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This book sets out to dismantle the category “Gnosticism.” Michael Williams encourages scholars to reconsider the major characteristics long associated with this construct, discover more complexity in the primary sources, and apply a healthy dose of common sense in theorizing about Gnosticism in particular and religion in general. This book brings to fruition more than twenty years of research by a highly-respected specialist of late antiquity, now Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Washington. Written (exceptionally well) for specialist and non-specialist alike, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* is the most important, theoretically-engaging, book to come out of this field in the last decade.

The Preface and Introduction state the author’s position. “The extended argument at the core of this book amounts to a case study in the construction of categories in the study of religions, and in how a category can become more an impediment than an expedient to understanding.” The key point is that “men and women whose conceptions and practices are discussed in what follows have in crucial respects been greatly misunderstood. And imagining them as the same religious species (‘the Gnostics’) has resulted from such misunderstanding and then further magnified it.... I will be arguing that it is best to avoid imagining something called ‘the Gnostic religion’ or even ‘gnosticism.’ I will suggest that the texts in question are better understood as sources from a variety of new religious movements” (xiii, 5).

Throughout the book Williams highlights diversity and innovation in the “gnostic” source base. His section on origins (Chapter 10) insists that it is inherently more likely that the myths found in these texts “emerged from multiple innovations,” suggesting that those seeking roots are more likely to find persuasive answers by “clarifying the origin and history of specific traditions, such as Valentinianism” rather than searching for “that original ‘smoking gun’” (231). His examination of the Nag Hammadi corpus itself (Chapter 11), after making important suggestions concerning the internal coherence of individual codices and the need to appreciate separate tractates
within their “book” context, concludes that this collection “presents us with one fourth-century snapshot from what was a long and much wider history of recycling and repackaging religious innovations” (262). The producers of at least most of these books seem to have been persons:

(1) who accepted the biblical demiurgical proposition that the cosmos was not created as a result of the initiative of the highest God, (2) who were intensely interested in speculation about the true nature of divinity and the supracosmic realms, (3) who were focussed on the soul’s eventual transcendence of the created order and on patterns of spirituality that would contribute to this goal, and (4) who saw nothing un-Christian in these views. (261-62)

The above depiction leads him (Conclusion) to offer an alternative to “Gnosticism”: biblical demiurgical traditions. Williams does not intend the new category to replace the old; rather, he sees it as more limited in scope, but naturally generated by the texts themselves—a simple typology “for organizing several religious innovations and new religious movements” (265-66) in antiquity, one not fraught with the problems associated with “Gnosticism.”

Chapter 2 reflects directly on the category “Gnosticism.” Scholars have long known that the category is modern, and that the self-designation “gnostic” is poorly attested in groups in question. A typological or phenomenological approach has nevertheless encouraged scholars to accept the validity of the category: “the rationale is usually that those groups which are alleged to have used the self-designation share a typological structure with other groups for whom the self-designation is questionable or unattested, and this structure is ‘gnosticism’ or ‘the Gnostic religion’” (43). Williams insists that the construct has brought no clarity in classification, or in understanding the texts, and does not even accord with the heresiologists’ own views (“to the degree that Irenaeus does place all of these ‘sects’ in the same category of ‘gnosis,’ it is really merely the category of ‘false teaching’ rather than a grouping defined by a list of phenomenological traits”; 44).

Exegesis of the primary sources is the heart and soul of this book. Williams approaches the texts in a historical-critical manner, interspersed with sociological considerations mainly generated by his colleague, Rodney Stark. He avoids using one source to interpret another, considers each source to be a coherent whole, and assumes that sources tell us something about communities.