
Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies by Nicola Denzey Lewis

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The main point of Nicola Denzey Lewis' book, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, is to debunk once and for all the notion that early Christian 'Gnostics' felt 'alienated, disempowered, or oppressed by cosmic forces' [185]. By challenging the scholarly consensus of an earlier generation of historians of religion such as Hans Jonas, E. R. Dodds, Franz Cumont, Arthur Darby Nock, and André Jean Festugière, a consensus which still holds considerable sway today, Lewis has also dealt a definitive blow to the category of 'Gnosticism' itself. She thereby lends further support to the argument of scholars such as Karen King, Michael Williams, Elaine Pagels, and David Brakke that texts traditionally labeled 'Gnostic' do not represent a fringe, marginal, derivative, degenerate religion devolving upon either early Christian origins or late Platonism, and existing apart from and in distinction from some form of proto-orthodox Christianity. Rather, they represent the diversity of Christianity in the second-century, its engagement with Graeco-Roman thought, and its participation in the intense dialogic exchanges of school settings and study groups in large urban centers.

In this respect, Lewis uses the texts that she discusses to demonstrate the great innovativeness and cultural entrepreneurship of early Christian thought. She does all of this by carefully and expertly exploring the way in which concepts such as Providence (προνοία) and Fate (εἰμαρμένη: mainly in the sense of astral determinism) are invoked and deployed in a wide range of second-century texts, both Christian and non-Christian. Instead of reading statements regarding enslavement to Fate in these texts as representative of a social group's feelings about the cosmos, Lewis successfully demonstrates that language of this sort serves a rhetorical purpose, namely, it refers to those who stand in opposition to the authors and preservers of these works.

In other words, those who are not privy to the revelations contained within the texts that she explores are the ones who are subject to the daemonic influence of the planets and stars. She also highlights an important difference between the way in which early Christians dealt with the problem of astral determinism in the second century and the way in which they did so in subsequent epochs, particularly in the third and fourth centuries. Her claim is that while second-century Christians, and not merely those identified in some way or other as ‘Gnostics’, were willing to entertain the possibility that some people were subject to Fate, later theologians generated universal arguments against astral determinism. By making these points, Lewis makes a significant contribution to studies on early Christianity and the Nag Hammadi codices, as well as to studies in the history of ideas.

Chapter 1, entitled ‘Were the Gnostics Cosmic Pessimists’, is an overview of the development of the identification of the writers of ‘Gnostic’ cosmogonies and apocalypses with a certain negative attitude about the universe. This chapter is very helpful, not just as it relates to the question that Lewis asks in the book but as an overview of the problems with earlier scholarship on ‘Gnosticism’ in general. Lewis highlights the ways in which members of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of the late 19th and early 20th century propounded the view that ‘cosmic pessimism’ entered the Roman worldview from Babylonian and Iranian religion *via* ‘Gnosticism’ [21]. Implicit in this idea is a theological position which holds that ‘belief in astrology was a pathological attitude healed by the orthodox Christian fathers of the fourth and fifth century’ [23]. Scholars in this lineage determined the terms of the discussion in ways that persist today. This chapter does such an excellent job of laying out the history of this scholarship and its inherent problems that I would consider assigning it not only in my seminars on early Christianity but also my course on method and theory and my introduction to the New Testament.

Chapter 2 does a couple of important things. First, it plots the shift in thinking about Providence and Fate as one and the same thing within Stoicism to their distinction in the works of various Middle Platonists. Lewis then records instances where early Christian writers such as Athenagoras and Tatian take up this notion of a divided Providence before she provides instances of the same in some Nag Hammadi texts, namely, *On the Origin of the World* and the *Apocryphon of John*. In the case of the latter, Lewis suggests that the original Greek version of the text may have associated the ruling archons

with the planets and thereby with some idea of astral determinism. The main point of this chapter is that, like their Middle Platonic contemporaries, a wide variety of Christian authors thought of Providence as divided. They did so for what we might call ‘theogonical’ reasons, that is, in order to explain evil and chaos in the present world.

In her next chapter, Lewis advances the position that the cosmic pessimism which we do find in second- to fourth-century Christian texts, that is, the idea that some human beings are subject to Fate in the sense of astral determinism, ‘finds its root not just in prevailing Graeco-Roman conceptions of a malevolent cosmos, but also in later exegeses of the Pauline corpus’ [53]. Here she focuses on Paul’s rhetoric of enslavement and the role played in his cosmos of categories of celestial beings such as ‘powers’ and ‘archons’. His idea that these forces collectively rule the cosmos until the time of the Eschaton (i.e., the final judgment or the end of the world) implies that some sort of archontic hold on humankind has been built into the cosmos by its providential creator.

In chapter 4, the author traces the appearance of the term «εἰμαρμένη» in certain Nag Hammadi texts where it serves to explain human disinterest in spiritual matters. Her case studies are, once again, *On the Origin of the World* and the *Apocryphon of John*. Next Lewis discusses the appearance of the term «εἰμαρμένη» in one of the three Hermetic texts that appear in the Nag Hammadi codices, the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, and demonstrates that Fate in the Hermetic tradition has suffered the same kind of misrepresentations as it has in ‘Gnostic’ texts.

Chapters 6–8 all explore strategies for escaping Fate or enslavement to the cosmos in various ‘Gnostic’ texts. These include texts that focus on the apocalyptic ascent of some sort of savior figure, ascetic practices for controlling the passions, and the work that the sacrament of baptism can do to subvert this enslavement.

In Chapter 9, Lewis considers one early Christian anomaly, namely, the Gospel of Judas, a text that invokes the sort of cosmic pessimism that she is excising from Christian tradition in the rest of the book. Unlike the other texts that she discusses, the Gospel of Judas does not appear to draw on contemporary philosophical interpretations of Providence but takes its cues instead from Jewish apocalyptic. The book ends by focusing on what Lewis sees as an important shift in thinking about Providence and Fate in later

Christian theologizing. Using the works of Methodius and Arnobius in the third century and Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth, Lewis claims that later Christian intellectuals abandoned notions of Fate that were informed by ‘pagan’ cosmological concepts and instead denied that humans were subject to Fate in any sense.

In general, Lewis’ arguments about second-century Christian ideas of Fate, astral determinism, and Providence are convincing and insightful. The book is essential reading for anyone working on early Christian intellectual history and its engagement with Greco-Roman philosophy and science.

I have a number of minor criticisms of the book, none of which detracts from its overall quality. I list them briefly here.

It is confusing that the term ‘Gnosticism’ appears in the book’s title, when it seems that the author is clearly uncomfortable with this categorization of the texts that she focuses on. In terms of style and structure, the book is a bit disjointed and the arguments are not always easy to follow; but because the author has elected to use many subheadings in each chapter, it is easy to locate the information one needs when doing research. One wishes that the author had been more consistent in her use of terminology when referring to the early Christians that she is discussing, given the fact that these terminological issues are part of the larger debate in which she is engaged. The book is a reworking of Lewis’ dissertation of 1999 and, given the intervening years between her first work on the topic and this project, the book’s bibliography could have been updated more than it was. Lewis cites only 12 secondary sources from 2000 and later, four of which are her own publications. At certain junctures, she seems to be making claims about the communities which are using the texts that she discusses; but for the most part, she does not go beyond the texts themselves to explore much of the context that would provide a broader picture of the contest that she invokes. If the concept of astral determinism is being used as a rhetorical strategy, as she rightly claims it is, it would be good to get some sense of who is being marginalized by this discursive move. Finally, although her argument is ultimately convincing that from the second through the fourth centuries Christian debate about the nature of Fate shifted from questions of cosmology to ones of ethics and moral responsibility, her tendency to elide the third and fourth centuries is problematic and calls for more nuance. Figures such as Origen, Porphyry, and Iamblichus complicate

this tidy picture considerably. And her claim that pagans such as Iamblichus were 'reduced to a beleaguered minority' in the third and fourth centuries needs rethinking. Her argument works for the later fourth century but the intervening period needs further attention. This was not, however, the aim of her book and, hence, my point is a minor one.