

THE CELEBRATION OF THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST BY THE
BASILIDEANS AND THE ORIGIN OF EPIPHANY:
IS THE SEEMINGLY OBVIOUS CORRECT?

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1. *Introduction*

There seems to be a widespread tendency in the scholarly community to see Gnostic groups as part of early Christianity and to accept their writings accordingly as part of the 'Christian' heritage of the first centuries. That heresiologists like Irenaeus of Lyons were already arguing against these groups during early periods (he wrote his book against heretical teachings in the eighties of the second century) is just seen as an argument in favour of a 'multiform' Church. Some say that the Gnostics were part of a struggle that was decided in later times, in which Christianity lost alternative forms of its own traditions.¹

This is claimed to be especially true for Egypt. In that country, 'Orthodox Christianity' is supposed to have emerged later than heterodox groups. To validate this claim, the fact is used that evidence concerning ecclesiastical structures emerged at a later stage than evidence of 'heretical' groups like some Gnostic schools in Egypt.²

1. This article was written in the context of a research project of the Austrian Wissenschaftsfonds (FWF). I want to thank Noel Bullock who looked through the article and suggested improvements of my English.

2. Cf. W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1971, a translation of BHT, 10; Tübingen: Mohr, 2nd edn, 1964), pp. 44-60, here p. 48: 'Certainly there were Christians in Egypt in the middle and at the beginning of the second century... But the burning question is, of what sort were they? Everything that we know of this Christianity, apart from what has been mentioned already, clearly has grown up apart from all ecclesiastically structured Christendom until far into the second century.' Cf. also T. Baumeister, *Martyr Invictus: Der Martyrer als Sinnbild der Erlösung in der Legende und im Kult der frühen koptischen Kirche: Zur Kontinuität des ägyptischen Denkens* (Forschungen zur

Church structures become visible only with bishop Demetrius of Alexandria at the end of the second century, a time when the Gnostic movement was flourishing in Egypt.³ Thus, it is common practice to point to the history of Christianity in Egypt in order to argue that Egyptian Christianity was indebted to Gnosticism.⁴ However, this opinion is challenged by scholars like Christoph Marksches, who states that this claim belongs to the inventory of church history legends.⁵ There are other possible explanations: Christians seem to have been more willing to confess their faith—with ‘appropriate’ results—than followers of Gnostic groups during the persecutions of early Christianity. Gnostic groups obviously saw martyrdom as a useless enterprise.⁶ This raises the question whether the orthodox Christians actually suffered—and were diminished—during the persecutions in Egypt while the Gnostic groups were not—or at least

Volkskunde, 46; Münster: Regensberg, 1972), who remarks (p. 77) that, for the origins of Christianity in Egypt, data are lacking. He concludes that the work of Clement of Alexandria and Origen, as well as the fact that important Gnostics came from Egypt, make it probable that the origins of Christianity in Egypt were influenced by Gnostic tendencies.

3. Demetrius was probably bishop of Alexandria from 189 to 231; cf. A.S. Atya, ‘Demetrius I’, in *Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 891-93.

4. For a rather extreme form of this hypothesis, cf. E. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

5. Cf. C. Marksches, *Zwischen den Welten wandern: Strukturen des antiken Christentums* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997), pp. 18-19, who points out that there are no reliable sources for Alexandria. This is not only true for the beginnings but also for the history of Christianity in the second century. This has given rise to the scholarly hypothesis (Marksches actually calls this hypothesis a scholarly ‘legend’) of a ‘heretic’ Christianity as the oldest Christian community in Egypt, which only in later times has been replaced by the victorious ‘catholic’ church. However, as Marksches argues, the truth is in all probability that a Judeo-Christian community was at the origins of the Christian community of Alexandria.

6. Cf. M.A. Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 104, who says, ‘Clement of Alexandria mentions certain “sectarians” who stress that genuine martyrdom or “testimony” (*martyria*) is “knowledge of God who truly exists”, and who say that public confession leading to death is equivalent to an ostentatious suicide. Such circles probably included at least some Valentinians, since elsewhere Clement notes that the Valentinian teacher Heracleon disparaged literal martyrdom, arguing that it was useless to confess Christ with a martyr’s death and yet to have denied him by one’s conduct (*Strom.* 4.71-72).’

not very much—afflicted. This would throw a totally different light on the fact that in the middle of the second century there is more news from Gnostic groups than from ‘mainstream’ Christianity in Egypt. If Christians were diminished while Gnostics were thriving, this might actually explain why more of the latter were around. Thus, there is actually very little evidence in favour of the hypothesis that Christianity in Egypt started with a ‘heretical’ Christianity.

2. *The Celebration of the Baptism of Christ by a Gnostic Group*

However, is it not possible to show that a festivity of the Gnostic followers of Basilides,⁷ which is attested for the second century, was used as the foundation of the Christian—or rather ‘mainstream’—celebration of Epiphany? Certainly this is a claim made by Hansjörg Auf der Maur. According to him, it is not even an open question whether or not the Church adapted this Gnostic celebration. The only question is: When exactly did the Church copy this celebration in order to celebrate a feast of the baptism of Christ on the 6th of January? Special reference is made in this context to Gnostic theology as a theological foundation for the introduction of the feast in ‘orthodox’ groups.⁸ The result of this claim is obvious. According to this hypothesis, Gnostic groups were able to influence the liturgical shape of the Church in the fourth century by their theological argumentation. Thus,

7. It is not really of importance for this question whether or not Basilides was actually a Gnostic teacher—it seems that according to the original fragments of his teaching he was not a Gnostic. It suffices to say that in the scholarly discussion concerning the baptism of Christ and its liturgical celebration he is perceived as a Gnostic teacher and that the group of his followers was perceived as Gnostic as early as Irenaeus of Lyons (*Haer.* 1.24) and Hippolytus of Rome (*Haer.* 7.20-27) (that means around the end of the second and beginning of the third centuries); cf. C. Marksches, ‘Basilides’, in S. Döpp and W. Geerlings (eds.), *Lexikon der antiken christlichen Literatur* (Freiburg, Basel and Vienna: Herder, 2003), p. 112.

8. H. Auf der Maur, *Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit. I. Herrenfeste in Woche und Jahr* (Gottesdienst der Kirche, 5; Regensburg: Pustet, 1983), p. 156, reports the fact of the celebration of the Basilideans—a Gnostic community—as found in the works of Clement of Alexandria. The Basilideans celebrated the Baptism of Christ with a vigil on either the 11th or the 15th of Tybi (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.146.1). The 11th is the equivalent of January 6th. According to Auf der Maur, it is only the question of when and how exactly this Gnostic celebration became the feast of Epiphany of the church in Egypt.

the connections between the different ‘Christian’ groups in the second and third centuries must have been much deeper than is usually accepted. Usually the polemical onslaught of ‘proto-orthodox’ theologians against these groups is taken as evidence for a rather distanced relationship.⁹ In other words, the survival—or even resurrection—of a Gnostic festival (which is attested only once by the end of the second century!) in the Church of the fourth century is proof that these groups, which might have fought on a theological level, were in fact deeply intertwined. If this should hold true, these groups would obviously represent part of the tradition of the Church.

3. *Theological Foundations of the Argumentation*

Actually, the argumentation is—at least on the surface—quite convincing. The first to mention a celebration of the baptism of Christ is Clement of Alexandria. He lived at the turn from the second century to the third. According to him, the followers of Basilides—who is attested as a Gnostic teacher in the second half of the second century—celebrated the baptism of Christ on the 15th of the Egyptian month Tybi, some of them on the 11th. These dates translate in the Julian calendar to January 10th and 6th. According to the wording of the text of Clement of Alexandria, it seems quite sure that for the followers of Basilides the 15th of Tybi (January 10th) was the more important day. This does not keep Franz Nikolasch from the claim that this group celebrated Epiphany.¹⁰ However, it seems necessary to stress the fact

9. As to this concept of ‘proto-orthodox’, see B.D. Ehrman, ‘Christianity Turned on its Head: The Alternative Vision of the Gospel of Judas’, in R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst (eds.), *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 2006), pp. 77-120. On p. 105 he says, ‘According to proto-orthodox writers such as Irenaeus (I call him “proto-orthodox” because he embraced views that at a later date would come to be called orthodox), there is only one God and he is the one who made all that exists, in heaven and earth.’ But this concept of one God who created the world is not an invention of the ‘proto-orthodox’. It is part of the Jewish roots of Christianity. One is even tempted to affirm that it was part of the core of this tradition even if ‘alternative Christianities’ saw this differently in the second century. Maybe this should be an argument to caution those who use the term ‘Christian’ for some groups of the second century too freely.

10. Cf. F. Nikolasch, ‘Epiphanie. III. Liturgisch’, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 3rd edn, 1995), III, pp. 720-22, who states explicitly (p.

that there is no evidence whatsoever for a name of this celebration. Clement of Alexandria states only the fact of a celebration. The festival itself remains nameless. This caution seems necessary from a scholarly point of view. Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidence in favour of a connection between the celebration of the Gnostic group and a feast within the Church seems to be overwhelming.

The Gnostic theology of the baptism of Christ can be used to support the claim of a connection between the Gnostic feast and the Church's Epiphany feast.¹¹ According to Gnostic theology, the baptism of Jesus was not only the beginning of his ministry but rather a spiritual birth that endowed him with his power. One might even mention that the claim has been made that an adoptionist theology within the accounts of the baptism of Christ is the earliest stratum regarding Christ's baptism, being proof of the originally adoptionist theology of the early Church.¹² The majority of the Greek manuscripts have at Lk. 3.22c: 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'¹³ However, the so-called Western tradition of the New Testament in its most outstanding manuscript¹⁴ attests as the allegedly original version of Lk. 3:22c: 'My Son are you, today I have begotten you.'¹⁵ This almost sounds exactly like the description of Gnostic theology reported by a heresiologist of the end of the fourth century. In his *Book of All the Heretic Teachings*, Epiphanius of Salamis quotes the *Gospel of the Ebionites*: 'You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased... Today I have begotten

720) that the word Epiphany (Greek ἐπιφάνεια) occurs for the first time in the work of Clement of Alexandria. G. Giamberardini, 'Il "Sub tuum praesidium" e il titolo "Theotokos" nella tradizione egiziana', *Marianum* 31 (1969), pp. 324-62, explains on p. 347, 'Clemente Alessandrino fin dal secolo II fa menzione dell'uso che vigeva in Alessandria di solennizzare le feste con preghiere e letture. Egli tratta dell'Epiphania, e dice: "Trascorrono l'interna notte precedente in letture".'

11. Auf der Maur, *Feiern*, pp. 156-57, states explicitly that theological reasoning influenced the acceptance of the Gnostic celebration as the feast of Epiphany in the church.

12. Cf. for example B.D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 62-67.

13. Lk. 3.22c: σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

14. This is the *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*.

15. Lk. 3.22c (*Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*): υἱὸς μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε.

you.’¹⁶ In the following chapter Epiphanius explains that, according to the Ebionites, Christ was born at the baptism. Before that he was only Jesus.¹⁷

The feast of Epiphany seems to have its roots in exactly this theology. Johannes Cassianus, who visited Egypt probably in the late eighties or early nineties of the fourth century, attests that the celebration in Egypt comprised two topics: The baptism of Christ and his birth.¹⁸ The theological link seems to be complete and can even be supported by using a theologian from later times. Cosmas Indicopleustes, a learned man from the sixth century, states explicitly a theological link between the birth and the baptism of Christ.¹⁹ Thus, the claim made by Auf der Maur and others seems to be valid: it seems that

16. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.13.7 (GCS, Epiphanius I.350.16-17): σύ μου εἶ ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα ... ἐγὼ σήμερον γέγενηκά σε.

17. Cf. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.14.4 (GCS, Epiphanius I. 351.17-20).

18. Cf. Cassian, *Coll.* 10.2 (CSEL, 13.286.19–287.3, Petschenig): Intra Ægypti regionem mos iste antiqua traditione servatur, ut peracto Epiphaniorum die, quem provinciae illius sacerdotes vel domini baptismi vel secundum carnem nativitatis esse definiunt, et idcirco utriusque sacramenti non bifarie ut in occiduis provinciis, sed sub una diei hujus festivitate concelebrant, epistolae pontificis Alexandrini per universas Ægypti ecclesias dirigantur, quibus et initium Quadragesimae et dies Paschae non solum per civitates omnes, sed etiam per universa monasteria designetur. ‘In the country of Egypt this custom is by ancient tradition observed that—when Epiphany is past, which the priests of that province regard as the time, both of our Lord’s baptism and also of His birth in the flesh, and so celebrate the commemoration of either mystery not separately as in the Western provinces but on the single festival of this day,—letters are sent from the Bishop of Alexandria through all the Churches of Egypt, by which the beginning of Lent, and the day of Easter are pointed out not only in all the cities but also in all the monasteries.’ [English translations of Latin and Greek texts in the footnotes are my own].

19. Cf. Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Top.* V (PG 88, 197A/B = W.O. Winstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes Edited with Geographical Notes* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909]), 138.25-28: οἱ δὲ Ἱεροσολυμίται, ὡς ἐκ τοῦ μακαρίου Λουκᾶ λέγοντος περὶ τοῦ βαπτισθῆναι τὸν Κύριον ἀρχόμενος ὡς ἐτῶν λ, τοῖς Ἐπιφανίοις ποιούσι τὴν γένναν. καὶ ἀληθεύει μὲν καὶ ὁ εὐαγγελιστῆς καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται· οὐχ ἡ ἀκρίβεια δὲ οὕτως ἔχει, ἀλλ’ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ γέννᾳ ἐγένετο καὶ τὸ βάπτισμα, ὡς φασὶ καὶ ὁ Λουκᾶς καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται. ‘Those living in Jerusalem deduct from what blessed Luke says concerning the baptism of Christ that he was 30 years old that they celebrate on Epiphany the birth of Christ. And indeed, both the evangelist and those living in Jerusalem are correct: for it is not the exactness, but in the birth happened also the baptism as say Luke and those in Jerusalem.’

a line can be drawn between the celebration of the baptism of Christ by the Basilidians and the Christian feast of Epiphany, celebrating the baptism of Christ in the orthodox traditions on more or less the same day as a Gnostic group of the second century. Thus, the inner structure and the theological foundation of the two feasts point to a common foundation for them. This is even more the case since both groups are part of what is very often called ‘early Christianity’. However, this seemingly valid claim can be challenged—and it must be.

4. *Questions of Probability*

The first problem is a question of probability: Is it really likely that a feast of a separatist group of the second century—though some followers of Basilides seem to be attested as late as the fourth century—can have influenced the Church of the fourth century? It might be possible to show that a line between these feasts can be drawn. But the question is not whether a line can be drawn but whether it has to be drawn. To phrase the issue even more precisely, it is not a question of similarities between two feasts. It is rather the question of the likelihood of an influence. Another possibility might be that these two feasts evolved independently. However, this claim must be shown to be probable. One has to admit that the claim of an interdependence of the two feasts seems to be of a higher probability—at least at the first glance. Thus, a refutation of this claim is not possible by just claiming an independence of the two feasts. This independence must be proven by closely examining the relevant sources. And there seem to be some indications that this total independence of the two celebrations of the baptism of Christ is what correctly describes the historical situation and the relationship of the groups involved.

A few very interesting circumstances concerning these two feasts must be mentioned. While the name of the feast ‘Epiphany’ clearly points to an origin in the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire, it is in the West that we find the first definite proof of a celebration. The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus reports that Julian the Apostate—shortly before he officially renounced Christianity—visited a church on the feast of Epiphany. This happened in January of the year 361.²⁰ Thus this feast was already celebrated at this time in Gaul. By

20. Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rer. gest.* 21.2.5 (W. Seyfarth, *Schriften und Quellen der Alten Welt* 21 [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 3rd edn, 1986], 2.132.10-13):

the turn of the century Epiphany was celebrated more or less in the entire Roman Empire.²¹ Thus, the first question must be, what was it that made this feast so attractive to the Church? Why did Epiphany spread so rapidly? If a parallel feast of an earlier tradition—the question whether it is possible to call a Gnostic group an ‘earlier tradition’ is in itself a worthy candidate for discussion²²—influenced this feast of the Church, it has to be shown that this earlier tradition was distributed and prominent throughout the entire Roman Empire. However, it is hardly the case that the Basilideans were a force to be reckoned with throughout the entire Roman Empire in the fourth century. Rather—if they existed at all—some remnants of this group led a very withdrawn life in Egypt.²³ Thus the question naturally arises, why should a small and only locally existing Egyptian group, which was not accepted by orthodox Christianity, influence Church liturgy not only in Egypt but in the entire Empire?

Et ut haec interim celarentur, feriarum die, quem celebrantes mense Januario christiani Epiphania dictitant, progressus in eorum ecclesiam solemniter numine adorato discessit, ‘In order to keep this <fact> meanwhile secret (i.e. his apostasy), he went to church on the feast that is celebrated by Christians in January and is called Epiphany. He worshipped God solemnly, thereafter he left.’

21. For the historical evolution and local distribution of this feast in the Early Church, cf. H. Förster, *Die Feier der Geburt Christi in der Alten Kirche: Beiträge zur Erforschung der Anfänge des Epiphanie- und des Weihnachtsfestes* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum, 4; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) and H. Förster, *Weihnachten und Epiphantias: Eine Anfrage an die Entstehungshypothesen* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum, 46; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

22. By the use of ‘Christentümer’ Marksches obviously tries to stress the great differences of these traditions even though the Gnostic groups use the persons of the New Testament in their scriptures. The word ‘Christentum’ is translated ‘Christianity’. To speak of ‘different Christianities’ implies that the differences between the traditions are much bigger than today’s differences between the Christian denominations; cf. C. Marksches, ‘Neue Forschungen zur Kanonisierung des Neuen Testaments’, *Apocrypha* 12 (2001), pp. 237-62 (240).

23. Cf. W.A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (WUNT, 83; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), p. 337. He argues that the Basilidean tradition was much less important than the Valentinian School. According to Löhr, it is actually questionable whether the Basilideans ever had any importance outside of Egypt, or even more specifically, Alexandria. However, the writings of Basilides survived till the fourth century.

5. *The Hypothesis within the Context of Fourth Century Christianity*

Nevertheless, taking the proposition of Auf der Maur and others seriously, one has to consider the following claim: A locally attested feast of a group in Egypt of the second century suddenly in the second half of the fourth century became a highly important feast of the entire Church. Actually the prominence and importance of this feast as celebrated by the Church cannot easily be overstated. It was so important that by the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century none other than Augustine could use this feast as proof of the unity of the Church.

The situation in Africa can be easily sketched. The persecutions of Diocletian led to rifts and schism in the Church. The heatedly discussed question (which led to schism not only in Africa) was whether or not an official of the Church who somehow collaborated with the persecutors and distanced himself from his faith—there were different levels of failure and different measures for the repentance—could still be a minister of the Church. In Africa the separatist party was under the leadership of a certain Donatus. And they were a rather successful group. Many of the African Christians—maybe even for some time a majority—were followers of this schismatic (but obviously also charismatic) leader who fought for a Christianity that would not yield to persecutions and would punish those in its ranks that were deemed not to have been upright enough in confessing the faith.

In one of his homilies on Epiphany (his fourth homily), Augustine reprimands the Donatists by saying that they do not love the unity with the churches of the East. This is shown by the fact that they do not celebrate Epiphany.²⁴ This leads into the debate of what constitutes orthodoxy. Obviously, there is no question as to the teachings of the Donatists. Augustine does not criticise the Donatists for false teaching but for violating the unity of the Church, as can be seen from their non-observance of an important feast of the Church. This is probably in answer to the claim of the Donatist theologian Parmenianus, who claimed universality also for the Donatists. This was important since the Donatist schism was geographically confined to Northern Africa.

24. Cf. Augustine, *Serm.* 202.2 (*PL* 38:1033): Merito istum diem numquam nobiscum haeretici Donatistae celebrare voluerunt, quia nec unitatem amant nec orientali ecclesiae, ubi apparuit ista stella, communicant. ‘Justly, the heretical Donatists did not want to celebrate this day with us for they do not love the unity nor do they stand in community with the churches of the East where this star appeared.’

However, a very small group existed also in Rome.²⁵ It would be a more than curious fact if an allegedly Gnostic feast, celebrating the baptism of Christ for reasons connected with Gnostic theology, could become a cornerstone for the unity of the Church by the end of the fourth century. If the roots of this feast were actually known by the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century, one would expect to find some discussion between Augustine and the Donatists concerning the acceptability of celebrating a feast with such a theological foundation. However, no such thing is attested. This is all the more astonishing since the controversy between the heresiologists and the Gnostics can rightly be called emotional, to say the least.

Thus, the question is: How could a feast of a group that was denounced by the 'mainstream' as heretical become an integral part of the Church to such an outstanding measure that it could even function as proof for the unity of the Church? If there were close proximity between the Gnostic followers of Basilides and the Church, this would be obvious. However, the deep animosity between the two groups calls for a different solution. A more convincing explanation holds the proposition that the followers of Basilides were of no importance by the first half of the fourth century. In this case it is not surprising that there is no evidence of a controversy over the possible connection that has been proposed in scholarly discourse in the twentieth century. Since no knowledge of a feast of the baptism of Christ in Gnostic circles existed in the middle of the fourth century, the introduction of the feast of Epiphany, or, to phrase it even more correctly, the conversion of the topic of Epiphany to the baptism of Christ in the churches of the East did not pose a problem in the Church.

There is additional evidence that substantiates the hypothesis that the followers of Basilides were of no importance whatsoever in the fourth century. There is ample, if not to say overwhelming, papyrological

25. Cf. W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 195, who says, 'Moreover, he could in fact point to the presence of a Donatist episcopal succession at Rome as proof that unity with the see of Peter was being maintained.' See also C. Piétri, 'Die Schwierigkeiten des neuen Systems im Westen: Der Donatistenstreit (363–420)', in N. Brox et al. (eds.), *Die Geschichte des Christentums. II. Das Entstehen der einen Christenheit (250–500)* (Freiburg: Herder, 1996), pp. 506–24. On p. 508 he points to the fact that the argumentation of Parmenianus was very convincing for many of his contemporaries. He underlined the unity and universality of his own church with a representative in Rome. This forced Optatus to mount a counterattack.

evidence from Egypt.²⁶ A thorough study of the material from the fourth century shows no evidence of Gnostic groups.²⁷ It seems strange that such an important group—if it actually was important—should have left no traces in the documentary papyri. This is even more so since the Meletians—a schismatic group in Egypt—as well as the Manichaeans are attested in documentary papyri. This again poses the question as to the real importance of the different Gnostic factions by the beginning of the fourth century. If they were an important group at that time, why did they (contrary to other important groups of the time) leave no traces in the documentary papyri? The most convincing answer seems again that they were of no importance.²⁸ The most

26. For a use of literary papyri in the argument for orthodox roots of Egyptian Christianity, cf. C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt: The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 53. He notes that of the earliest fourteen texts no less than three are of the Psalter, and the Psalter, more used and read than any book of the Old Testament, perhaps more than any book of the Bible, throughout the Christian centuries in Egypt, was as a book of no particular interest to Gnostics. Another early papyrus, the Chester Beatty Numbers and Deuteronomy, formed part of a collection in which there are no Gnostic texts. Roberts says, ‘If we accept, as I think we must, that manuscripts such as these were written for and used by ordinary Christian communities, their geographical distribution becomes significant; the Bible (to use a slightly anachronistic term) was read in the second century in or near the Arsinoite nome, in the Heracleopolite, in Oxyrhynchus, and in Antinopolis. This points to more than a few scattered individuals holding orthodox beliefs and it is the more surprising that the statement can be made today that “in the second century, as far as our knowledge goes, Christianity in Egypt was exclusively heterodox”.’

27. Cf. M. Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri* (Studia Antiqua Australiensia; Turnhout, NSW, Australia: Brepols and Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 2006).

28. This is in contrast to how M. Meyer, ‘Introduction’, in R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wurst (eds.), *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos* (Washington: National Geographic, 2006), pp. 1-16 (7-8), describes the situation: ‘Rome and orthodox Christianity eventually won the day, and as Borges once noted concerning the gnostic accounts he was discussing, “Had Alexandria triumphed and not Rome, the extravagant and muddled stories that I have summarized here would be coherent, majestic, and perfectly ordinary. The gnostics of Alexandria and Egypt did not triumph, nor did the Gospel of Judas, in the theological wars that raged during the second, third and fourth centuries.”’ The ‘theological wars’ were fought by means of intellectual weapons in the second and third century. And these wars the Gnostics did lose. By the fourth century, they actually had lost.

probable solution is that in the fourth century the Gnostics in Egypt were long past their prime. If this is the case, the problem is again: How and why should this group have been able to influence the liturgy of the Church?

6. *Textual Variants and their Value*

The textual problem of the passage in Luke's Gospel actually belongs in the same category. One possibility is that Gnostic influence led to the introduction of this part into the so-called Western text. However, this is actually a quotation from a psalm.²⁹ A comparison of the exact wording of the Greek version of the psalm with the two versions of Lk. 3.22 explains how easily this psalm could have come to the mind of the person who copied the text of the passage in the Gospel of Luke:

Lk. 3.22c: σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

Lk. 3.22c (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis): υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γέγεννηκά σε.

Ps. 2.7b: υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γέγεννηκά σε.

The wording of the passage of Luke is identical with v. 7b of Psalm 2. Taking into account the good knowledge of the psalms that can be seen in the homilies of the Church Fathers, one is left with the impression that a good knowledge of the psalms seems the more likely cause for the inclusion of part of v. 7 of the Psalm 2 into the account of the baptism of Christ as witnessed by the Western manuscripts of Luke. It seems more probable that the inclusion is a 'slip of the pen' and not an influence by a Gnostic tradition. Thus, it seems that no link exists between this textual variant and Gnostic teaching. It is much more likely that either liturgical practice and the singing of psalms in liturgy or just the knowledge of the psalms led to this scribal error. However, this explanation of this particular textual variant makes the claim of a link between a Gnostic celebration of the baptism of Christ and the Christian Epiphany even more dubious.

The question of the content of Epiphany is a second problem that has to be addressed. It is questionable indeed to use Johannes Cassianus's

29. Cf. Ps. 2.7: κύριος εἶπεν πρὸς με υἱός μου εἶ σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε.

testimony to establish a link between the Gnostic celebration of the second century and the later celebration of the Church. Johannes Cassianus mentions that the Egyptian way of celebrating this feast is unique—and it seems that he did not get to know the origin of the celebration of Epiphany in Egypt. Another witness, Epiphanius of Salamis, can shed light on this subject. He wrote his *Refutation of All Heretic Teachings* in the seventies of the fourth century. In it he wrote that the celebration of Epiphany in Egypt comprised the birth of Christ and the wedding at Cana, but he makes explicit mention of the fact that the baptism of Christ took place in November. In addition to that, Epiphanius is convinced that he celebrates on Epiphany the very day on which these two things happened. To him it is a question of using the correct date for the commemoration of these events. Epiphanius does not show any knowledge of a celebration of Christ's baptism. From this fact, two important points follow. The first is that one is forced to surmise that a celebration of Christ's baptism was not originally part of Epiphany. The second is that, since his testimony is dated as late as the middle of the seventies of the fourth century, his lack of any knowledge of a celebration of the baptism of Christ indicates that it had not yet taken place in the Church—even at such a late time. And indeed the first witness for this content of Epiphany is from Constantinople for the year 380 or 381—two centuries after Basilides celebrated the baptism of Christ, and on the other side of the empire. And it seems very probable that this is actually the first time that Epiphany had the baptism of Christ as content. This further weakens the theological arguments for the alleged link between the celebration of Epiphany and the feast of the followers of Basilides.

7. *Content of the Celebration of Epiphany*

However, on a theological level, one is forced to add even more: Epiphanius states explicitly that in his opinion Jesus Christ must have performed miracles as a child since this proves those wrong who claim that Christ came down on Jesus only in his baptism.³⁰ It is against this

30. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.20.3 (GCS Holl II 278.2-5): ἔδει γὰρ καὶ παιδικὰ ἔχειν αὐτὸν σημεῖα, ἵνα μὴ πρόφασις γένηται ταῖς ἄλλαις αἰρέσεσι λέγειν ὅτι ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἰορδάνου ἦλθε(ν ὁ) Χριστὸς εἰς αὐτόν, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἡ περιστερά. 'For he ought to have childhood miracles too, to deprive the other sects of an excuse for saying that '<the> Christ', meaning the dove, came to him after [his

background that one must consider the hypothesis that there was a connection between the feast of the followers of Basilides in the second century and the introduction of Epiphany in the Church in the fourth century. This idea amounts to the claim that a group which probably did not exist any more was able to influence the calendar of the Church—not only the Church in Egypt—by means of a theology to which the Church was adverse! And, furthermore, that this was done in such a clandestine way that there is no evidence whatsoever of a controversy concerning this celebration and its content. One has to add that the Church of the fourth century was in no position to suppress any opposition: It was most probably during the reign of Bishop Athanasius that Epiphany was introduced in Egypt. It suffices to mention that not only had he been exiled from Egypt more than once, but he had to deal with a strong opposition, which called itself the ‘church of the martyrs’. It is unthinkable that the followers of Athanasius celebrated a feast with Gnostic roots and Gnostic theology while the followers of Meletius kept silence. However, no traces of a controversy can be found, or, to phrase it more correctly, no controversy concerning this point can be found, but Athanasius and the followers of Meletius fought happily over many other topics. This in itself is very revealing.

8. Conclusion

Taken together there seems to be only one conclusion: the seemingly obvious is actually highly improbable and virtually impossible. The consequence is clear. The Christian celebration of Epiphany has no link to a feast of the baptism of Christ in a Gnostic group of the second century.

On the basis of this analysis an additional point has to be raised. It might be a very common practice today to create the impression that the

baptism in] the Jordan.’ For the translation, cf. F. Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book II and III* (Sections 47–80, *De Fide*) (NHS, 36; Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 45. Cf. also H. Förster, ‘Vogel oder Taube? Überlegungen zur Verwendung des sogenannten “Vogelalpha” in koptischen Handschriften unter Berücksichtigung einer isopsephischen Berechnung bei Epiphanius von Salamis’, in F. Beutler and W. Hameter (eds.), *‘Eine ganz normale Inschrift...’ und ähnliches zum Geburtstag von Ekkehard Weber* (Althistorisch-Epigraphische Studien, 5; Vienna: Eigenverlag der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Archäologie, 2005), pp. 443-48.

exclusion of Gnosticism is connected with an abuse of power by the Church.³¹ But since the evolution of the celebration of Epiphany points very clearly to the fact that these groups were of no major importance by the beginning of the fourth century the reason for the disappearance of Gnostic groups must be sought elsewhere. For, a Church going through the last of the severe persecutions (under Diocletian and his followers, from the end of the third to the beginning of the fourth century) had no means to suppress rival groups. It might be that theologians of that time were against Gnosticism. However, their opposition would have been useless if Gnosticism had not faded away by itself during that time.

In treating this question one has to deal with the problem that personal bias shapes the way in which history is perceived.³² This should caution scholars that they might end up with exactly those results they wish to find. Thus, it might be necessary to unlearn—at least in some areas—what we ‘know’ about these times.³³ However, this should be done, if possible, in a balanced, scholarly way. In the case of the celebration of the Basilideans and the feast of Epiphany, scholarly research points clearly to a much greater distance between the followers of Basilides and the Church than has hitherto been thought. It does not seem necessary to mention that this also holds implications for the question of how we have to perceive the relationship between Christians and Gnostic groups in these times.

31. Cf. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 28-29: ‘The astonishing discovery of the gnostic gospels—a cache of ancient secret gospels and other revelations attributed to Jesus and his disciples—has revealed a much wider range of Christian groups than we had ever known before. Although later denounced by certain leaders as “heretics”, many of these Christians saw themselves as not so much *believers* as *seekers*, people who “seek for God”.’

32. Cf. S.E. Porter and G.L. Heath, *The Lost Gospel of Judas: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 103, who say, ‘What makes one think that Ehrman’s own bias may be a factor in his favouring of a more liberal understanding is his own rejection of his fundamentalist background and his desire to have a more tolerant Christianity.’

33. Cf. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 181: ‘In my own case, the hardest—and most exciting—thing about research into Christian beginnings has been to unlearn what I thought I knew, and to shed presuppositions I had taken for granted.’