

Hans Jonas (1903-1993) was born and educated in Germany, where he was a pupil of Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. He left in 1933, when Hitler came into power, and in 1940 joined the British Army in the Middle East. After the war he taught at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Carleton University in Ottawa, finally settling in the United States. He was the Alvin Johnson Professor of Philosophy on the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science at the New School for Social Research in New York. Professor Jonas was also author of, among other books, *The Phenomenon of Life* (1966). He died in 1993-

THE MESSAGE OF THE ALIEN GOD & THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

The Gnostic Religion

HANS JONAS

THIRD EDITION

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Abbreviations

C.H.	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
G	<i>Ginza. Der Schatz oder das Grosse Buch der Mandaer</i> , by M. Lidzbarski (tr.), Goottingen, 1925
GT	"Gospel of Truth": <i>Evangelium Veritatis</i> , by M. Malinine, H. C. Puech, G. Quispel (ed. and tr.), Zurich, 1956
J	<i>Das Johannesbuch der Mandaer</i> , by M. Lidzbarski (ed. and tr.), Giessen, 1915

Preface to the Third Edition

It may be said that in this century Gnosticism, which is bound up with the development of Early Christianity, matured or graduated from a field for church historians, and mainly as an object of stern criticism on the part of the Church Fathers, to a topic that has drawn into its orbit more scholars of different fields.* It is now difficult to define which field, which particular section of scholarship, is the true home of research in Gnosticism. It touches in its own essence on so many issues and predicaments of modern man, i.e., on questions of which the nineteenth century was completely unaware, happily so, and of which we of necessity must be aware in the dislocated century in which we live. There is an empathy with Gnosticism, an element of topicality to it, which it has not had since the time when the Church Fathers fought it as a danger to the Christian creed.

To reminisce is a dangerous matter, as everyone knows. When one looks back, things have somehow been edited in one's mind, unintentionally but inevitably. The question asked of me is: What brought me to Gnosticism? Since I am not a philologist or a theologian (and certainly not a Christian theologian) or a historian, but entered university with the intent of studying philosophy in the hope of becoming a philosopher, a few words about the formative influences of my adolescence may be permitted.

In my later school years, when one begins to choose one's own intellectual food somewhat independently of what the teachers in "Secunda" and "Prima" tell one, I had three decisive reading experiences of an intellectual, moral and emotional nature. Those were the concluding years of the First World War and the beginning of the post-1918 period. A world had collapsed and the violent motions of nascency and, as it later turned

* The talk on which this preface is based was given in free improvisation, without notes, and inspired by the atmosphere of intimacy which the preceding days of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism (1974) had created between the speaker and that particular small and close-knit audience. It is this intimacy bound to the occasion more than the rambling due to improvisation that made me hesitate to let the tape-recorded talk become part of the official proceedings, thereby making the personal outpourings of the moment a lasting statement to an anonymous wider public. My eventual consent owes most to the sensitive editing of the transcript by Mr. David Hellholm, to whom I express my sincere thanks for his dedicated and ingenious labors. The transcribed text was reviewed by me once more, and I now release it, still not without a sense of embarrassment, but in the comforting knowledge that among the now enlarged audience are the friends who were the original and so kindly responsive recipients of these autobiographical indulgences. ("A Retrospective View," *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Gnosticism, 1977*)