

Einar Thomassen, *The Coherence of “Gnosticism”*, Hans-Lietzmann-Vorlesungen 18, Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021, XIV + 39 p., ISBN: 978-3-11-070571-3.

Florin George Calian*

This rich and concentrated little book is published as a series of lectures held annually in memory of Hans Lietzmann. The twenty-fourth lecture, delivered in 2018 by Einar Thomassen, endeavours to define the term *Gnosticism*, questioning its utility and whether it encapsulates a pre-Nicene religious reality. Christoph Marksches writes a comprehensive *Preface* about Hans Lietzmann (1875–1942), the Lietzmann lectures, Gnosticism, and the scholarly career of Einar Thomassen (b. 1951).

For historians of ideas, particularly those focused on early history of Christianity, the terms “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism” have become sensitive concepts. This was not the case until recently. Prominent figures in critiquing the coherence and relevance of “Gnosticism” as a category are Michael Williams (*Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, 1996) and Karen King (*What is Gnosticism*, 2003). Accordingly, it is recommended to refrain from discussing the “essence of Gnosticism” further, as the term has evolved from the legacy of heresiologists and has often been used as a tool of exclusion, perhaps not accurately, reflecting thus no religious reality at all. Instead, the term tends to obscure rather than elucidate. However, Thomassen notes the paradoxical endurance of the term in broad usage, one of the examples given being April DeConick’s *The Gnostic New Age* (2016).

Showing these extreme tendencies, Thomassen maintains, and I assume it to be correctly, that the term “Gnosticism” does indeed encapsulate a religious reality that predates its labelling by heresiologists, and can be used fruitfully for understanding early Christianity. In essence, Thomassen reaffirms the perspective of the heresiologist Irenaeus, for whom “Gnosticism” referred to a specific group. Central to his thesis is that since the Nag Hammadi texts are problematic to be dated, reliance must be placed on Christian apologists, particularly Irenaeus of Lyons. Irenaeus’s work holds significant relevance in this context, and Thomassen makes his case around the testimony of the heresiologist, as it provides a reliably dated source (from the 180s). He specifically examines Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses*: I.29 & I.30, to which he brings the

* Florin George Calian, Research Fellow, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, str. Mitropoliei, nr. 30, 550179, Sibiu, RO, calian_george-florin@alumni.ceu.edu.

Apocryphon of John as a case study, to illustrate the connection between the theological encounters described by Irenaeus and the texts found in the Nag Hammadi corpus.

Following Hans-Martin Schenke's thesis, Thomassen suggests that the myth of the *Apocryphon of John* and the "Sethian" tradition were later integrated by the "Valentinians," albeit with some modifications. Central to his lecture is a meticulous analysis of the protological accounts (pp. 26–34), wherein Thomassen convincingly demonstrates that the Valentinians adhered to an already established *gnostic* "interpretation of the passion story." Therefore, the Valentinian interpretation finds its origins not in the proto-Valentinians but is to be regarded as "part of the legacy" inherited from the "Gnostics," who, as noted by Irenaeus, were the *parents* of the Valentinians (p.33).

Consequently, one must consider that there is more of a *gnostic heredity* than has been so far acknowledged. Thus, the "Gnostics" emerge as prototype for both Valentinianism and Sethianism. And, very important, these early Christians were "unlike any Christianity we know, and for which the name Christianity itself is an anachronism" (p. 35). In other words, before Christianity Christians were exploring different religious and philosophical paths.

If Thomassen is right, and I think he is, that Irenaeus provides an account, offers a relatively accurate account of a specific group called the "Gnostics," then scholarly investigation should indeed delve deeper into this thesis to strengthen the genealogy of the Gnostics from their initial ideological encounters to the composition of the Nag Hammadi writings. Therefore, "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism" remain sound categories that provide more explanatory power than if they were to be discarded.

With this *libellus*, Thomassen makes a significant contribution to history of early Christianity. It can be regarded also as *great short introduction* into the *gnostic lineage*. The book includes three graphic diagrams (pp. 17, 19, and 25), which prove to be very helpful for the reader.