Conversion and gnosis in the "Gospel of Truth"

Anne Marie McGuire
Haverford College, amcguire@haverford.edu

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CONVERSION AND GNOSIS IN THE
GOSPEL OF TRUTH

by

ANNE McGUIRE

Haverford College, Haverford, Pa.

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 adherence.

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

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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," 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 fron-
tiers, but a "straddling of cultural fences." The spread of syn-
cretistic 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, they did not effect conver-
sion, or genuine reorientation of the soul. They could not, accord-
ing to Nock's definition, because they did not require
"renunciation and a new start."

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

4 Nock, p. 7.
5 Nock, pp. 7-8.
6 Nock, p. 14. The only non-prophetic or pagan example to which Nock at-
tributes 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 'pro-
phetic' message. On pp. 117-18, he admits that the Poimandres and other
"Hermetic" and "Gnostic" texts may bear a 'prophetic' message, or even ex-
press a 'concept of conversion' but these features do not qualify them as ex-
amples of 'genuine conversion.' Similarly, Apuleius's account of Lucius's
Because they made no demand to renounce sin and make a new start, they could not meet the "deeper human need" to escape from sin, and thus offered "no possibility of anything which can be called conversion."  

With its lucid depiction of religious options in antiquity, Nock's Conversion has earned its position as a classic. Yet under the influence of its views, the study of religious change in antiquity has taken an excessively narrow course. By defining conversion as the individual's crossing of religious frontiers, Nock focuses on the individual and interreligious aspects of change, but largely ignores the broader social and intra-religious dimensions of change. Even more serious, by defining conversion as the reorientation of the soul from a life of sin to grace, Nock restricts the label of conversion to those phenomena that meet his set of psychological and theological criteria for "genuine conversion." Like "the devotion of Catholics to the cultus of a new saint," religious movements bringing reorientation to a pattern of attitude, thought, and practice different from Nock's criteria are devalued and excluded from serious consideration. As a result, our understanding of religious change in antiquity is diminished, and other voices, expressing alternate conceptions of religious transformation, remain unheard.

Among the voices muted by Nock's approach are those of gnostic Christians. Under the terms of Nock's analysis, these individuals did not experience genuine conversion when they embraced a gnostic understanding of the Christian gospel, nor were they genuine Christians. Though they might claim to be Christian, they were only Gnostics, adherents of a cult. They had not experienced genuine conversion but only bought supplementary insurance for the safety of their souls.

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Gratitude to Isis, surrender of self, and "an accompanying element of moral reformation," represents an "approximation to the idea" of conversion, but not genuine conversion.

9 Nock, p. 103, describes the desire for a more dignified relation to the cosmos as characteristic of the age. But on p. 119, he describes the practical concern about the safety of the soul as particularly characteristic of the Gnostic sects.


11 Nock, p. 137, argues that the speculation of the cults "completes and systematizes what was there, but it does not substitute things new for things old. It is a theology of unity and mutual understanding, and not of conflict. Adhesion to a new cult was thus made easier: it need involve no more than the devotion of Catholics to the cultus of a new saint." Nock hereby demeans at once the piety of the cults, of Gnosticism, and of Catholicism.
This approach has clearly impeded the scholarly investigation of conversion and religious change in Gnosticism. But it has not been the sole obstacle. Equally responsible are two problems plaguing Gnostic studies in general: the fragmentary and secondary nature of the sources and stereotyping of Gnostic soteriology and ethics. While the Nag Hammadi discovery has helped significantly to overcome the problem of sources, the stereotypes of heresiological and other polemical accounts continue to influence the interpretation of the sources and the historical reconstructions of the phenomenon of Gnosticism and its varieties.12

Among the assumptions that continue to shape scholarship are the views that the terms "Gnosis," "Gnosticism," and "the Gnostics" refer to a single, undifferentiated entity with shared characteristics. On the basis of these shared characteristics, many scholars believe they can make generalizations about the phenomenon as a whole and all of its varieties. Among the most important of these is the view that "Gnostics" believed they were "saved by nature." Since this seems to imply that salvation was by election and guaranteed, it is often believed that ethical questions were of no concern to ancient Gnostics and that modern interpreters of the phenomenon can limit their discussions of "Gnostic ethics" to issues of sexuality, or, as they see it, to the choice between asceticism and libertinism.13

These stereotypes, like Nock's definitions of conversion and adhesion, displace scholarly interest in the turn to Gnostic belief and the implications of that belief for social and ethical practice.

12 Besides a few fragments preserved in the original Greek by the heresiological sources, most of the primary sources for Gnosticism are anonymous, undated, and preserved only in Coptic translations. F. Wisse, "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists," VigChr 25 (1971), pp. 205-223, called attention to the dangers of applying the patristic categories for the varieties of Gnosticism to the interpretation of the newly discovered evidence, but the task of organizing the texts and the varieties of Gnosticism remain. The abiding power of those categories and of the phenomenological approach to "Gnostic" belief and practice can be seen in such recent, post-Nag Hammadi works as Kurt Rudolph, Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism (New York, 1982). For further elaboration of this critique, see my review in Second Century, forthcoming.

13 Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 3 may be ultimately responsible for establishing asceticism and libertinism as distinctively 'Gnostic' alternatives, but his account of Gnostic attitudes toward sexuality distinguishes more varieties than most of his successors have. Peter Brown's forthcoming study of virginity and asceticism in antiquity promises to offer a richer, more nuanced account of Christian and Gnostic attitudes toward sexuality.
The result is a perpetuation of stereotypes that support Nock’s account. Under the terms of both, those who turned to Gnosticism did not experience genuine religious change. They merely adhered to Gnostic cults for the protection of their souls.

Historical understanding of religious change in antiquity can be extended beyond the limits set by Nock with more careful definitions of conversion and Gnosticism. It is possible, without setting such narrow restrictions as Nock, to define conversion as the process by which an individual reorients his or her life to any new pattern of attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Freed from Nock’s criteria of renunciation of sin and commitment to a specific range of thought and practice, the term conversion can apply to a fuller, more representative range of phenomena of religious change. Analysis of such a range would not only broaden understanding of the varieties of conversion, but deepen awareness of the varying patterns by which experience, theology, ethics, and social change are related.

Similarly, a less biased definition of Gnosticism than Nock’s would provide a sounder basis for analysing the turn to Gnostic theology and its implications for practice. If the terms “Gnosticism” and “Gnosis” are recognized as terms of modern scholarship, derived from Irenaeus’s construction of the phenomenon of “Gnosis falsely so-called,” they can be redefined according to those features the historian takes to be the distinguishing characteristics of the phenomenon as a whole. Recognizing the circular nature of delimiting the phenomenon, the body of evidence, and its characteristics, the historian may set for-


15 Morton Smith, “The History of the Term Gnostikos,” The Rediscovery of Gnosticism, vol. 2, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden, 1981), pp. 796-807 has been rightly critical of those attempts to delimit the characteristics and to define the phenomenon of “Gnosis” or “Gnosticism” which claim to be historical and typological but ignore the ancient historical usage of gnōsitikos and remain unaware of the circularity of their arguments. As examples he cites the proposal of the Messina colloquium on the Origins of Gnosticism and the phenomenological effort of Hans Jonas, “Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon: Typological and Historical,” in Le Origini dello Gnosticismo, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden, 1977). For a treatment of the methodological issues which remains of critical value, see H. J.
ward a list of features exhibited in a delimited body of evidence as the distinguishing characteristics of the phenomenon. Such a list of features might be designated as follows: 1) a conception of the saving power of Gnosis, or revealed knowledge about the nature of existence in which the content of such Gnosis includes 2) a radical disjunction between divinity and the powers that create and govern the cosmos, 3) identification of the saved or salvageable element(s) of humanity with the divine, and 4) a parallel identification of the remaining elements of humanity with the creating and ruling powers of the cosmos.

While these are not the only characteristics that one might take to represent the distinguishing features of Gnosticism, they are sufficiently broad to gather a variety of religious phenomena under the category of Gnosticism, sufficiently narrow to set that group of phenomena apart from other phenomena, and they do correspond to a delimited body of evidence. Since Gnosticism is a syncretistic phenomenon of many varieties whose members came out of and often remained identified with other religious traditions, it is important to define Gnosticism as a phenomenon which existed in varying relationships with the phenomena of Judaism, Christianity, and paganism. Some historians choose to describe it as an independent religious movement with comparable status to those phenomena; others define Gnosticism as a subset of the larger phenomena of Judaism, Christianity, and paganism, appearing always in Jewish, Christian, or pagan form.

What is important about both of these approaches for present purposes is their usefulness in describing conversion to Gnosticism. For both models suggest that the reception of Gnosis, and the move from old to new, might be described in terms of changing configurations of Jewish, Christian, pagan, and Gnostic elements in an individual’s social and religious identity. As persons adopted a Gnostic view of existence, they may have moved from one tradition to another, as in the move from non-gnostic Judaism to gnostic Christianity, or they may have stayed within a tradition, as in the move from non-gnostic to gnostic Christianity. Of course, conversion from a gnostic understanding of one tradition to a gnostic understanding of another, as in the move from Hermetic

Gnosticism to Valentinian Gnosticism, can also be imagined. This would not, however, count as a conversion to Gnosticism but as a conversion within Gnosticism, or alternately, as a conversion from (gnostic) paganism to (gnostic) Christianity.

Described in this manner, the reception of Gnosis might be expected to effect profound changes in the individual’s understanding of his or her former religious belief and practice. If such changes can be shown to include the adoption of a coherent new pattern of attitude, thought, and practice, such change can be described, under the redefinitions given above, as conversion to Gnosticism, and investigation of Gnostic sources will yield greater insight into the varieties of religious conversion than Nock’s account of adhesion and the cults implies.

The sources for Gnosticism illustrate vividly that as individuals moved from non-gnostic to gnostic varieties of Judaism, Christianity, or paganism, they conceived of their reception of Gnosis as a turning, reorientation, or conversion. The evidence that such turnings were accompanied by rites such as baptism or apolytrósis, contemplation, figuratively described as an inward or upward journey, and by change in social and ethical practice suggests that Nock’s own questions about the crossing of religious frontiers might be rephrased and applied to the evidence for Gnosticism.

How were the frontiers of Gnosticism crossed in antiquity, and what did their crossing involve? How did those who crossed the frontier to Gnostic Christianity conceive of their crossing, and how much change did it bring?

One of the most striking and accessible sources for the examination of these issues is the Gospel of Truth (NHC I, 4). This writing, which may come from the hand of Valentinus himself, witnesses

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powerfully to a gnostic Christian understanding of conversion and its social and ethical implications. Often characterized as a Valentinian meditation or homily on the gospel, the *Gospel of Truth* describes the reception of Gnosis with metaphors familiar from biblical and philosophical tradition. Chief among its metaphors of conversion are figures of turning— from intoxication to sobriety, anxiety to repose, sleeping to wakefulness, and blindness to vision. But unlike the "'prophetic'" use of such figures, where the turn to sobriety, wakefulness, and vision is a turn from sin to repentance, the *Gospel of Truth* applies these images to the turn from ignorance to Gnosis.

At the center of the text, the author describes the function of Gnosis. Gnosis awakens one from the intoxication, anxiety, nightmares, and blindness of ignorance and calls one to turn back to the true source of one's existence and repose, the Father of the Entirety.

Such is the manner of those who have cast ignorance from themselves like sleep, not considering it to be anything, nor do they consider its other products to be real. Rather, they renounce them as a dream in the night. The knowledge of the Father they reckon as the light. This is the way each one has acted, being asleep, at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way of his coming to knowledge, just as he awakened. And it is a good thing for the human who turns and awakens. And blessed is he who has opened the eyes of the blind.

This application of the images of conversion to the turn from ignorance to Gnosis might appear to vindicate Nock's claim that Gnosticism and the cults brought a sense of psychological security, but no genuine reorientation of one's theology and way of life. Yet closer examination of the text reveals that throughout the *Gospel of*

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19 G. MacRae, "Sleep and Awakening in Gnostic Texts," *Le Origini*, pp. 496-507 provides a useful survey of uses of the theme of the call to awaken, focusing particularly on the *Apocryphon* with a brief consideration of *GTr* on pp. 504-05. For literary analysis of the *GTr*, see B. Standaert, *op. cit.*, and J. Fineman, "Gnosis and the Piety of Metaphor," *Rediscovery*, vol. 1, pp. 289-312.

20 *GTr* 29.32-30.16.
Truth, the author directs the reader to an understanding of Gnosis that links the individual’s reception of Gnosis to a radical reorientation of emotional attitude toward existence, of theological conception, and of life in the world. Analysis of the text as a whole shows that the author skillfully leads the readers to see the relation of their new attitude, thought, and practice through a radical revision of Christian tradition. Among the traditional figures it revises most effectively is the image of the Son as the one who “opens the eyes of the blind.”

The Gospel of Truth grounds its understanding of individual conversion and of the Christian gospel in a myth of cosmic creation and conversion. The major figures in this myth are the inconceivable Father, the Son, the Entirety (or all those who are from the Father), and Error. It is Error which is responsible for the conditions of cosmic existence, the Son who reveals the knowledge of the Father, and the Entirety who are called to receive it.

The central message of the text may be described as the proclamation that the reversal of cosmic conditions has begun with the revelation of the Father in the Son. This revelation makes possible “the redemption of those who were ignorant of the Father,”21 or the Entirety, by reversing the conditions of their existence and making possible the turn from ignorance to Gnosis, blindness to vision, deficiency to fullness, anxiety to repose. Yet this “repose” does not preclude action, for those who hear the proclamation and receive the Gnosis are exhorted to a new pattern of action. Analysis of the text shows that this pattern of action corresponds to the pattern of the myth; that the action and function of the Son serves as a model for those who have received his revelation of the Father. But before the meaning of the proclamation and exhortation can emerge, the myth’s account of the origin of deficiency and ignorance among the Entirety must be made clear.

The “Entirety” to whom Gnosis is revealed exists within a world generated by Error. Though the Entirety itself comes from the Father, and may even be said continually to exist within the Father, before Gnosis its members are ignorant of their source. This ignorance comes at the will of “the inconceivable, incomprehensible One” from whom they had come, and leads to terror and fear. As terror and fear create a dense barrier like fog, Error becomes

21 GTr 16.39-17.1.
powerful. She creates the substitute of truth by modelling her matter (hyle) vainly.

Since the Entirety searched for the One from whom they had come, and the Entirety was inside of Him, the inconceivable, incomprehensible One, who is superior to every thought, Ignorance of the Father brought about terror and fear. The terror became dense like fog, so that noone could see. Because of this, Error became powerful. She fashioned her own matter vainly, without having recognized the truth. It was within a modelled form (plasma) that through the power she was preparing in beauty the substitute of truth.  

As a result of Error’s power, the Entirety finds itself trapped and befogged in ignorance, fear, and in a modelled form (plasma) of matter. Unaware of its root, the Entirety falsely thinks itself to be existing without a root. This is a condition that rightly belongs to Error, which arises from ignorance and thus is ultimately without root. But it does not rightly belong to the Entirety. The Entirety, by contrast, has its root in the Father. Yet through the ignorance willed by the Father, the Entirety is unaware of its root. As a result, it becomes trapped in Error’s snare of terror and alienation.

The Father’s withholding of the Entirety’s perfection, the text goes on to assert, came not as the result of any envy or smallness on the part of the Father. Rather, the Father withheld their perfection that the members of the Entirety might receive it as a turning back or restoration (apokatastasis) to the Father and through Gnosis, that they might come to know and love “the inconceivable, incomprehensible Father.”

He, withholding their perfection within Himself, giving it to them in the form of turning back (apokatastasis) toward Him and as a knowledge singular in perfection. It is He who created the Entirety, and for it was the Entirety that was in Him and it was Him whom the Entirety lacked. Just as, in the manner of one of whom some are ignorant, so in that manner, He wishes them to know Him and to love Him, for what did the Entirety lack except this knowledge of the Father?

This turning back and restoration is accomplished through the revelation of the Father in the Son. He fills the deficiency precisely by revealing what the Entirety lacked: knowledge of the Father. This knowledge is revealed not only through the teaching of Jesus Christ, but also through his death on the cross and his resurrection.

In his teaching, Jesus revealed the gospel of the Father.

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22 GTr 17.4-21.
23 GTr 17.28-30. “For this reason, despise Error which is thus without any root.”
24 GTr 19.3-17.
This, the gospel of Him who is sought, it is to the perfect that he, the hidden mystery, Jesus the Christ revealed it, through the mercies of the Father. Through him he illuminated those in darkness because of forgetfulness. He illuminated them, he gave them a way, and this way is the truth about which he informed them.25

Those to whom he revealed it thus become the "perfect." He illuminates them, enabling them to move from deficiency to fullness, from the darkness of rootlessness to the light and repose of knowing one's root.

Through his suffering and death on the cross, Christ became a "fruit of the knowledge of the Father" and published the decree (diatagma) of the Father.26 Through his resurrection, he passed from perishability to imperishability, and called the "living ones written in the Book of the Living."27

Those whose names he knew first were called at the end, as one who has knowledge, he is the one whose name the Father has uttered. For the one whose name has not been spoken is ignorant ... So then, if one has knowledge, he is from above. If he is called, he hears, he responds, and he turns to the one who calls him, he ascends to him, and understands now in what manner he is called.28

As this passage clearly shows, the function of the call, or of the revelation of Gnosis in the Son, is the return of the Entirety to its root in the Father. This cosmic conversion through Gnosis replaces the deficiency of existence in the cosmos of Error with the fullness of existence in the Father.29

This myth of the Entirety’s return to its source provides the conceptual frame for the meaning of the individual’s own conversion through the proclamation of the gospel. Within the mythic scheme of creation and revelation, conversion is the response of the Entirety to a call from above. Their response brings their collective turn, ascent, and return to the Father. But at the same time as the myth describes the call of the Entirety, it invites the reader to understand this call in another sense. Through the use of ambiguous pronouns, several passages may be taken to refer at once to the mythic, collective return of the Entirety to its source and to the historical response

25 GTr 18.11-21.
26 GTr 20.25-27.
27 GTr 20.30-34.
29 The theme of divine fullness (pleroma) is well known in Valentinian speculation. In the GTr see, for example, 24.20-25.19 and GTr 43.15-16. For discussion of the monism of the text, see W. R. Schoedel, “Gnostic Monism and the Gospel of Truth,” Rediscovery, vol. 1, pp. 379-390.
of individual persons to the gospel of truth. It may be precisely in this ambiguity and the blurring of distinctions between myth and historical experience that results that the literary and religious originality of the *Gospel of Truth* lies.\(^3\) For within the symbolic world of this text, the individual act of response is part of the mythic process by which the Entirety returns to the Father. Individual conversions participate in the collective conversion or restoration of the Entirety. The myth of the Entirety's return thus invites the readers to identify themselves as members of the Entirety, as it provides the interpretive key to the meaning of the individual's own experience.

This leads the readers to construe their own response, or conversion, to the gospel as part of a larger process of conversion, the return of the Entirety to its source. It also leads them to reconceive the relation of divine and non-divine elements in the cosmos, and to discover or adopt a new conception of their own relation to God, the Savior, and the rest of the Entirety. Through the Son's revelation of Gnosis of the previously unknowable Father, they come to know themselves as they come to know their source.

So then, if one has Gnosis, he is from above. If he is called, he hears, he responds, and he turns to the one who calls him. He ascends to Him and understands now in what manner he is called. Having Gnosis, he performs the wish of the One who called him; he wants to please Him, he receives respite, the name of this One comes to be his. He who acquires knowledge in this manner knows whence he has come, and whither he is going. He knows this in the manner of a person who, having become intoxicated, has separated himself from his intoxication, having returned to himself. He has set back his own on their feet. He has turned many from Error.\(^3\)

What the recipients of Gnosis come to understand about their relation to God, the Savior, and the Entirety is that theirs is a relation of family members, previously estranged but reconciled through the Son. With this metaphorical language of family relations, the *Gospel of Truth* leads the readers to see themselves as sons and daughters of the Father, and brothers and sisters of the rest of the Entirety. They are "the sons and daughters of the understanding of the heart,"\(^3\) the children who are worthy of the Father's name, and they are the "true brothers and sisters" upon

\(^3\) See Standaert, *op. cit.* pp. 255-259 and Fineman, *op. cit.*, for close analysis of the relation between literary technique and theological conception in the *GTr.*

\(^3\) *GTr* 22.2-21.

\(^3\) *GTr* 32.38-39.
whom “the love of the Father flows.”33 As sons and daughters of the Father, they share, though they do not duplicate, the Son’s relation to the Father of the Entirety.

The adoption of this new identity does not imply a vision of closed social boundaries, by which only those who have already attained such Gnosis constitute the Entirety, or the extended family of God. On the contrary, in conceiving of their own conversion as part of a larger process, the readers recognize the process of conversion, or the apokatastasis of the Entirety, as only partially complete. The process has begun with the revelation of the Father in the Son, but will not be complete until all the members of the Entirety hear the call and respond. That this eschatological event is not yet complete is clear from both the mythic structure of the text and its exhortation.

Through its language and myth, the Gospel of Truth blurs or dissolves distinctions. The first of these is the apparent distinction between the readers and the Entirety. In addition to this, the text dissolves the apparent distinction between the Son and the awakened members of the Entirety. The author achieves this in part through the use of familial metaphors, which give the Entirety the same relation to the Father as the Son. Even more important, this strategy dissolves the distinction, or shows the connections, between the work of the Son and the work to which the readers are now called. As the Son awakened them to restore their vision and their true relation to the Father, so they are now called to awaken those who continue to sleep, to open the eyes of the blind. Thus, one who has attained the state of repose through Gnosis is not freed from activity, but “performs the wish of the One who called him.” Like the Son, he or she “has separated himself from intoxication, having returned to himself. He has set back his own on their feet. He has turned many from Error.’”

The ambiguous use of pronouns and the concentric structure of the text34 support this reading further. Near the center of the text, the author makes explicit the relation of the author and readers to the mythic Entirety by addressing them with the first person plural.

At the time when the unity will perfect the paths with unity, each one will receive Him in unity, will purify himself from partial state into unitary state, devouring

33 GTr 43.6-7.
34 Standaert, op. cit., pp. 245-250.
matter in Him like fire and darkness by light, death by life. If indeed these things have happened to each one of us, it is indeed right for us to think about the Entirety, so that this house might become pure and tranquil towards unity.35

With this direct address, the author identifies himself and the readers as those who have begun this process of purification from darkness to light, death to life. Individually they have moved from partiality to unity. Collectively, however, the states of purity, tranquility, and unity have not yet been fully achieved. And since these things have happened individually to those who are addressed, it is right, the author points out, that they should think about the Entirety as a whole. This goes beyond those addressed and includes those in whom these things have not taken place.

This concern for those who have not yet awakened is supported by the discussion of those who have not yet come into being. ‘‘I do not say, however, that those who have not yet come into being are nothing; on the contrary, they exist in the One who will wish that they come into being when He so wishes.’’36 While that which does ‘‘not exist at all will never come into being,’’37 there are some who do exist but have not yet come into being. If they are to come into being in the same manner as the readers of the text, it should take place through the awakening activity of the Son.

‘‘Blessed is he who has opened the eyes of the blind’’ appears at the very center of the text.38 This saying links the activity of the Son, the accomplished conversion of the readers, and the future conversion of those who are still blind.

This is the way each one has acted, being asleep, at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way of his coming to Gnosis, just as he awakened. And it is a good thing for the person who turns and awakens. And blessed is he who has opened the eyes of the blind. And the hastening Spirit fled to them after He had awakened him. Having helped the one who was stretched out upon the ground, he stood up upon his feet, because he had not yet risen, and the Gnosis of the Father and the revelation of His Son, it gave them the means of knowing.39

With this central passage, the text moves increasingly to link the new identity to which the readers have awakened to the identity and activity of the Son. This transforms the makarism, ‘‘Blessed is who has opened the eyes of the blind,’’ from a blessing of the Son to an

35 GTr 25.8-24.
36 GTr 27.34-28.3.
38 Standaert, op. cit., p. 252.
exhortation directed to the readers of the text. This method of exhortation continues with a description of the function of one who "came into being." His function is to redirect, turn, or convert, those who wait, stretched out in need.

He came into being, being a path for those who were astray and a knowledge for those who were ignorant, a discovery for those who were seeking and a stability for those who were shaking, a purity for those who were defiled. He is the shepherd who left behind the ninety-nine sheep which had not strayed and came and searched for that one which had strayed and rejoiced when he found it.\(^40\)

In an extended discussion of the shepherd's work on behalf of the sheep, the author explicitly identifies the shepherd's activity even on the Sabbath as the work of the Son. He worked on behalf of the Entirety that "you might know in your heart what the Sabbath is."\(^41\) From this, the author moves immediately to exhortation.

Even on the Sabbath, the sheep which he discovered fallen into a pit, he worked on its behalf. He gave it life, having brought it up from the pit in order that you might know in your heart what is the meaning of the Sabbath—that you are sons of the understanding (of the heart) ... So you should speak from the eternal day—which has no night, and from the light which does not set since it is perfect. Say then from your heart that it is you who are this perfect day and that it is in you that the light which does not cease dwells.\(^42\)

Here, the goal of the Son's activity is making known the message that "you," the addressees of the text, are the sons and daughters of understanding. From this follows the exhortation to speak from "the eternal day," the Sabbath which has no night but exists in the perfect light of the Father. This exhortation implies that those for whom the Son worked on the Sabbath, that they might know the meaning of that eternal day, should speak from that day, working as shepherds even on the Sabbath, for those who remain fallen in the pit.

The author plays with the meaning of the Sabbath to establish the task and source of the shepherd's work. In one sense, the shepherd violates the day of rest for the sake of those who remain "fallen in the pit." In another, more important sense, the shepherd speaks about the eternal day in which the Entirety resides, the repose of the Father. In another sense, the shepherd works out of that eternal day in which he resides. The members of the Entirety,

\(^{40}\) *GTr* 31.28-32.4.  
\(^{41}\) *GTr* 32.22-24.  
\(^{42}\) *GTr* 32.18-34.
like the Savior, are called to work on the day of rest by speaking about and from that perfect day, the repose of the Father, in which they reside and out of which they speak and work.

As the text continues, a series of imperatives identify the audience to whom they should speak. This serves more clearly to pattern the activity of the readers on the model of the awakener.

Speak about the truth with those who seek it and of knowledge for those who have sinned in their error. You are the sons of the understanding of the heart. Strengthen the feet of those who have strumbled and stretch out your hands to those who are sick. Feed those who are hungry and to those who are weary give repose. Raise those who wish to rise. Awaken those who are asleep. For you are the understanding that draws out. If strength acts this way, it becomes even stronger.\(^{43}\)

Like the one who "helped him who was stretched out upon the ground" at creation,\(^{44}\) and the Son who "revealed the Gnosis of the Father," those who do this work of speaking, strengthening, feeding, raising and awakening perform the wish of the Father and receive the blessing, "Blessed is he who has opened the eyes of the blind."

As this analysis shows, the Gospel of Truth seeks to reorient its readers' theology and practice through a mythic interpretation of the Christian gospel. In this interpretation, conversion is both the Entirety's return to its source and the individual's response to the call of the gospel of truth. These two processes of conversion are shown to converge not only through the identification of the Entirety with the individuals who hear and respond, but also through the figure and activity of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Through his teaching, death, and resurrection, he reveals the inconceivable God to be Father and enables those who are His to turn from ignorance to gnosis, anxiety and rootlessness to repose. From the perspective of the narrator this process of conversion has already begun for himself and for the readers of the text.\(^{45}\) But since the process is not yet complete, he exhorts those who have turned and awakened to

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\(^{43}\) GTr 32.35-33.11.

\(^{44}\) GTr 30.6-26 may be read as a reinterpretation of Gnostic readings of the Genesis account of the creation of Adam. Especially suggestive is the image of the one who could not rise without Gnosis, paralleled in Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.30.6, *Apocrif Io. II.*, 1, 19.5-20; *HypArch* 88.3-11, and Fragment 1 of Valentinus, in Clement, *Strom.* 2.36.2-4. See also GTr 34.10-31 and 35.18-27.

\(^{45}\) GTr 42.11-39 describes the place of the blessed. In GTr 42.41-43.8, the narrator speaks of that place as if he is in it and shall come to be in it.
continue the work of the Savior. This exhortation follows directly from the proclamation of the gospel. Thus, the Gospel of Truth may be described as a gospel of conversion. It proclaims the good news of conversion for those who have already turned, sets forth a vision of their place in the Father and in relation to the Son, and exhorts them to awaken those who still sleep to their true relation to the Father, the Son, and the rest of the Entirety.

This gnostic conception of conversion is not the product, as Nock would have it, of a cult which promised privilege and security but demanded no genuine reorientation in return. To be sure, this conversion to Gnosis does not involve reorientation of the sort that Nock describes, but it does involve reorientation of a different sort. For the conversion of which its speaks does not involve repentance from sin to grace, or repugnance and guilt for one’s past, but a reorientation from ignorance to Gnosis, and from anxiety and rootlessness to repose. Moreover, it brings profound reorientation of thought, as it conceptualizes the return of the Entirety to its source, and brings about a new form of practice, as it calls its readers to act in conformity with the pattern established by the Son. If the warning to “‘despise Error, which has no root’” suggests repugnance for one’s own past, it is not for sin but for the one’s former beliefs, renamed as error and ignorance. But even more, this renunciation of the past brings compassion for those who remain under the tyranny of Error.

As the Gospel of Truth leads its readers to identify with the sons and daughters of the Father, it leads them to model their activity on that of the Son, and so to participate in the eschatological process of restoring the Entirety to its source. The awakened ones thus become agents of awakening. The recipients of Gnosis are not merely Gnostikoi, or ones who possess Gnosis, but those who make the gospel of truth known to those who are ignorant, “the name of the gospel being the manifestation of hope, the discovery for those who go about seeking Him.”

The course of action or discipleship to which this gospel reorients its readers is not the moral code of Nock’s prophetic Christianity, nor is it a stereotyped gnostic asceticism, libertinism, quietism, or

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46 GTr 17.28-30.
47 See M. Smith, op. cit., for further discussion of the use of gnōstikos as a self-designation.
48 GTr 17.1-4.
elitism. Instead, it is a course of action based on a distinctively gnostic vision of the gospel and grounded in its conception of the will of the Father and the redeeming activity of the Son.

Against Nock, this analysis of the Gospel of Truth shows that conversion and Gnosis are not mutually exclusive phenomena. It also shows that Gnosticism was not a cultic movement which appealed only to superficial psychological needs and effected no genuine change of theology or way of life. Instead, Gnosticism, or this particular variety of Christian Gnosticism (or gnostic Christianity), developed a distinctive theology from which follow corresponding patterns of social and ethical action.

The Gospel of Truth vividly illustrates the social meaning and power of a gnostic vision of the gospel. Through its creation of a symbolic world, the Gospel of Truth has the power to sustain a community of believers and provide theological justification for preaching its message and extending its boundaries. The "Gnostikoi" who read this text understood themselves as an inner circle of awakened ones, members of the Entirety returned to their source. This did not mean they cut themselves off from others, any more than it meant they merely satisfied their superficial desire for privilege and security from mortality and fate. Rather, their interpretation of the gospel of truth as the good news of the restoration and conversion of the Entirety called them to "open the eyes of the blind" and complete the process of social and cosmic conversion at the will of the Father and in imitation of the Son.49

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