THE PROBLEM OF THE ANTI-GNOSTIC POLEMIC
IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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The celebration of Professor G. Quispel's 65th birthday is a suitable occasion for reviewing the often-discussed subject of how much the Rabbis of Talmudic times actually knew about the Gnostic heresies of their time and how, if at all, they reacted to those heresies. One need not repeat here the fact that the scholarly world owes a great debt to Professor Quispel for his share in purchasing, publishing and interpreting the Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi. Professor Quispel was one of the first scholars that recognized — to use a happy phrasing of Elaine Pagels — that "Most of the writings (discovered at Nag Hammadi) use Christian terminology, unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage".¹ Yet, however closely related the Gnostic terminology and ideas were to the Jewish heritage, there is nothing new in the statement that they maintained a hostile attitude towards that heritage. Thus, it is only natural to assume that the Rabbis could not afford hiding in trenches without taking up the challenge and responding in the strongest terms. One's expectations from the Rabbis are even greater, when one realizes that the Gnostic writers not only used Jewish material in their writings but virtually inverted its meaning and significance. The Jewish material used by the Gnostic writers derived from Scripture, the Targums and the Midrash at large, and one is definitely justified in assuming that the Rabbis could not indifferently watch their own religion misused and turned against itself.

Furthermore, it has been argued by the present writer that in using the Jewish sources for anti-Jewish purposes, the Gnostic writers were aiming at certain Jewish and/or (Jewish)-Christian circles with whom

they found themselves to disagree, in order to point out to them how inconclusive, nay wrong, their religious tradition was.\textsuperscript{2} From a Gnostic or Christian-Gnostic point of view, the Jewish tradition upon which Christianity rested and out of which it grew had to undergo a substantial inversion of values (Umdeutung) before it could be incorporated into the new spiritual framework. Thus, Christianity was believed by the Gnostics to handle its Jewish background in a manner that did not seem radical enough to the Gnostic writers. Needless to say, under such circumstances the Rabbis were called upon to react in the strongest terms possible. The questions which we shall try to answer here in this respect are: Did the Rabbis live up to what one justifiably expects from them? And if so, how did the Rabbis react to the Gnostic challenge?

Indeed, these questions are most fascinating ones and they have been dealt with frequently in modern scholarship. However, as we shall see, telling as the answers to those questions may be about the nature of the Judaism — and possibly also of the Gnosticism — of that period, they are not as easy and clear cut as scholars sometimes assume. Admittedly, there is a relatively great number of utterances in Rabbinic writings which seem to be reports of arguments which the Rabbis had with heretics. Heretics are frequently referred to in Rabbinic writings as 

\textit{Minim}, but who are those \textit{Minim} and how can they be identified? There are almost as many answers to these questions as \textit{Minim} mentioned in Rabbinic writings.\textsuperscript{3} In addition, there are a number of utterances in Rabbinic literature which take up in a polemical manner such subjects as the alleged existence of two or more powers in heaven, the creation of the world with the help of or by angels, the questions of the existence of evil and the relevance of the Law. Now, the question may be asked: Do those utterances reflect a live situation in which the Rabbis actually argued against real Gnostic opponents, or were those utterances rhetorical means of disputation? Of course, one may argue, the alternatives do not make a real difference; yet, it is of high historical importance to know whether a polemical utterance reflects a

\textsuperscript{2} See the writer's article \textit{Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy} in the forthcoming \textit{Proceedings of the Yale International Conference on Gnosticism} (1981).

\textsuperscript{3} For a brief review of the problem see A. Segal, \textit{Two Powers in Heaven}, Leiden 1977, 4ff.