The Tetragrammaton among Gnostics and Magicians in Late Antiquity

We have reviewed evidence for interest in the Tetragrammaton before Nicaea and before the almost universal ascendancy of the name of Jesus. Already in Justin (Día 75.3.14), we saw, the name revealed at the Bush was thought to be Jesus.1 As Christianity moved progressively away from a Hebrew or Aramaic linguistic background onto Gentile soil and opened a linguistic breach between Church and Synagogue, the Tetragrammaton was increasingly eclipsed. We shall see, however, that it enjoyed some longevity away from orthodoxy, not only among heretical sectarians, who perhaps found here angelomorphic tendencies that assisted their Arianism (not a context, perhaps, to promote a long future), but more strikingly among Gnostics and Magicians. The Tetragrammaton there, however, frequently denotes inferior or even pagan deities. In both cases these more marginal groups may arguably have been influenced by Judaism.2

The Gnostics and the Tetragrammaton

A considerable variety of different notions pass under the heading of Gnosticism, and while a universally serviceable general definition seems to elude us, scholars are able to work productively by specifying precisely who or what they are talking about.3 Someone disapproved of by Irenaeus (c.130–c.200) or Hippolytus (c.170–c.236) or Epiphanius (c.315–403)—our basic Patristic sources writing against these schools—has been a good qualification. The Coptic secret documents from Nag Hammadi (Chenoboskion) in Egypt

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1 One might compare perhaps Acts of Thomas (163) (c.225 A.D.): Midaeus asks Thomas, “Who is your Lord and what is his name?” Thomas said, “You cannot hear his true name at this time, but the name that was given him is Jesus Christ”; J.K. Elliot, The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford, 2005), p. 507.
3 J. Dan is not alone when in “Jewish Gnosticism,” Jewish Studies Quarterly 2 (1995), 309–328, he argues that the term is too imprecise to be used meaningfully.
found in 1945 greatly enriched our first-hand knowledge of Gnostics as they wrote for themselves, and further complicated the varieties of systems and mythologies of which we know. Some grew out of Jewish mysticism, and the apocalyptic and apocryphal corpus, and some are very clearly focused on Jesus. Gnostic schools drew widely on the syncretistic heritage of antique, Iranian, Jewish, Greek, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian traditions to establish basic myths and concepts relating to the creation of the world by the Demiurge, the fall of the soul, the mission of the redeemer and the revealer of Gnosis, and the ultimate release of the soul and its ascent to its heavenly home. There is also a sociological element to Gnostic attitudes, particularly with respect to what might be seen as the oppressing majority.4

The collectors of the Chenoboskion library were Christians, and some of the pieces were no doubt composed by Christians, though in time they became regarded as heretics—and naturally they themselves developed a similar estimation of their opponents. Yet not all these essays reflect Christian traditions: some draw on the Hebrew Bible, but other material seems to come from post-biblical Judaism. Other texts appear more philosophic and Neoplatonic and stress the unknown God, and yet others represent religious traditions wider than Judaism.

The names of God were attractive to Gnostic writers, but as with pagan magical texts, which we shall examine below, the divine name was often no longer reserved exclusively for the God of the Hebrew Bible, but liberally bestowed upon other beings, in this case upon the various powers and agents of Gnostic mythology.

Jeu appears in Gnostic texts as a transcription of the Tetragrammaton, an abbreviation of yah or yeh with the third-person pronoun meaning “Yhwh Himself” or “Yhwh, C’est Lui.” Two Books of Jeu5 are mentioned in Pistis Sophia and survive in Sahidic in Codex Brucianus of disputed date, bought in Egypt in 1769 by the Scottish traveller James Bruce and now in the Bodleian (Bruce Ms 96).6 Answering his disciples, Jesus reveals how the Father projected from his bosom Jeu (‘Ieou), the “true God,” and how there issued from him twenty-eight emanations, whose form, mystic name, and number are in turn