CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR
THE HISTORY OF THE TERM GNOSTIKOS

[796] This article continues a discussion with Prof. Bianchi which began with my review of the papers of the Messina conference,¹ when I pointed out, inter alia:

1. That the “working hypothesis” proposed by the “final document” of the conference would not work—the “coherent series of characteristics” it tried to find in second-century gnosticism was not coherent; each of its elements was absent from one or more of what are commonly called “the gnostic systems,” and some of them contradicted major points of major systems.

2. That Prof. Jonas’s attempt, in his paper at the Messina conference, to describe an “ideal type” of gnosticism, was a failure—the resultant miscarriage had few traits that were common to all systems and itself corresponded to none.

3. That none of the conference’s speakers who had attempted to define gnosticism had thought of asking which groups actually called themselves “gnostics” or were called so by their neighbors.

To these objections Prof. Bianchi replied in his paper at the Stockholm conference.² First he mixed up my criticisms of Jonas’s paper with my remarks on the conference’s document, and took me to task for accusing the conference of trying to establish an “ideal type” of gnosticism³ (which I had not done), then he reiterated his notion of trying “d’établir une série cohérente (d’une cohérence objective) de traits qui soit indubitablement gnostique” (ibid.) this in spite of the [797] fact that not only I but also Prof. Drijvers had pointed out that the elements of his “coherent series” did not cohere, but were found in different “systems” most of which lacked or even contradicted one or more of them.⁴

¹ In JBL 89 (1970) 82ff.
⁴ Drijvers’s criticisms are cited by Bianchi, “Quelques discussions,” 21.
To meet these criticisms he fell back on the claim that if even one of his proposed traits—for example, the creation of the world as the consequence of a divine crise—was found “dans les contextes respectifs” (by which I suppose he means, “in several systems commonly called ‘gnostic’”) it would necessarily be “une idée typiquement gnostique.”5 Hence, I suppose, he thought we could collect a set of the typical ideas of “gnosticism.”

However, this notion overlooks the problem indicated by my third objection, that none of the writers of the Messina conference had considered the question, “Which groups in antiquity did call themselves ‘gnostics’ or were so called by their neighbors?” Here I may have led Prof. Bianchi into error. I pointed out that if ancient usage had been considered, “Someone might have noticed that the most insistently self-styled ‘gnostic’ whose works have come down to us is Clement of Alexandria. As things were, orthodox Christian gnosticism was wholly ignored.”6 By “orthodox Christian gnosticism” I meant, of course, that gnosticism which eventually, thanks to the victory of the “catholic” Christians, came to be thought “orthodox.” But Prof. Bianchi commented, “Il nous semble que cette phrase contienne la source de confusions remarquables, car elle juxtapose dans une même proposition herméneutique [whatever that means] les groupes qui s’appellaient ‘gnostiques’, comme dénomination d’une ‘secte’, et l’appellation de ‘gnostique’, voire de ‘vrai gnostique’ que Clément s’attribue dans le contexte d’une école, mieux dans le contexte de la révendication des profonstories (et de l’orthodoxie) d’une théologie.”7

For my part, I think Prof. Bianchi’s comment not the source, but the result of profound misunderstandings, viz., the notions: (1) that the gnostic groups considered themselves “sects” (in the modern sense, viz., as opposed to the Church, which I take to be the sense Prof. Bianchi had in mind); (2) that none of the gnostic groups could have thought themselves schools within the Church; and (3) that their use of 798 gnostikos did not indicate the claim to a profound and orthodox theology. Yet worse is (4) the notion that words must have had in antiquity, as distinct meanings, the different senses assigned to them by modern dictionaries. (Sometimes they did, but more often they had one meaning which the ancients perceived as appropriate for matters we feel it necessary to describe by various terms.) Worst of all is (5) the notion that to investigate the ancient usage of a word will be a “source of remarkable confusions” if it reveals that the usage does not

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5 Ibid., 18.
6 JBL 89 (1970) 83
7 “Quelques discussions,” 20f.