GNOSTIC ESCHATOLOGY AND
THE NEW TESTAMENT

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That a writing must be interpreted historically is one of the accepted canons of biblical exegesis ¹). However, it is quite often in his effort to observe this canon that the New Testament exegete reveals an architectonic of method. That is, because of the sheer magnitude of the task of mastering firsthand all of the social, political, philosophical, and religious facets of the milieu from which a writing emerges, the exegete frequently accepts as working historical presuppositions the results of certain standard investigations into that milieu. Often, confidence in such results is quite justified, but such confidence must never be interpreted as license for the neglect of periodic re-examination of these presuppositions. And especially does such re-examination become mandatory when there are new discoveries of relevant data.

Our purpose in the ensuing study will be to examine afresh one of these presuppositions, viz. the traditional view of Gnostic eschatology, and to do so with special reference to writings from the Coptic Gnostic Library discovered near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945/46 ²). Our procedure will be as follows: First, we shall summarize the traditional view and its impact


upon the interpretation of certain New Testament passages. Second, we shall survey the Gnostic literature, both that formerly known and that recently added from Nag Hammadi, in order to see what views of eschatology are actually present in these texts. Third and finally, we shall consider what modifications—if any—are required in the presuppositions regarding Gnostic eschatology which have guided New Testament exegesis.

By way of introduction, however, we must undertake to define our terminology, for, as is well-known, the definition of Gnosticism has been among the thorniest of problems confronting the historian; and even "eschatology" has failed to gain a generally-accepted meaning among all students of religion. With respect to the former term, there is much to commend that set of definitions formulated by the International Colloquium on the Origins of Gnosticism held at the University of Messina in April of 1966. Members of that Colloquium agreed that for clarification there should be distinctions made between "Gnosis", "Gnosticism", "pre-Gnosticism", and "proto-Gnosticism". By the term "Gnosis", one has reference in a phenomenological manner to "knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for the elite". Such a phenomenon may appear in any religious sphere at any time. "Gnosticism", by contrast, refers specifically to that unique form of religion developed in certain second century sects which was first identified and combated by Heresiologists of that century. Integral to such "Gnosticism" is a cosmogony involving a split in or devolution of the Godhead, an event which results in Creation. Man, in turn, is dualistically conceived. He possesses a spark of the divine, now fallen and imprisoned in matter, which must be awakened to its true nature by the divine counterpart of the self and thereby re-integrated into the divine world. "Pre-Gnosticism", then, is a term applied to those particular theologumena which emerge

1) The complete collection of papers delivered at this Colloquium is now to be found in published form in Ugo Bianchi's edited volume mentioned in Note 2, p. 141. In what follows, the author is especially indebted to the skillful summation of the Messina Meeting provided by Father George MacRae, S. J., "Biblical News: Gnosis in Messina", Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 3 (July, 1966), pp. 322-333.

2) In the words of Prof. Bianchi, convener of the Messina Colloquium: "... the type of Gnosis found in Gnosticism is specifically characterized by the identity of the 'knower', 'the known' (his own divine substance), and the 'means of knowing' (gnosis as an implicit facility to be awakened and actualized)." (As reported by MacRae, ibid., p. 332).