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THE TWO GNOSIS OF THE Gnostics: A TYPOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ANCIENT GNOSTICISM

Research article

Bahar S.A.^{1,*}¹ORCID : 0000-0002-8094-6079;¹ Saint-Petersburg Medico-Social Institute, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation

* Corresponding author (temperatur[at]yandex.ru)

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Abstract

This article attempts to bridge the current gap in the study of Gnosticism. For this reason, an historical and philosophical analysis of the singularity of the category of knowledge in Gnostic works was performed for the first time. The paper shows its place in ontology, gnosiology, and anthropology of the Gnostics. The analysis draws on a wide range of resources. As a consequence of the research, the author came to the conclusion that the Gnostics use the word “gnosis” at least in two senses: firstly, in the sense of an immediate experience of the Truth, and secondly, in the sense of information about this experience. This makes it possible to say that we are concerned with two types of knowledge. Speaking figuratively in the Gnostics’ manner, it may be said that these two types can be nominally designated as an inner and an outer knowledge. This typological differentiation can provide a deeper understanding of the Gnostic category of knowledge, and, as a result, a deeper understanding of the Gnostic works. The results of this paper can be used in all areas of modern science, in one way or another connected with the study of Gnosticism.

Keywords: gnosis, Gnosticism, knowledge, typology of knowledge, truth.

ДВА ГНОЗИСА ГНОСТИКОВ: ТИПОЛОГИЯ ЗНАНИЯ В АНТИЧНОМ ГНОСТИЦИЗМЕ

Научная статья

Бахарь С.А.^{1,*}¹ORCID : 0000-0002-8094-6079;¹ Санкт-Петербургский медико-социальный институт, Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация

* Корреспондирующий автор (temperatur[at]yandex.ru)

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Аннотация

В данной статье предпринята попытка восполнить существующий пробел в изучении гностицизма. По этой причине впервые был проведен историко-философский анализ уникальности категории знания в гностических трудах. В статье показано его место в онтологии, гносеологии и антропологии гностиков. Анализ основан на привлечении большого количества различных источников. В результате проведенного исследования автор приходит к выводу, что гностики используют слово «гнозис» как минимум в двух смыслах: во-первых, в смысле непосредственного переживания Истины; а во-вторых, в смысле информации об этом переживании. Это позволяет сказать, что мы имеем дело с двумя типами знания. Образно выражаясь в духе гностиков эти два типа можно условно обозначить как внутреннее знание и знание внешнее. Такая типологическая дифференциация способна обеспечить более глубокое понимание гностической категории знания и, как следствие, более глубокое понимание гностицизма. Результаты работы могут быть использованы во всех областях современной науки, так или иначе связанных с изучением гностицизма.

Ключевые слова: гнозис, гностицизм, знание, типология знания, истина.

Introduction

The term “Gnosticism” was derived from the word gnosis (from Greek γνῶσις — knowledge) in the second half of the XVII century by the English philosopher Henry More. In a modern literature, it is commonly used to designate the summation of religious and philosophical movements of late antiquity [1, P. 3], which recognize gnosis (γνῶσις) — a kind of knowledge — as the main salvation. Gnosis is considered to be the central concept of Gnosticism, which is why there is no text dedicated to Gnosticism that is complete without invoking the theme of knowledge.

Speaking of gnosis, researchers often acknowledge the ambiguity of this word [11, P. 36], which indicates the various referents behind it. Nevertheless, the analysis of the research literature has shown that, despite this statement, scientists cannot make a clear typological differentiation of the category of knowledge. At any rate, there is no methodic work on this issue. As a result, it is often not entirely clear what meaning the Gnostics do put into the word “gnosis”, which significantly affects the understanding of the Gnostic teachings themselves. Basically, this very circumstance caused our interest in the topic of this paper.

The work used texts from the 3rd and 4th centuries, including the Ascu Codex (CA), Bruce Codex (CB), Chacos Codex (CT), Nag Hammadi Codex (NH), and Berlin Papyrus 8502 (BG 8502).

The study used a historical and philosophical approach to explicate and systematize Gnostic ideas about knowledge, as well as to identify their background and compare them with similar ideas in Orthodox Christianity.

Main results

However, we face some serious difficulties while proceeding to the study of the category of knowledge in Gnosticism. It concerns sources. The Gnostic texts currently available are translations made on the cusp of the III-IV centuries into Coptic from more ancient manuscripts written in Greek. Since these are just translations, the text has a completely different structure and vocabulary compared to the original, and therefore may differ significantly from it [10, P. 172]. Therefore, in most cases, we cannot exactly say which Greek word stands for the Coptic one.

Nevertheless, on the basis of a large number of sources and relevant critical literature, it can be concluded that the Gnostics use the word "gnosis" in at least two ways: in the sense of knowing oneself, and in the sense of different ways for achieving this knowledge. Such ambiguousness makes it possible to say that we are dealing with at least two types of knowledge. Using Gnostic terminology, they can be designated as the inner and the outer knowledge (NHC I. 3, 32: 8).

According to the Gnostics, inner knowledge is the knowledge of oneself. Originally, the possessor of such knowledge is the Absolute —the singular and transcendent source. The knowledge that God possesses can be viewed as His Personality [5, P. 218–308] or His true "Self" [4]. The Personality of God is inextricably linked to Him. At the same time, both God and His Personality have an independent existence. The relationship between them is depicted by the Gnostics as that between the Father and the Son.

The subject matter of the inner knowledge is God's Truth about Himself. God always possesses the knowledge of the Truth, since there was no time when God would not know Himself. However, God's knowledge of Himself is not just the result of perception, but also the process by which this perception is materialized. Thus, the Absolute is revealed to Himself not only as Self-Consciousness but also as Self-Knowledge.

In the process of the Self-Discovery of the Absolute, initially united, Knowledge unfolds in a multitude of diverse acts, which personify themselves as aeons (from the Greek αἰών — age, eternity), souls endowed with their own freedom and self-awareness. In the case of aeon, knowledge of oneself is knowledge of one's nature. Moreover, for aeon the knowledge of its nature means not only the knowledge of its origin but also the knowledge that the Absolute is unknown to it, that is, the knowledge of its unknowledge.

In most Gnostic systems, the revelation of the One Knowledge through a multitude of aeons is depicted as a gradual descent of the Absolute. Here, each aeon is endowed with a degree of understanding of the Absolute that is distinct from the others, thereby representing a specific level in the hierarchy of being. The more coarse and crude the individual consciousnesses are by nature, the more they dwell in "places" that are rougher and farther removed from the Father. In this context, inner knowledge can be viewed as a hierarchical structure that differentiates souls according to their proximity to God.

The ignorance of the Absolute compels the aeons to strive for His knowledge. However, it is only in unity that they can attain a complete understanding of the Absolute. Attempting to comprehend the Father in isolation leads to suffering, which shapes the matter of the sensory cosmos. Due to their ignorance of the true nature of suffering, the aeons perceive the material world as something external and independent from themselves [9, P. 37–39]. Since this world is a consequence of their ignorance of the Father, ignorance and the world are identified by the Gnostics. In this context, ignorance does not merely materialize; it is personified in the form of independent entities known as archons (from the Greek ἄρχων, meaning ruler), who seek to maintain the state of ignorance [11, P. 47].

But since the external world is considered to be the objectified affectus of fallen aeons, its existence is illusive. It is only an illusion, an obsession, or a figment of fallacy and has only imaginative being. Captured away by this illusion, aeons forget about the absolute being from which they originate, as a result of which their being turns out to be imaginative, illusive, or rather identical to the not-being. And this means that the soul, being enclosed in a material body, drags on an imaginative, illusive existence, alike a dream or death. Therefore, the Gnostics construe the unknowledge as evil. Thus, the goal of aeons is in returning to the real being, the resurrection. The necessary condition for it is the knowledge of one's own nature, one's true "I". This means that salvation can be achieved through the self-knowledge [7].

In most Gnostic systems, the fullness of Knowledge possesses a multi-tiered structure, and thus the self-discovery of the aeons can be depicted as a process of their gradual ascent or elevation, where the soul must transcend the hierarchy of gods. A person seeking to grasp the Truth encounters the complexities of celestial realms and stages described in gnostic texts. As one delves into these stages, they gradually move toward the understanding of God as the unity and root of all levels of existence.

It is important to note that Gnostic self-knowledge cannot be achieved through conventional means of understanding, such as sensory perception or rational thought; rather, it is the result of mystical experience [11, P. 113]. It is "what no eye has seen, and what no ear has heard, and what no hand has touched, and what has not occurred to the human mind" (NHC II. 2, 17) [8, P. 91]. In this regard, the Gnostics refer to inner knowledge as secret or concealed [11, P. 37–38].

Nevertheless, the true "Self" remains hidden from an individual until one becomes aware of it. Through the process of self-discovery, what was once secret becomes evident, and the concealed becomes accessible. As a result of this revelation, the aeons begin to recognize their divine nature and experience unity with the Absolute [3, P. 9–19]. This implies that in the universal oneness, the external world becomes equal to the internal one. Consequently, the Gnostic understands that his own essence is the foundation of all objects and events in material reality. Thus, he becomes the "King of All" (NHC II. 2, 1). From this point forward, it is not he who is subject to the laws of the world; rather, the world is subordinate to his authority, which manifests primarily in the soul's capacity to resist passions (NHC II. 3, 61).

This means that the transit from the unknowledge to the knowledge is congruent with the change of the knower and with its fundamental transformation. In The Treatise on the Resurrection (NHC I. 4, 48–49) it is said that "the resurrection <...> is the truth which stands firm. It is the revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness" [8, P.



39]. This means that the inner knowledge is inexpressible — it cannot be learned and it cannot be taught. It cannot be told from the outside and can only be obtained through personal experience, only internally.

Gnosticism varies from the Orthodox Christianity in this area. The Orthodox Christianity bases on the authority of tradition in order to prove the tenability of its teachings. The Gnostics criticize Christians who, in their opinion, use someone else's beliefs. Not coincidentally, Irenaeus says that the Gnostics imagine themselves as a more rational and wiser person than the apostles, and that, according to the Gnostics, the apostles have been preaching the Gospel while still being under the influence of Judaism [2, P. 264].

Such an idea of knowledge is found not only in Gnosticism, which has certain cultural and historical boundaries but also in every mystical teaching. It is not for nothing that while exploring the origin of gnosis there appears to emerge such terms as Orphic mysteries, Upanishads' teachings, the religion of ancient Egypt, the mythology of Iran and etc. [11, P. 50]. However, revealing an absolute similarity with all mystical teachings, the teaching presented in the Gnostic monuments has one significant difference. It reflects a completely different experience — an experience of the individual. The subject of cosmogony here is not a generalized impersonal principle, and certainly not a mythological deity, deprived of its own certainty, but a person with freedom and self-consciousness [5, P. 218–308].

The second type of knowledge is the outer knowledge that is secondary towards the personal experience of the mystical trail. It means an attempt to express the revealed truth through signs and symbols. The outer knowledge is represented primarily by texts and rituals. In many Gnostics' works, the texts are termed knowledge. For example, in Zostrianos (NHC VIII. 1), where the author explains the purpose of his writing as: "I wrote three tablets (and) left them as knowledge for those who would come after me, the living elect" [8, P. 226].

Gnostic texts provide a comprehensive depiction of the world, revealing the origin, purpose, and essence of humanity, while addressing the problem of good and evil. They describe various ways of knowledge acquisition, including ritual practices. The later the system, the broader the range of external knowledge it encompasses. For instance, in Pistis Sophia, one of the later Gnostic texts, the list of themes covered by gnosis spans several pages. As for Gnostic rituals, they bear a striking resemblance to the practices of the Christian Church and incorporate elements such as baptism, re-clothing, and the sharing of food, among others [12, P. 84].

Being a method of expressing the Truth, such texts and rituals were composed with a possibility to be interpreted. Since interpretation leads to the revelation of the hidden, both external knowledge and internal knowledge can be regarded as secret. In the prologue of The Gospel of Thomas (NHC II. 2) it is said: "These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke. And Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down. And he said: Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not taste death" [8, P. 89]. From this stems the designation of their rituals by the Gnostics as "mysteries" [11, P. 38].

However, any signs and symbols are elements of the physical world. Therefore, in contrast to the inner knowledge, the outer knowledge is accessible for the usual methods of comprehension, as a result of which it is called not only secret but also evident, revealed. The evident knowledge can be transferred from one person to another so that it can be learned and taught. According to the Gnostics, the first who taught people this knowledge was the Savior, sent by God the Father for the salvation of aeons from the world of evil. The Savior inform about the Truth to his flock, who were, in turn, to spread the word amongst other people.

However, for self-knowledge to be realized, it is essential to undergo repentance, or "metanoia" (from the Greek μετάνοια — "a change of mind," "a transformation of thought," "a rethinking"), which entails turning away from all that is external and turning inward. And to do this, aeons must overcome any discursive activity. Only this way will help them reveal the true meaning of symbols. According to Hippolytus [12, P. 335], The Gnostic Monoim instructs: "abandoning the search of God by means of creation, (begin) to search for Him on your own behalf and perceive who has adopted absolutely everything in you and says: "My mind, my thinking, my soul, my body", and perceive whence grief and joy, love and hate ... And if you carefully research all this, you will find Him in yourself".

Conclusion

In summary, based on the above, it can be concluded that the Gnostics use the word "gnosis", at least in two senses: in the sense of knowing the Truth, and in the sense of information about this knowledge. This makes it possible to say that we are concerned with at least two types of knowledge. The first is directed at the Absolute and is given within the realization of the "everything with everything" identity. The second is aimed at the plurality of things and is not congruent with the experience of the unity. Using the Gnostics' spatial metaphor, these two types of knowledge can be conventionally designated as the inner and the outer knowledge. This differentiation can provide a deeper understanding of the Gnostic category of knowledge, and as a result, a deeper understanding of Gnosticism itself.

However, this Gnostic teaching about the identity of "everything with everything" ultimately makes any typology impossible to understand. From this, we can conclude that, despite the methodological reasonability of the typological differentiation of the Gnostic category of knowledge, it eventually appears to be rather conditional and requires specific detailing in each specific case.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Рецензия

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.



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