CONVERSION AND GNOSIS IN THE
Gospel of Truth

by

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How were religious frontiers crossed in antiquity? What did this crossing involve? And when a man began to take notice of Christianity, how much in his mode of thinking and living did he imagine that adhesion to it would mean?

A. D. Nock

The crossing of religious frontiers changed the shape of late antiquity, as it transformed individual lives. In his classic study of conversion in antiquity, A. D. Nock sets out to explain Christianity's success by comparing it with the other religious options of the age. Nock distinguishes two types of religious movements in the Graeco-Roman world and two corresponding types of individual religious change. The first comprises the "prophetic religions" of Judaism and Christianity and the philosophical schools. To them corresponds the phenomenon of conversion. The second comprises the cults of the Hellenistic world, chiefly the mystery religions and Gnosticism. To them corresponds the phenomenon of adhesion.

Conversion, for Nock, is that "crossing of religious frontiers" through which an individual turns "from indifference or from an


2 Nock, pp. vii-viii, sets his project apart from those which study the appeal of Christianity from the "Christian point of view."

3 At several points in the study, but especially in ch. 7 (99-121) and ch. 8 (122-137) Nock includes several "Gnostic sects" among the cults. Among these, the most frequently cited are the Hermetic tractates, the Marcosians, the Ophites, and the Naassenes (especially pp. 115-119, but see also pp. 92, 104, 119, 253).
earlier form of piety to another,” with “the consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.” Following William James, Nock considers the turning away from a sense of present wrongness and the struggle away from sin to be central to the experience of conversion; “at least as much” as the turning to a new way of life, or a positive ideal of moral righteousness.5

This kind of conversion finds its fullest expression, Nock argues, in the prophetic religions of Judaism and Christianity. Converts to these movements respond to a “prophetic call” to reject the beliefs and practices of their past and commit themselves to a new theology and a new of life. Thus, genuine conversion involves “renunciation and a new start,”6 the soul’s radical reorientation in attitude, thought, and practice, as the convert turns from a sense of sin and guilt to forgiveness, from pagan syncretism to exclusive monotheism and a well-defined system of morality.

Adhesion, by contrast, involves no real crossing of religious frontiers, but a “straddling of cultural fences.”7 The spread of syncretistic cults of salvation in the Graeco-Roman world “led to an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old.” Though some of the cults, like the cult of Isis and certain Gnostic groups, aroused emotional passion and even brought conceptual or ethical change,8 they did not effect conversion, or genuine reorientation of the soul. They could not, according to Nock’s definition, because they did not require “renunciation and a new start.”

In Nock’s view, all the religious movements of antiquity promised salvation or protection for the soul, but the cults could only meet the superficial desire to escape from mortality and fate.9

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5 Nock, p. 7.
6 Nock, p. 14. The only non-prophetic or pagan example to which Nock attributes such renunciation and a new start is that of philosophy, “which held a clear concept of two types of life, a higher and a lower, and which exhorted men to turn from the one to the other.”
7 Nock, p. 7.
8 Nock, pp. 3-4, quotes the conclusion of the Poimandres as an example of a ‘prophetic’ message. On pp. 117-18, he admits that the Poimandres and other “Hermetic” and “Gnostic” texts may bear a ‘prophetic’ message, or even express a “concept of conversion” but these features do not qualify them as examples of “genuine conversion.” Similarly, Apuleius’s account of Lucius’s