Ancient Mystery Cults
Institute for Lifelong Learning
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Gnostic Texts & Sects

The first few centuries of the modern era (CE, “Common Era”) in the eastern Mediterranean saw a bewildering array of mystical sects. Those called “Gnostic” all reject materialism, emphasize direct knowledge of divine truth, require some secret knowledge to achieve salvation (Greek: gnosis) and show the Roman Empire as a wide-open marketplace of salvation theologies.

EARLY WISDOM GOSPELS (1C CE), portray Jesus as wise teacher or divine word itself.

*The Gospel of Thomas*
*The Gospel of John*

LITERATURE OF GnostIC WISDOM (2C CE)

*The Book of Baruch* (by Justin Martyr), Jewish–Greco-Roman gnostic wisdom.

SETHIAN LITERATURE, Jewish gnostic re-interpretations of the Bible, e.g. Genesis creation stories, a wisdom role for Eve, her 3rd son, Seth, and Norea, wife of Noah.

*The Secret Book of John*
*The Reality of the Rulers*
*The Revelation of Adam*
*Three Forms of First Thought*
*The Three Steles of Seth*
*The Vision of the Foreigner*
*The Sermon of Zostrianos*
*The Baptismal Ceremony of the Gospel of the Egyptians*
*Thunder*
*The Letter of Peter to Philips*

VALENTINIAN LITERATURE, from 2C CE Alexandrian wisdom teacher Valentinus, whose movement used Sethian literature in fashioning a hierarchical salvation system.

*The Gospels of Truth*
*The Gospel of Philip*
*The Letter of Flora (by Ptolemy)*
*Commentary of the Gospel of John* (by Herakleon)

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1 This handout, like the outline of the associated class on Gnosticism, is adapted from *The Gnostic Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone & Marvin Meyer (2003)
THOMAS AND OTHER SYRIAN LITERATURE, seeing disciple Thomas as twin of Jesus &
guarantor of his wisdom and knowledge.

The Songs of Solomon
The Song of the Pearl
The Book of Thomas

ADDITIONAL LITERATURE OF GNOSTIC WISDOM

The Exegesis on the Soul
On the Origin of the World
The Paraphrase of Shem
The Second Treatise of the Great Seth
The Gospel of Mary
The Naassene Sermon

HERMETIC LITERATURE (1C CE), sacred writings reflecting an amalgam of magical powers
attributed to a syncretism of Thoth and Hermès called “Hermès Trismegistus”.

Poimandres
The Discourse on the Eight and Ninth
The Prayer of Thanksgiving

MANDAEAN LITERATURE, from Middle Eastern gnastics who derived practices from John the
Baptist, and who still exist today.

The Ginza
Hibil’s Lament from the Book of John
Songs from the Mandaean Liturgy

MANICHAEAN LITERATURE, from the Persian prophet Mani, 3C CE, who drew his dualist
doctrine from Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Christian, & Gnostic ideas.

On the Origin of His Body
the Story of the Death of Mani
Kephalaia
The Coptic Manichaean Songbook
Parthian Songs
The Great Song to Mani