Theosophic speculation to our own time, the
“acosmic” Weltanschauungen withered, kept alive mainly in Manichaean quarters (pace Indic doctrines of the visible world as māyā). When dealing with most post-Antique Gnostic cosmo- and macro-historical envisionings, significantly, they accept “moments of descent from above” as necessary materialization, thereby creating the possibility of a readier ascent back to the Divine rather than cosmic imprisoning. Where we find U-curve models reminiscent of classic Gnosticism still reappearing they will now be accompanied by doctrines of Ages and/or a greater sense of time depth, but not entrapment in cosmic cycles (as, e.g., in Plotinus, Ennead 4.9, or Indic karmic processes).

Jewish Kabbalah, which has ancient roots in merkabah speculation about the celestial Adam, is “pro-cosmos.” The Sefer Yeẓirah introduces famous “paths” of Creation (Sefirot, or ten emanatory “Utterances out of Nothing”), and concentrates on Adam Kadmon (Gen 1:26), the first (and anthropomorphic) emission of the Divine Light (Ein Sof). He is the “Crown” and “Plan” behind the cosmo-historical Four Worlds making for Creation and the persisting ideal of human reunification with God (see chs. 34, 39). Yet if it was disputed whether each heavenly “issuing” (hamshakhah) involved time, discussion of temporalsequence in the created material order naturally arose (with Malkhut, “Queen/Mother of Creation” or Shekhinah, a “good-Sophia equivalent” as lowest in the Sefirot, mediating between heaven and earth).

At what ever point it had formulation (probably in early medieval times), Kabbalistic teaching of great Ages (behind Sefer ha-Temunah [ca. 1250]) went way beyond the idea of a Great Week (as in Rav Catina, [Babylonian Talmud] Sanhedrin 97a) into 7,000-year great cycles (based on the planetary Great Year) that would end after 49,000 years in an eschatological Great Jubilee. Each cycle was under the influence of a relevant Sefirah, each ended in a return to chaos (before re-creation), each decreased in length or numerical weight as if the whole process needed final messianic intervention, and in each reincarnations (gilgul) occurred to purify for sin over specified periods (mostly three generations) (see esp. Scholem 1974: 23–7, 43, 120–2, 343–7, 365–81). The archangel Metatron, originally connected with Enoch’s translation to heaven (Gen 5: 24), and sometimes seen as a lesser YHWH (3 Enoch [ca. 500 CE] 4; 16; 18), monitors all space and time. Greek-philosophical “eternity of the world” is denied, but what we call a Gnostic “tendency to near-eternalize time” applies, if always as a poor inferior to the real Everlasting, by whom “no one is cast off forever” and all earthly defilement and punishment will finally end (Lam 3:31; 1 Enoch 10:22).

Islam, from its very beginning, reflects signs of residual Gnostic macro-historical touches. Historical materials in the Qur’an look rather unacculturated, with most narratives from the first two books of the Bible (Taurat) and the Gospels (Injil). The model of a list of prophet figures, though more probably inspired by the Samaritan “chain” (shalshaloth) of holy luminaries from Adam to Aaron’s priestly descendants Eleazar and Phinehas (Memar Marqah [ca. 370s] 1.9), could also have been affected by Manichaean ideas of a lineaged “prophetic succession” and of such ancient teachers of truth as Hermes and Plato (see Ephrem Syriis, Prose Refutations [Mitchell] 2.208–209, with Reeves 1996: 11–17; cf. ch. 28). This manner of signposting the past had its highpoint in the studied listing of prophets (25 main, 124,000 possible), heralding increasing interest in long-term history among Islamic scholars, but it is our purpose here to introduce forms of distinctly Gnostic macrohistory in the Muslim ambience, and these are found above all in Shi’a thought, and from its allowances to Zoroastrian, Hermetic, Platonic, and Illuminist impetuses.
Henri Corbin (1964: 40–109) has rightly described Shi‘ite concern for the succession of mystical imams after Muhammad as a “meta- or para-history” of imaginal hierognosis, considered much truer than ordinary recordings of human events (see also ch. 29). But this imamological succession also sits within a wider framework of “prophetic gnoseology,” accepting many standard prophets (nabīs), yet honoring only six as teaching a new law (sharī‘at) (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad), each of whom mark a separate cycle, with all six sealed through a superior legislative cycle by Muhammad. Yet now the truly universal but esoteric period of prophecy or sanctity (walāyat) has unrolled: the Imamate (in the dominant school the Twelve Imams) becomes the plērōma, its universal seal being the Shi‘as’ first Imam ‘Ali (Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law) and its particular Muslim seal being the last Imam al-Mahdī, through whom the final Imam will come and the end of the current cycle will be announced, with everything and all (believers’) souls then returning to their Beginning in Allah (Ya‘qub al-Kulayni, Kitāb al-Kāfī [920s], with Corbin, e.g., 1966: 382–7).

This quest for a theosophy, or divine wisdom (hikmat ilāhiyya) and gnosis (‘irfān, haqīqat) expressed macro- and hiero-historically or as so-called “historiosophy,” reappears strongly in Batiniyyah “heretical” groups triggered by the unprecedented Shi‘ite Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt under al-Hākim (996–1021). In Isma‘ilism (ca. 813–), the modeling is basically oscillatory, great cycles of epiphany (“day”) and occultation (“night”) negating each other in turn, each with sevenfold divisions marked by altered planetary configurations over 360,000 years. Every major cycle starts with “a partial Adam,” and experiences a guiding Imam and associates (expressing divine individuality on earth and angelic help). Our present cycle, that of the “historical” Adam, is of “total night” (with corruption, fornication, terrible ignorance). It faces untold catastrophes and the last revolt of Iblis (the Devil), who, most like a Zurvanist Ahriman, had disturbed the original cosmogonic flow (ch. 23). The cycle is helped by six prophets: the five standard ones listed above, plus al-Hākim, with the Imam-to-Come presaging the “total day” of eschatological epiphany. Muhammad knew this esoteric meaning of the Qur’anic revelation through Salman the Persian (cf. Qur. 62:2). Souls, necessarily descending (“falling”) into materiality, need nature and history as mirrors for accessing beauty and moral perfection, in a cosmic process that is overall a “progress,” overcoming retardations, and reverting at the last to origins in the Divine (Idris ‘Immādaddin, Zahr al-Ma‘ānī, 4, 7–8, 10–13, with Corbin 1951: 165–74, 183–221; Abu’l Jorjani [990s], with Corbin and Mo’in 1955: 61–3, 74–83, 87–8, 102–12; cf. ch. 31). In Nizari (and Khoja) Isma‘ilism long lists of the Imams (the Aga Khans) and their ongoing significances are cherished (e.g., Ginans [Dossa] 1, 4–6, 9), the Khojas viewing (from Qur. 2:28) the Aga Khan as the visible divine “successor” on earth (Trompf 1980: 8–10). Consequently, the End is left “delayed.”

For the Druze (not strictly Islamic) case (1017–), we also find alternations between Light and Shadow, septenary stages, and talk of the five Hudūd (divine principles also appointed as personal guides through the whole system from the beginning of Creation), with key prophets and their foundations in the last septenary cycle – Adam-Seth, Noah-Shem, Abraham-Ishmael, Moses-Aaron, Jesus-Simon, Muhammad-‘Ali – consummated by the Fatimid Imamate and by founder-leader of the Druze Hamza ibn ‘Ali. The time of al-Hākim was the last station (maqām), in which the
Gnosis of the Islamic message was realized. Yet the stress is on the huge length of the macrohistorical system, with seven grand aeonic cycles (adwār), each made up of 4,900,000 years in a total of 343,000,000 years, prefaced by a cosmic emanatory process (Divine Intellect, All-inclusive Soul, Word, Precedent, and Follower), issuing from the utterly indescribable divine One (see ch. 32, with Trompf and Kasamanie 1981: 189–93). In every grand cycle (“globe”), separated by cosmic dissolution, the first stage is spiritually idyllic and longer, while the last one of crisis is shorter, with enough time allowed for the soul’s choices through reincarnation. According to the Druze view, history is the playground of Providence and Fate. There is overall deterioration portending a cataclysmic End (but not a convincingly final one!) (Hamza ibn-'Ali, Rasā’il al-Hikma, esp. 12–14 [1017–1020], with De Smet 2007: 60–7). The Druze notion of al-Qiyāma is a final reintegration of our world into its primordial pattern. Pythagorean, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Hermetic influences are strong, and the cyclical trajectory from best to worst and back to best may reflect acquaintance with the Indic yuga pattern (idyllic Krta Yuga to evil Kali Yuga and back, as in the Mahābhārata 3.312), given Druze epistles to India now being translated.

Other non-standard macrohistorical visions reflect significant propensities. Isma’ili-affected Persian encyclopedist Abū Hātim ar-Rāżī sought to accommodate Zoroastrian age theory into his vision of a grand cosmic cycle (dauw’at a’zamān), with descent by cosmic devolution (including a cosmic Adam) to terrestrial back up through periodic resurrections in angelic orders in seven stages (Kitāb Alām al-Nubuwwa [Al-Sawī and A’vānī], 1.3–6). Martyred Persian Sufi and founder-Illuminist Suhrawardī was bent on demonstrating that eternal truth always existed among followers of all revealed religions, radiated through angels like stars in the night sky, and was known deeply among hakīms (Masters of Gnosis). For him access to Divine Wisdom (al-ḥikmat al-laduniyyah) was first disclosed through Enoch/Idris (Gen 5: 24; Qur. 19: 56–7), identified with Hermes, and kept in two lines of transmission, one Greco-Egyptian, stronger in alchemy, the other Persian (involving Zoroaster), stronger astrologically and revived by Suhrawardī’s Ishrāqī teaching (Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq [1113]; cf. also Anon., Chrysia epē; Ibn al-Sīd, Kitab al-Ḥadāʾiq; Ibn Sinā, Daneshnāma-i ‘ala’i 1; Ibn al-'Arabī, Fusūs al-Ḥikām). As a means of rooting this mysticism in Islam, there was a common Sufi acknowledgement that Muhammad, as the Ideal Man (Al-insan al-kamil), came at the worst time in history, to the most ignorant and wicked people, the Arabs, bringing through them the “Heavenly Light” to engender “the most God-fearing divine lovers the world has ever seen” (Sufi Raushan Ali 1925: 136–7).

More eclectically, in Kurdish Yezidism (and related minorities) we find the pattern of paradoxical care for the Fallen Angel (the Yezidi Peacock Angel or Malak Tawus). Though looking homologous with Satan and the Zoroastrian Ahriman, when falling with Adam and Eve out of heavenly Paradise for not obeying the divine request to worship Adam (cf. as background, Vita Adae et Evae 12–17; NHC IX.1; Qur. 7; 11–14), Malak Tawus actually showed pure monotheism for his refusal and was reinstated as head of his angelic heptad (Açıkyıldız 2014: 15). Claiming to worship one God, the Yezidis take the Peacock Angel to make re-unity with the Divine possible and reincarnation avoidable. His original descent marks a golden age, with our cosmos forming when Malak Tawus sent divine emissaries upwards to create the sun and moon, etc. He ordained 7,000-year-long “vessels” (one involving a prior Flood), and in this our present, fifth Age, the worst one, minor deities/angels/kings established seven millennia
(the last with his chosen people, the Kurds, being given their language before Malak Tawas returns, openly reinstated by God as victor after millennia of Hell’s threats) (*Misqafl i Resh*; with ch. 33). The Yezidis believe they originate from Adam (not Eve!), through Enoch and Noah, while other Middle Eastern ethno-religious minorities have their own unusual lineages: the Shabak and Ahl-e Haqq both honoring ‘Ali for earlier incarnating as Adam, Jesus, and Muhammad, and further on, Babists (precursory to Bahaiism) holding the cycles of time to close off the “Islamic dispensation” for a totally new *Endzeit* (*‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi, Bayán [1847]*).

**MODERN DEVELOPMENTS**

If in the Islamic and Byzantine worlds reflection on such interesting frameworks still remains alive in gnoseology or soph[i]ology (chs. 37, 38), it becoming a gnōsis in Orthodoxy (*via* Maximus the Confessor) that all human history incarnates the Logos, we can barely talk of an attested “Gnostic macrohistory” in the West until the Theosophical Society (TS). Relevant components were admittedly present. We find the descent and ascent of souls, the principle of divine procession (*exitus*), creation (*natura*), and return of all to God (*reditus*), especially in Hermetic and Platonic lines of thought, but usually the envisioning is of the broadest cosmo-history (not terrestrial event-patterns), or else (as with Bogomilism) of great events transpiring in heaven (ch. 35). Early moderns posited lineages of shared universal wisdom (of *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*), from ancient sources like antediluvian Enoch and Egypt, or Noah. Note also Trinitarian or three-staged visions of cosmic unfolding affected by Kabbalah followed by three-staged human history à la medieval Cistercian Gioacchino di Fiore, as in Jacob Boehme’s *Sechs mystische Puncte* (1620); and we see various other theories of great Ages. Yet since, even if ideas of Gnosis or deep Wisdom occur, Western expositors deploying these motifs typically dissociate themselves from (“heretical”) Gnostic thought, it is better to refer to them as esoteric or (lower-case theosophic) macrohistories, certainly within Occidental Christian thought-modes, even including Christian Kabbalism (see Trompf 2005: 707–13, with ch. 39). Exceptions aside (e.g., Lurianic-Kabbalist impacts in the West [chs. 34, 39] or such Masons as De Pasqually [ch. 40]), the turning point comes with the modern (upper-case) Theosophy, after which some of those who kept sustaining earlier esoteric frames of synoptic history (Rosicrucians, Martinists, etc.) could re-read them inter alia as “Gnostic.”

We owe to Ukraino-Russian Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of the TS (1875–), the fundamental texts of modern Gnostic macrohistory: *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). While conceding secret societies had plotted lines of transmitted wisdom (e.g., Freemasonry on the Buddha as first known “Masonic legislator” and on successive groups of Initiates into the Mysteries [Pike 1871: 277, 379–90]), Blavatsky arresting detailed a lineage of confraternities that kept multi-millennia-old Gnostic truths alive, from India’s ancient *risbis* through Hermetists, Zoroastrians, Orphics, to Essenes, Gnostics, the (Mandaean) “Nazarenes,” Origen, Plotinus, Kabbalists, Sufis, the Druze, on to Boehme, Giordano Bruno, even Emanuel Swedenborg (see previous ch. 2). She also left one the grandest European visions of “the spiritual evolution of the world proceeding in cycles, like the physical one.” There was “a regular alternation of ebb and flow” over huge aeons in the overall length of 4,320 million years (*Isis*, vol. 1, pp. 30–5), surpassing figures of the Druze – with whom she outrageously
claimed membership (Letter 110 [Algeo]). The general framework seemed confirmed by myths about great time-passages taught around the globe, in the Golden-to-Iron Ages of Greece (taken seriously), the Egyptian nero, and also prior worlds told of in Popul Vuh, a by-then better understood Mayan text. Blavatsky’s extravagantly high numbers, however, clearly derived from new researches into the Indian kalpas (aeons), and, joining the current “Indo-mania,” she sought to “trace” virtually “every ancient religion to India” (Letter 71) and detect vestiges of very ancient civilizations so far back in time as to embarrass the newly popular Darwinists (Trompf 1998: 270–6).

Blavatsky hated modern materialistic evolutionists for causing a massive spiritual crisis in her time, and it was a claim of The Secret Doctrine that she could confute their myopia through a long-lost “akashic” text. The alternative vision in this second master-work, diverging from Isis, answers pressures to systematize the TS cosmological position by competitor Alfred Sinnett in The Mahatma Letters (1880–1884), where he expounded the idea of huge Buddhist-looking and seemingly endless undulating cycles (though still giving them such Hindu names as manvantaras and yugas). The essence of Blavatsky’s finally disclosed “Gnosis” was that, while material life very slowly progressed, from stones to higher organisms, humanity devolved from the highest ethereal planes, inhabiting increasingly solid bodies toward necessary materialization, before the meeting of higher and lower-natural evolutionary processes produced the bodily outcome seen thriving in us today. In the “globe” pertaining to our world (a Druze feature), the cosmic Descent involved a vastly long proto-history of higher (although increasingly more problematic) civilizations – of “great pitris,” Hyperboreans, Lemurians, and Atlanteans, and their “Root Races” – to our current state, which is preliminary to a returning Ascent. That the TS had access to a true spiritual science was legitimated by the newly accessible translation of the Ethiopic Enoch, accepted as indicative of antediluvian truth and foresight (e.g., [1] Enoch [Laurence 1883] 3–6). Within the whole cosmic process souls were tested by reincarnations, Spirit “Masters” moving through the course of things as guides (a Druze motif) to facilitate nirvanic escapes from the rounds and re-absorption into the “Over-Soul.” In our time the Fifth Root Race prevails, remnants of the Fourth survive (as “primitives”), with signs of a more highly spiritual Sixth emerging (marked by the Aryan superiority, and the prospect of a “messianic” Maitreya-figure, identified as young Krishnamurti after Blavatsky’s death). The cycling always winds back, as in a U-curve, to the Absolute, but like Vishnu’s mighty ex- and inhaling apparently goes on forever (Trompf 2013: 383–90; French 2000: 192–235; with ch. 44).

Apart from shifts of relevant viewpoints in the long-term history of the TS itself, macrohistories in breakaway movements and thinkers require recognition. Most famously, Austrian Rudolf Steiner, founder of Anthroposophy (1923–), accepted the basic “Akashic” macrohistory, but reacted against the favoring of Buddhism (in its TS version) and the marginalizing of Christ. Over and above expositions of the lost civilizations (Aus der Akasha-Chronik 1904) and repeated karmically-appropriate reincarnations (Theosophie 1922), Steiner paid much more attention to the succession of civilizations in “our historical order” – the Indo-Vedic, Persian, Egypto-Chaldean, and Greco-Roman-Christian epochs – with Christ becoming the consummating point (McDermott 1984: 172–3).

Greco-Armenian Georges Gurdjieff, Christian-esoteric founder of “The Work” (1921–), radically modified Theosophical cosmology by reviving ancient Middle-Asian
teaching about the Ray of Creation, through which divine Light and Tonality become increasingly less rarified in a “totally material universe.” Members of early and lost civilizations, including the pyramid-builders, possessed a superior consciousness to ours that can be re-attained, while the maintenance and recovery of higher-being states is the purpose of subtle cosmic cycles (Pecotic 2004). French Traditionalist René Guénon, paradoxically, while renouncing Theosophy as a “pseudo-religion,” honored Blavatsky’s frameworks of yugas and lost civilizations for understanding how processes brought about increased materialization, or the Crise du monde moderne (1927) and the West’s Reign of Quantity (1945). For solutions the best remnants of primordial wisdom were northern (Hyperborean), fragmentarily available in Celtic Druidism, a residual Arctic “Boreal” culture being also celebrated by Giulio Evola of Italy’s occult Ur-group (1927–) as the primal basis for a Rivolta contro il mondo moderno (1934) and the restoration a new Mithraism to preserve lost Gnosis. For Evola the Greek Golden Age (the Indic Kṛta Yuga) was that of the gods, who made possible all the mysterious monuments – pyramids, megalithic henges, Easter Island statues – as an “eternal race that lives in eternal cycles, … travelling in flying saucers from distant galaxies,” with the Fall happening, and consequent “cycles of decadence” and imperial succession, after gods mated with humans (Gen 6:2) (Trompf 1998: 292–5). Germanic “Ariosophical” lines of thought stressed pure Aryan descent and access to Wisdom from “Hyperboraea” (Arktogaa/Arktos, and its capital Thule) where Atlanteans survived (cf. ch. 45).

These better-known modern Gnostic overviews will recall many and varied threads in the complex array of related macroscopic outlooks. In psychoanalysis, for example, aside from Sigmund Freud’s possible Kabbalizing, depth psychology with Carl Jung implies an apparent inversion of the Gnostic U-curve by positing humanity’s very slow ascent from the depths of the unconscious, into a problematic situation of “exteriorized” over-done conscious life that needs to probe and recover contact with the inner, unconscious Deep through dreams and symbols (Jung 1951). Though ancient Gnostics were not averse to referring to the ultimate “Root” (e.g., NHC II.7.94.15), the Jungian implication is explored macrohistorically in Ken Wilber’s 1983 title “Up from Eden.”

Symbolist Harold Bayley (1912: 7–9) taught that Freemasonry inherited the secret signs of “Gnosis or secret Wisdom of the Ancients,” of truths needing “no connection with historic fact,” from Rosicrucians, Provençal Cathar paper-makers, and the Templars. Traditionalists and Perennialists so-called (chs. 48, 49) have stressed continuity of the same deep wisdom in all the great religious traditions. The Anthroposophically inspired Christengemeinschaft (1922–) is proclaimed by founder Friedrich Rittelmeier to further spiritual evolution in the whole cosmic process divinely guided by “Christ-Helios” (Christus, 1936). In Sri Aurobindo’s alternative Gnostic strand (see ch. 56), Culture, “based on the truths of life,” is always superior to Civilization, and the meeting of cultures, as in the impact of the (Veda-based) East on a declining West, illustrates the grand spiral of humanity’s advance through serious crises toward the supramental state of “Gnostic Being” (Varma 1976: 134–65).

Deep wisdom passed on through adepts and Masters is of course a characteristic of new-esoteric and New Age thought (e.g., Atkinson [?] 1908) [2003: 3 [for neo-Rosicrucians]; Johnson [1939] 1980: 175 [Shabdists]), and features in various New Religious Movements (NRMs). Contemporary Latter-day Saints, for example, see
themselves heirs to a holy Remnant passed on in the supplementary Biblical stories in *The Book of Mormon* about Israelite tribes reaching America, while also teaching that the Divine Couple propagating humans for our world from a minor planet called Kolob is far inferior to the hidden Lord of the universe (Bracht 1990: 97–133). Followers of Indo-Persian Meher Baba hold him to be the God-Man for our time, but also as *avatar* on earth in prior prophets (Trompf 2012: 76). For Scientologists, the esoteric gnosis is that our world has been infiltrated by dangerous entities called Thetans trapped on earth from very long-passed galactic tensions and Ron Hubbard has revealed the way to “clear” ourselves of the threat (Rothstein 2009: 379–83, and ch. 59). For the Nation of Islam, “the white devils” (not the hellish “black devils” of old Gnosticizers [e.g., *Acta Thomae* 55]) resulted from evil Frankenstein-like engineering in Arabia 6,800 years ago. In a cosmology warping Isma‘ili/Druze cyclical paradigms, the time of black redemption is at hand (Walker 1990: 344–6; ch. 51). These are all alternative macrohistories of new religions with strong Gnostic features. Some Indian NRMs modify the *yuga* system to allow in the Theosophical framework, so that the present Kali Yuga is followed by the intermediate Satya Yuga (not the Golden Age), allowing “the Knowledge of Reality” that was conveyed by the (divine) Serpent in Eden and recently fully expounded by Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi, as Mother, true Eve and feminine Holy Spirit, to prepare for extraordinary times ahead (Trompf 2012: 69).

The typical salvific purport of these newer macrohistories is that a blessed spiritual elite or long-deserving oppressed group are now “truly-in-the-know” about the nature of things. But that is quite generally true of all Gnostic macrohistories: “the last shall be first,” as in the special realized eschatology of *Pistis Sophia* (2.87), because “insider-listeners” of the myth-history, from the persuasive “Spinners of Time,” benefit “right now” at the end of its story (yet cf. Matt. 20:16). The revelations about unfoldings and great processes *only serve to confirm* the currently offered gnosis (the special details of the constructed past often being too hard to remember anyway, and left to leaders). For us to scrutinize these constructions for their own interest and as a clustering, however, provides a crucial window into “the Gnostic World” in broad compass, especially the grand cosmic visioning of descent from on high, to the entanglements and predicaments of the material world, on to return as in a U-curve. Obviously variables come into the visioning, whether reincarnation, for instance, expresses futility, or a possibility to progress, or is just denied (by Guénon, interestingly, and other Traditionalists, at least as a literal truth). Differences over origin-points, emanations, and *teloi* can apply, and over values placed on human affairs – “ordinary history” usually taken as of little interest compared to successions of masters, prophets, avatars, etc. bespeaking how Divinity “descends on earth” (Kant 1990). But we have discerned a major pattern and a family of characteristic features, hopefully useful to guide those wanting to negotiate complex terrain in the chapters ahead.

**REFERENCES**


— **Gnostics and temporality** —


