

The Big Bang of Basilides

Menander, Basilides, Isidorus

This is Part 2 of the Gnostic Series. Read [Part 1](#) and [Part 3](#).

by [Jillian Becker](#) (September 2023)



Untitled, Zdzisław Beksiński, 1972

Following my [essay](#) on Simon Magus (The Father of Heresy, NER August 2023), this is the next of a short

series on some remarkable ancient Gnostic sects.

While remaining fully respectful of NER's erudite readership, I mention for the hypothetical rare reader who might want an explanation of "Gnostic," that it's derived from the Greek word *gnosis* and implies the possession of a particular sort of *knowledge*, a kind that needs no objective proof, but exists to the knower as an absolute, incontrovertible certainty. To Gnostics, their certainty was the sole source and authentication of their religious belief.

They *knew* that this world is evil. In the doctrine of most Gnostic sects, *everything* of this world is evil; every material thing. Every flower, every tree, every blade of grass, every fruit, every stream, the land and the ocean, every bird, fish, insect, animal is evil. Every human being is base, vile, made of filth. And as an evil creation can only be the work of an evil creator, he who made and rules this world is an Evil God (or, in a minority of systems, a God who is not outright evil but lacking goodness, being a stickler for dreaded *justice*).

So Gnostics scorned and hated everything that the generality considered good. They celebrated what was generally abominated, abominated what was generally admired. Acts regarded by most people as bad, immoral, or criminal, were to be performed; those regarded as good were not to be performed. This inversion of values characterizes Gnosticism.

The Gnostic also *knew* there is something in this world which is not evil: *the knowledge itself*. And since an evil god can only create evil things, the knowledge cannot come from the evil—or merely just-creator of this world. There must be another source, another god who has nothing to do with this vile world, but exists outside and beyond it, and is good. The Good God is the Primary Source, pure Being, the One. Only good

can come from Him.

So how did evil come into existence? To answer this question, the Gnostics charted a family tree of divine beings: a theogony. At the summit is pure Being, the Source, which is purely Good. From the Source descend "hypostases," personified principles, beings whose degree of divinity diminishes the further they are from the Source. Each lesser being receives from the one immediately above him a portion of his divinity and passes on a portion of what he receives to the one below him. From being to being descending, goodness diminishes with each diminishing degree of divinity. The goodness runs out before the divinity, however, and the lowest god receives none of it. He has the divine power to create, but no good to put into his creation. So what he makes is evil. He is the creator of this evil world and all that dwells therein. He is often named Ialdabaoth and is comparable to the "demiurge" (*demiurgos*) of Greek philosophy: the divine artisan or smith who takes everlasting Matter and shapes it into the things of our world. In many Gnostic systems he is identified with the God of the Jews.

And yet something of the good, a miniscule spark of the Good itself, the Gnosis, did come into human beings (or at least some of them), to remain deep within them, trapped inside their vile bodies throughout their lives on this earth until finally it is released when they die. But how did it come to them? It could not have come from the evil creator of this world—it was not his to give. It came, the Gnostics said, directly from the Source. It is a gift from the Highest, it belongs to Him, and to Him it will at last return, to be again one with the One. And for the time that people have to endure life in this world, by that spark they may know the good, and the layered heavens full of immortal beings, and the Supreme God Up There.

Up there, the One is at a distance immeasurably remote; but within the Gnostic, He is intimately close. And the Gnostic

knows that He will at last redeem—take back—the vital spark.

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The Fathers of the Catholic Church regarded Simon Magus as the originator of Gnosticism. After him, many Gnostic teachers established schools of thought. Some started in the tradition of one or another school but came to be so far at variance with the founders that they broke away and launched sects of their own, which in turn could be developed into new schools and traditions.

When Simon Magus disappointed the expectations of his Samaritan followers by falling from the sky when he took flight, or by failing to rise from the grave, they became Christians in large numbers according to Church accounts. But some of his disciples founded cults of their own, and they in turn had many imitators.

Simon's disciple, Menander—though he endorsed much of what his master had taught—did not try to keep his master's cult alive. He made some significant changes to the Simonian doctrine, and so founded a cult of his own.

Menander revealed that Simon was not really the divine savior; he—Menander himself—was.

Rather than try to persuade the once-bitten Samaritans to believe in him as they had believed in Simon, he repaired to Antioch and there gathered a following.

His theogony was a variation of Simon's. A First Power emanated a First Thought who, in turn, emanated lesser powers, the Archons, who made the world. But contrary to Simon's assertions, the lesser powers did have knowledge of the First Power and rebelled against him. As a result, death came into the world. However, after many ages, here was Menander descended in human form to save humanity. He offered a baptism 'into him' himself, which he guaranteed would provide

immediate immunity from decrepitude and death.

These promises were not fulfilled. His baptized flock aged and died, and his cult disappeared.

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But a disciple of his, Basilides, in his turn improved the mystic vision of his master into something richer and stranger, and with it won a large and enthusiastic following in North Africa, Spain, and even—it has been contended—in Britain.

He was born in Antioch (Syria) and began teaching in 117 C.E. Though Jewish by birth, he was won over by the Gnosis of Menander. When he was ready to lead a following of his own, he went abroad—perhaps because it is always hard to be a prophet in one's own land. He established his name as a Gnostic leader in Alexandria.

There are many and various scandalous stories about the beliefs and practices of Basilides recorded by the Church Fathers—chiefly Origen, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria—and they are not all consistent with each other. They broadly agree, however, on the *Gnostic type* of the Basilidean teachings, and that they are startling, elaborate, fantastic (in the true meaning of the word), and preposterous. We cannot know which of them is accurately attributed, for not one of Basilides's own books has survived. There were many of them, including 24 volumes of commentaries on the four canonical gospels—although in public he deplored book-learning, and preached the value of being without it. Practicing in secret what he outspokenly preached against, he wrote under a number of pseudonyms, among them Cham, Barcabbas, Barcoph and Parchor. He was adept at Numerology—finding magical significance in words and names according to numbers held to be the equivalent of letters. A certain treatise was attributed to him titled *On the*

Additional Soul. Christian critics, who read it before they had it destroyed, say that it expounded the idea that men have, in addition to a First Soul that is the gift of the supreme Father, another with which they have been cursed by a lower power. The second soul is manifest in the passions which drag men down into sin.

By some accounts, Basilides was himself a man of high moral principle and it was against his teaching that his followers turned to libertinism. Others state that he permitted libertinism, but only for those who attained perfection, because a Perfect (or Pneumatic, possessor of the spiritual spark of Gnosis) cannot sin no matter what he does.

The Basilides sect was not exclusive. All men and women were welcome to join it, even those who came from the squalid majority called the Hylics (wholly material). An initiate had to prove his seriousness of intent by not uttering a word for five years (a practice probably derived from the school of Pythagoras). A Hylic member of the sect might, by participating assiduously in the sacramental rites—orgies, for which uninhibited sexual self-indulgence was prescribed—rise to join the Psychics, members with souls in whom the light of the Gnosis was kindled if yet but dimly; and a Psychic, with spiritual labor, conscientious ritual defiance of all common sexual taboos, and presumably some manifest conviction that the Gnosis was within him, might rise to be accepted among the Pneumatics, who alone were the true Gnostics.

Basilides spoke of the “faith” of the Psychics, the “gnosis” of the Pneumatics. He also used the word Noesis—derived from Nous—to explain what the Gnosis was: direct knowledge, an intuitive certainty of understanding. All who did not achieve or were not gifted with the experience of gnosis were tied to the earth by their passions, literally their “attachments,” and each was destined to be reborn again and again (an idea which might have come, by many a winding path, from India), until in some eventual incarnation the true light of the

Gnosis broke within him.

Those who declared Basilides himself a libertine and charlatan in the style of Simon Magus said that he practiced the magic arts, used drugs to assist his promiscuous seductions, and preached sexual licentiousness to his followers. Far from welcoming all who would join him, he was an extreme elitist, regarding only those gifted with the Gnosis as "true human beings," the rest of humankind as "of no more worth than pigs or dogs." But if that were true, would he have acquired the vast following attributed to him?

By all accounts, Basilides propounded an elaborate and voluminous theogony, but there are differing versions of it. Broadly speaking, it was along these lines: At the top was the First Principle, the Source, who was God the Father and the Ultimate Truth. He had another, secret name, imparted only to the Pneumatics, who alone were enlightened enough by the inner spark of the Gnosis to recognize the truth and endure the implication of so terrible a revelation: for this secret name of God was—Nothing.

Something comes out of nothing; the most insubstantial of things, but something: a thought, the archetype of a thought, Thought itself. It emanated from Nothing. Nothing was a thought-emanator by its nature, though it was a negative, a not-nature. (So say some reports, while others assert that Basilides abhorred the idea that God emanated anything, preferring rather to say "God spoke and it was.") Volumes have been written about the meaning of Nous and Logos in Greek philosophy. In the New Testament, the Logos is translated as "the Word." Nous or Logos, either will do for our outline if they're both taken to mean "the Intellectual Principle."

Then comes the Second Emanation. Not from Nothing, but from the First Emanation. Thus, Nous or Logos emanated Phronesis (Prudence). And Phronesis *emanated* two beings, Sophia (Wisdom) and Dynamis (Power). Sophia was the feminine, passive,

conceiving principle; Dynamis the masculine, active, effecting principle. Sophia and Dynamis *generated* lesser Powers, Principalities, and Angels—the hosts of heaven collectively called the Aeons—who themselves made the First Heaven and generated more Aeons, who made the Second Heaven and generated yet more Aeons, who made the Third Heaven ... and so on through 365 heavens, and then a last generation of Aeons made this world and created mankind.

By some accounts, not only Sophia and Dynamis, but every Aeon had its opposite type, as male and female are opposite types. In their pairs they generate pairs which are called syzygies.

To the mystics who described such visions of the beginning of things, there was an important difference between *emanating*—explained by *the analogy of the sun giving out its light*, which light was not the same thing as the sun though inseparable from it—and *generating*, by which immaterial offspring were spiritually begotten as separate beings. *Creating* was different again, it being the means by which the first human pair was made. The lowest Aeons could create material things, including human bodies, but the human spirit had to come from much higher in the hierarchy of spiritual beings. In the Basilidean scheme it came directly from God the Father.

An alternative account of the Basilidean creation myth starts the same way but introduces a new idea. Before time began there was Nothing, which was absolutely nothing, nothing whatsoever. Even to call it nothing is to assert something about it that is too positive. It was an absence. It was God Non-Existent. It was God Non-Existent, without thought, without impulse, without desire. Yet because we must tell with words what words are inadequate to tell, we must say that this Nothing had or “spoke” a thought without *willing* to do so, and the thought was: to make a world. What was made in that first instant was a world-seed—analogous to the infinitesimally small, incalculably dense something which, in modern science’s

"Big Bang" theory, expanded to become the universe. Thus the Non-Existent God made a Not-Yet-Existing-World from non-existence, by bringing into being a single seed which contained all of which the universe consists: not only this material World and everything in it, but also the heavens and the Divine.

The implication of this account is that matter, having the same origin as the Divine, is not as entirely evil in the theory of Basilides as in most Gnostic theories. Basilides and his son Isidorus were both reputed to "love nature," unlike the Gnostic teachers in whose schemata nature is the creation of an evil god. And as Basilides had a son, and as he did not consider all things material including human flesh to be evil, it would be reasonable to suppose that he was not ideologically against marriage, reproductive copulation, and the begetting of children as were other Gnostics.

Still, in the Basilidean schema, evil exists in the lower heavens and on earth. Among the Aeons, there are two Lesser Rulers of the spheres of the fixed stars and the 7 planets, but neither of them made or rules this world (which came into existence when the world-seed expanded). The Higher Ruler (*not* to be identified with the highest god Nothing) abides in an upper heaven, the Ogdoad (meaning "the eightfold"); the Lower Ruler beneath him in the Hebdomad ("the sevenfold"). The Lower Ruler is a Bad Angel. He has the power to inflict suffering on mankind, and this he does.

In time, this World became peopled, and the peoples divided into nations. Then each of the lowest Aeons chose a nation for his own. The chief Aeon among them, the Lower Ruler, Lord of the Hebdoad, chose the Jews, and wished to subject all other nations to them, but the other Aeons opposed him, so all nations are opposed to his nation; all are opposed to the Jews.

International strife was only one of the afflictions visited

on mankind by this Lord. It was he who sent the Law to the Jews through Moses. All the prophets before the Christ believed mistakenly, as did Moses himself, that the Law came from God the Father. The Law was a heavy burden on suffering mankind, the whole of which at this point becomes oddly identified with the Jews, the bad nation which alone had been subjected to the Law of Moses.

After long ages the true God took pity on the human race, and to salve the sufferings of all mankind sent down the First Aeon, Nous—or “the Logos”, or “the Christ” —who for a certain time was united with the person of a man, Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ did *not* suffer crucifixion in the person of Jesus. Some say this was because the Christ parted from Jesus before the crucifixion; others because the man Jesus himself was not crucified. The latter taught that Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross for him, died on it in his stead, and Jesus with the Christ still in him took the form of this Simon and laughed at the Christians for believing that it was he who had died on the Cross. For this reason, Basilides taught that the Crucified must not be worshipped, nor the Cross held holy.

Whether from the body of Jesus or the body of Simon of Cyrene, the Christ rose again to the highest heaven. Yet it seems that he returned home without having fulfilled his mission on earth. Mankind was *not* saved by the Christ from the misfortunes visited upon it by the Lord of the Lower Heavens. Only the Gnosis can save a person.

A variation of this story propounds that when the Divine issued from the world-seed, it released a threefold Sonship; a Sonship of light which reaches God the Father immediately; a less pure Sonship which needs the aid of the Holy Spirit to reach the Father; and a coarse Sonship. The first two Sons are the Lords of the Highest and Middle Heavens, the third, Lord of the Lower Heavens. Also from the Divine issued the Gospel, not at once to be bestowed upon earth, but whole and ready in the highest sphere. Each of the two higher Lords has a son who

“surpasses his father in wisdom and beauty.” These glorious sons “catch” the Gospel “as naphta catches fire from a great distance,” and they declare it to their fathers. It fills the High Lords (all of them, even the highest) with terror and they “repent” –though of *what* is not disclosed, or the disclosure is lost.

The Lord of the Lower Heavens knew nothing of the Gospel until the coming of the Christ to earth. Then in our world it enlightened Jesus the son of Mary (so the Gospel came before Jesus was of an age to be enlightened), and yet everything happened as is related in the canonical gospels. According to Clement of Alexandria, the Basilideans taught that when Jesus died (whether on the cross or later in the body of Simon of Cyrene) he was the first man to “have his parts saved in three ways according to the three Sonships, the impure, the coarse, and the fine-pure.” He was Hylic, Psychic, and Pneumatic all in one. “His sufferings befell his impure bodily parts, his mind returned to the (psychic) Sphere of the Seven, a coarse sphere only in comparison to the highest sphere, to which his soul departed and was saved.” Clement infers from this complicated doctrine that Basilides blasphemously said that Jesus had sinned, since he needed refining and saving.*

Basilides’s son Isidorus wrote a number of volumes, among them one titled *On the Grown Soul*. It argued against his father’s thesis of the two souls. It is a dangerous idea, he pointed out, to propose that the soul is not one; that a second soul, moved by the attachments or passions, can drive a person to do evil things. It gives the evildoer an excuse, allowing him to claim, “It was not I, with my God-given soul, who sinned. I was forced against my will to do it by another soul within me that was not sent by God.”

A high ethical tenor was attributed to the books of Isidorus, in the light of which it seems doubtful that he was a Gnostic. Reports say that he upheld the virtues of responsibility, self-control and sexual continence. He adjured his

followers—wisely, I think—to “pray not that you may do right, but that you may do no wrong.”

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *City Journal* (US); *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe); *Encounter*, *The Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The Salisbury Review*, *Standpoint*(UK). She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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