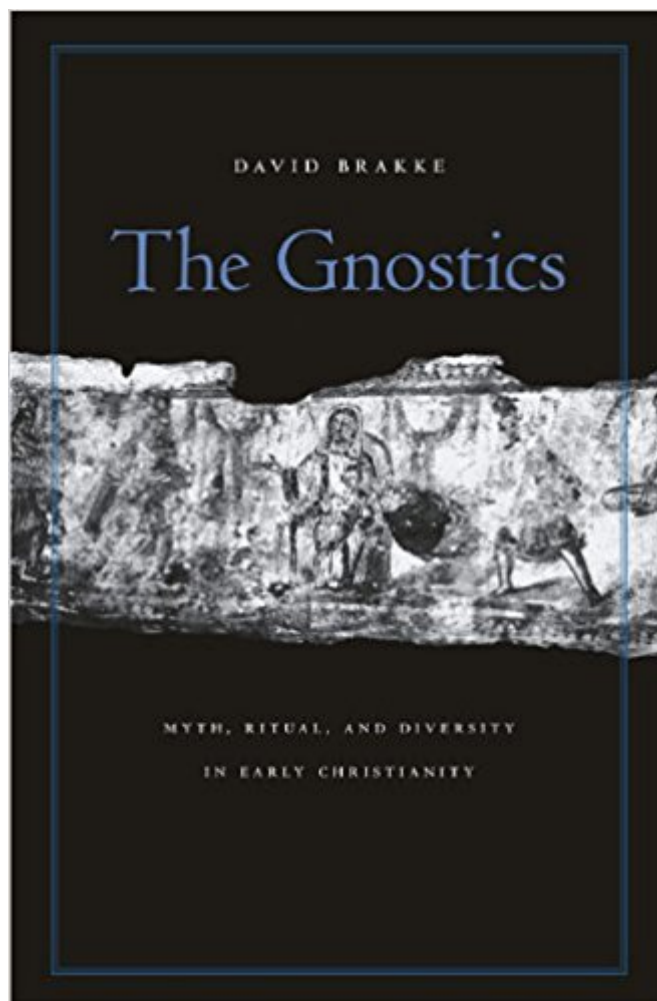


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# The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, And Diversity In Early Christianity



## Synopsis

Who were the Gnostics? And how did the Gnostic movement influence the development of Christianity in antiquity? Is it true that the Church rejected Gnosticism? This book offers an illuminating discussion of recent scholarly debates over the concept of "Gnosticism" and the nature of early Christian diversity. Acknowledging that the category "Gnosticism" is flawed and must be reformed, David Brakke argues for a more careful approach to gathering evidence for the ancient Christian movement known as the Gnostic school of thought. He shows how Gnostic myth and ritual addressed basic human concerns about alienation and meaning, offered a message of salvation in Jesus, and provided a way for people to regain knowledge of God, the ultimate source of their being. Rather than depicting the Gnostics as heretics or as the losers in the fight to define Christianity, Brakke argues that the Gnostics participated in an ongoing reinvention of Christianity, in which other Christians not only rejected their ideas but also adapted and transformed them. This book will challenge scholars to think in new ways, but it also provides an accessible introduction to the Gnostics and their fellow early Christians.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Not since Elaine Pagels's ground-breaking and best-selling *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) has there been a work that communicates so clearly the content and significance of the "Gnostics" for our understanding of early Christian history. The public and the academy need *The Gnostics*. (Denise Buell, Williams College) A model for how to engage in careful social historical reconstruction. (Stephen Davis, Yale University) Brakke has a growing reputation for his studies on the history and

literature of ancient Christianity, and he moves easily among the sources, making good sense of the sometimes scanty evidence...The Gnostics is a book to be warmly commended to those who have an interest in the development of Christianity. (Nicholas King, SJ Times Literary Supplement 2011-01-21) Perhaps the finest aspect of this book is the way that Brakke successfully nuances the conflict models of early Christian history that remain current in most introductory texts. Rather than merely keying students to the varieties of early Christianity, Brakke introduces beginners to a more open narrative that has emerged recently. This model focuses on the agonistic production of orthodox and heterodox identities through processes of textual production, interpretation, ritual, and so forth. Brakke accomplishes this through a style that is lucid without falling into oversimplification. (J. Schott Choice 2011-07-01)

David Brakke is Joe R. Engle Chair in the History of Christianity and Professor of History, Ohio State University.

A very good review of basic Gnostic beliefs and practices, including aspects of what would now be considered by most as the occult. Includes reasonable comparisons of beliefs and practices of Gnostic contemporaries. Where it fails, like most texts on the Gnostics, is to take into consideration the mystical aspects of orthodox Christianity with respect to why Gnostic beliefs were not accepted by people such as Bishop Irenaeus. Not everything can be reduced to socio-political forces!

David Brakke does an outstanding job of making Gnosticism's relationship to early Christianity both intelligible and interesting as well as full of lots of information on the various sects and teachers of the pro-Gnosticism school of thought as well as their opponents in what later became orthodoxy. I love how he shows that this took place before Christianity congealed into a solid orthodoxy, great facts and stuff. The irony of history is revealed in this book. By reading it any person with a glimmer of systematic theology background will be able to see how much of what we believe was founded in the war for orthodoxy itself. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in ancient Christianity, in heresies of the early ages, and in their lingering effects up unto the present era.

A significant addition to the books by Rudolph and Jonas that contextualizes gnosticism (small G) within the smorgasbord of 1st and 2nd century religious movements. I have only one minor difference with the book; the pagan writer Celsus likely gives us an accurate look at 2nd century Christian groups and his accusation that Christians practiced magic obviously caused Origen a lot

of distress. Celsus specifically mentions several gnostic teachings as well as a diagram of multiple heavens in use among some sects, so Irenaeus is not our only contemporary window into gnosticism. That said, this is an exemplary work that incorporates recent insights into the gnostic movement.

Very detailed.

The Gnostics are an often-disparaged group. They are employed for theological-slams against those who would denigrate the environment in the name of Jesus. Likewise, they are recognized as a "loser" within the battle to determine the Christian identity. But who were the Gnostics, really? Beyond contemporary polemics, what did this early Christian sect really believe " how did they originate? David Brakke aims to address many of these questions in *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Chapter 1 (Imagining "Gnosticism and Early Christianities) discusses the preliminary matters necessary for any serious engagement with the early Christian sect. One of the major problems with study of the Gnostics is our hindsight knowledge of their eventual outcome. We are prone to imagine them in contrast to the "orthodox" Christian movement. Following Irenaeus' rhetorical account of early Christianity, many have conceptualized the Gnostics as an impure heresy that had moved away from the pure, Apostolic Christianity. However, this view, in Brakke's account, is untenable because there was no pure Christianity from which to deviate. Rather, Christianity was pluriform in the 2nd century, with numerous "Christianities" each representing distinct elements while maintain enough unity to be considered one of the same. It is in this matrix that we find Gnosticism as an early Christian sect (social group) with a strong affinity for Middle Platonism. This chapter would have been stronger had Brakke considered the New Testament evidence. 1st Century Christianity suggests something closer to what Irenaeus charts. Certainly there was variance within early Christianity, though; I think there really were doctrines (forgive the term) which I think formed an orthodoxy " even before Justin Martyr. Chapter 2 (Identifying the Gnostics and Their Literature) aims to answer the question of who were the Gnostics. His answer, in short, is that the Gnostics were a particular strand of early Christianity often known as the "Sethian Gnostics". However, on Brakke's account, they are not "Sethian Gnostics", but merely Gnostics. Thus, other groups, which have been assumed to be Gnostic, such as Valentinus, are not actually Gnostic. They may share some Gnostic thought " likely derived from a common source (Middle Platonism) " but they were not part of the same social

unit. His main argument for this, which I found convincing, was that when Irenaeus speaks of the Gnostics, he is speaking a particular sect (likely self-identified as Gnostics) which was, and can be differentiated from other forms of Christianity. Brakke lists the texts which he thinks were produced by the ancient Gnostics. I don't know the texts well enough to appraise his list, nor will I include it here, due to length, though presumably they all embody Sethian distinctives. Chapter 3 (The Myth and the Rituals of the Gnostic School of Thought) charts out the Gnostic Myth, with all its complexity, and offer a glimpse into the ritual worship of this Christian sect. Let me say first, that Gnosticism is incredibly complex and, in my admittedly modern view, bizarre. I cannot even begin to describe the intricate theological understanding of the Gnostics, though, most simply put, the Gnostics believed in one ultimate being, who was presumably too transcendent to be known, who had a series of emanations who formed divine aeons. One of the emanations, in ignorant folly, created the material world. In a strange, dark happening, Eve bears a spiritual son, Seth, with Adam, and bears two fleshly son, Cain and Abel, because of her rape by demonic rulers. Humanity is cast into a state of ignorance and they await the redemptive gnosis from the ultimate being. This gnosis eventually arrives in Jesus. Gnostics practiced Baptism, in a form perhaps similar to other early Christians, though, it may have been a metaphor for a purely spiritual practice. Along with their five-fold (referring to a mysterious five seals) baptism, Gnostics also practice Mystical Ascent. They believed that the human intellect mirrored the divine intellect, and thus introspection and contemplation could lead to advance spiritual experience. Brakke additionally discusses the origins of the Gnostic sect. He rejects the hypotheses which understands it as an originally Jewish sect which adopted Jesus traditions, rather, from the beginning it was a Christian sect. However, he doesn't exactly explain this. The closest he gets is saying the Gnostics embody one response early Christians made to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I'm not sure I find this adequate or convincing. Chapter 4 (Unity and Diversity in Second-Century Rome) deals with much more than simply Gnosticism. Rather, it aims to situate Gnosticism within Roman Christianity of the 2nd Century. After some curious thoughts on the Apostle Paul, Brakke considers three representative examples of early Christian responses to Gnosticism. He surveys Marcion, Valentinus, and Justin Martyr. In the end, he concludes that there were multiple ways in which Christians responded to Gnosticism. None could really be called outright rejection. Many adapted some elements. The overall feel regarding second century Christianity, as depicted by Brakke, is that it contained "you guessed it" unity and diversity. The Gnostics likely went too far, breaching the requirements for unity. Thus, they were likely a marginal group within Christianity, perhaps unrecognized as truly Christians by

many. Chapter 5 (Strategies and Self-Differentiation) considers three representatives for understanding self-differentiation in early Christianity: The Valentinian School, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. I must confess that while I found this chapter, and the previous one, very interesting and worthwhile, they often veered away from discussing Gnosticism. This last chapter in particular had little to do with the Gnostics specifically. However, it was a helpful chapter in establishing the 2nd century Christian milieu. Overall, this was a helpful introduction to Gnosticism. Perhaps a bit too complex and constructive for a true introduction, but, as one unfamiliar with Gnosticism outside of contemporary polemical references (N.T. Wright), I benefited greatly. I'm not convinced by all of Brakke's arguments; however, his case was well worth my time and gained assent in many key areas. I feel confident now that when I pejoratively declaim Gnostic-like thought in American Christianity I will actually know what that means. That's a successful book on my count. Note: This book was provided free of charge in exchange for an honest review.

This book provides an effective argument of our interpretation of why Gnosticism has become too broad a topic and that new categories of proto-orthodoxy needs to be developed. This text should be required reading for those learning medieval heresy.

Superb summary of the current state of studies in Gnosticism with a convincing analysis of ancient communities and beliefs in the second and third centuries.

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