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Ronald S. Green

Coastal Carolina University, rgreen@coastal.edu

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The Gnosis of 2-3-74

RONALD S. GREEN

The last major writings of Philip K. Dick, *VALIS* the most famous among them, contain many points of reflections of Gnostic texts in the Nag Hammadi Library. Those texts describe the formation of the material universe arising as a part of a series of accidents, mistakes, and sometimes malicious devices used by an imperfect architect ignorant of the true creator.

Dick took up this idea of multiple imperfect architects not only in the world of *VALIS*, but even in the way the narrative unfolds through the mentally-deficient character of Horselover Fat. Fat is usually unaware that he is merely an author surrogate for the true creator, Philip K. Dick, who also appears in the story as a (sometimes) different character.

The Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi present a kind of religious-metaphysical conspiracy theory which, of course, resonated deeply with an author who had already explored hidden realities featuring gods who were somewhat less-than-divine in works like "The Adjustment Team," "A Present for Pat," and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

In February and March 1974, a period he refers to as 2-3-74, Philip K. Dick experienced a series of intense and life-changing visions he sometimes related to Gnosticism. These seem to have started when, while Dick was under the influence of sodium pentathol administered for an impacted tooth, a delivery woman arrived at his door wearing a pendant with a Christian fish emblem. Afterwards Dick placed a fish sticker on a window in his house and, perhaps in relation to the sun shining through

it, he saw bright rectangular images he felt contained information from a divine or otherwise extraordinary source.

For the rest of his life, he continued to come up with new ways of interpreting what had happened and what it meant. The varying accounts of the same “transmissions” became the basis for *Radio Free Albemuth* and the *VALIS* trilogy, and are also described and interpreted in his *Exegesis*. Within each of these books several differing accounts are given, but all assume a transcendental consciousness penetrated his mind through mundane expressions hiding some ultimate truth, and that this consciousness is at least in part beyond human rationality.

Accordingly, these truths cannot be fully expressed in ordinary terms, but a variety of mythic stories might be used to convey some aspects of them. In this, the *VALIS* trilogy resembles Gnostic texts, Hindu epics, and other pieces of classical religious literature: Dick’s last writings tell and retell the same stories in a range of contradictory ways.

In other novels such overt inconsistencies might make the stories unreadable. But because of the contradictory nature of reality that is assumed in these stories, these seeming contradictions are for Dick supportive of one another, all being imperfect reflections of higher truth, just like the material world itself. In *The Divine Invasion*, Herb Asher says the early church felt that because the resurrection of Christ was impossible it must have happened. That is to say, when mundane reality completely explains an event it must be wrong. Only when there are seeming contradictions might an assumption be correct. Higher truths are hidden and not explainable in ordinary terms. Likewise in *VALIS*, when characters continually point out the inconsistencies in the descriptions of his divine visions, Horselover Fat feels this reinforces their validity.

Dick’s Gnosis about Gnostics

VALIS can provisionally be called a “novel,” but it is also an autobiography, and a mystical text for those who are able to understand it that way. This multivalent way of writing and reading is in keeping with Gnostic views of the multidimensionality of reality and Gnostic subtexts. Writings in the Nag Hammadi Library interpret and retell stories from the New Testament, Plato, Pythagoras, and others, allegedly based on

divine inspiration and revelation on the part of the Gnostic reader and writer. As the name implies, Gnostics interpret the nature of reality by relying on gnosis, which can be defined as intuitive, transcendental insight; or hidden, secret knowledge, immediately certain without evidence or argument. Gnostics believed that they were able to enter into a kind of spiritual communion with these authors and with divine entities, allowing them to faithfully tell the “hidden truth” of the stories of others—even though their retellings were sometimes radical departures from the originals.

Nag Hammadi is a city in Upper Egypt. In 1945, farmers looking for fertile soil found a sealed earthenware jar on the outskirts of the city. At first they were afraid to open it, thinking it may contain an evil genie. However, feeling it was equally possible that it contained gold, they opened it and found thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices. Unfortunately they used one of these to kindle a fire.

The remaining books eventually made their way to the hands of museum officials. Since then, scholars have identified more than fifty separate writings within these volumes. They have been dated to around 390 C.E., although they are believed to translate earlier works. Many of these writings have been declared significant works of Gnostics, potentially changing our understanding of the history and ideology of early Christianity.

In *VALIS*, Horselover Fat speaks about the importance of the Nag Hammadi texts. For Fat, the texts provide an affirmation of his developing understanding of his personal mental defect and his view that his personal mental problems mirror the larger defect suffered by humankind: namely, that we have forgotten that we ourselves are divine. At the same time, the Nag Hammadi texts validate Dick’s revelation about the solution to this problem: remembering through gnosis. (The Library became widely available in English translation only in 1977, and Dick claimed his vision was not shaped but confirmed by reading the texts.)

Two writings found side-by-side in Codex II of the Library coincide particularly well with his idea that human suffering and insanity are based in cosmogony; in the way the universe was created and structured. These are *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (the Reality of the Rulers) and an untitled document

that has been given the name *On the Origin of the World*. Both interpret Genesis in ways that affirm various Gnostic beliefs, including the notion that our world was not constructed by the true God. In both writings, as in the *VALIS* trilogy, the speaker appears to change a number of times so that parts of the narration are retold from different perspectives.

Both of these Gnostic texts speak of an incorruptible realm also personified as the Incorruptible. From the incorruptible realm, Sophia, the spirit of wisdom, experiments with creating without her male aspect, who is referred to as the father-of-the-entirety. While the incorruptible is described as either filled with or being beautiful light, Sophia's experiment creates a veil of some type that casts a shadow. Darkness flows from the veil downward in a way both texts describe as like an aborted fetus. This becomes chaos with a bottomless watery abyss. Sophia breathes life into the darkness so a ruler over matter would form. The ruler moves across the face of the waters and Sophia says, "Child, pass through here," rendered as "yalda bayth" in the Coptic language of these texts. This begins verbal expression and the ruler is called Yaldabaoth (or Yaltabaoth). Having made the ruler over matter, Sophia withdraws her spiritual light from Yaltabaoth and the lower realm. In *VALIS*, Horselover Fat mentions Yaltabaoth to one of his psychiatrics, who responds, "What the hell are you talking about?"

The hell he is talking about is the material world and the arrogant being Yaltabaoth, who, ignorant of his origin and the realm above the veil, declares that he is God and that nothing else exists. Hearing this, Sophia calls him Samael, "the blind god." Samael appears here as an archon, or 'ruler'. In the Talmud, Samael is an archangel. Sophia causes the blasphemous words of the ruler to descend away from the incorruptible realm and Yaltabaoth to follow them downward to Tartaros. Tartaros is a pit or abyss that appears in classic Greek mythology, in the book of Job and elsewhere as a place of punishment. It's typically thought of as being below Earth.

By virtue of having both male and female characteristics, Yaltabaoth creates other beings that are also androgynous. His offspring become seven separate realms and the rulers of those seven heavens, likely based on the seven visible planets. Sophia arranges the placement of the seven heavens according to the attributes of the rulers and in some way mirroring the

arrangement of the invisible, immaterial and incorruptible realm above the veil. These rulers of the lower realms have a soul or life but are not endowed with the divine spirit or light of the father-of-the-entirety.

It is the will of the father-of-the-entirety to unite everything above and below through light. To begin the process, Sophia looks down and her face is reflected briefly on the surface of the bottomless waters. Seeing the reflection, the rulers become enamored and try to reproduce it. At the same time they are afraid of what they saw, fearing something greater than them exists. As with the visible realm mirroring the invisible, this continues a series of references to reflections and twins that Dick echoes in his writings. In all cases the relationships between the various pairs are confused, ambivalent, and forgotten. Yaltabaoth separates land from the water and shapes a human from the mud, modeled after the reflection of Sophia. The clay figure is a reflection of a reflection of the reality of Sophia that Yaltabaoth has never seen directly. Yaltabaoth breaths soul or life into the mud but it remains wallowing on the ground because it does not have spirit. This weakness pleases the rulers. But Sophia secretly puts her light into the clay, giving it spirit and thereby making him a man. She also gives him a voice and by it he is called Adam.

Dick's Twins

In Gnostic thought, divine or mythic figures like Zoe, Eve, and Norea are viewed as syzygic pairs (necessarily co-existing couples) with other religious figures, such as Adam and Noah. These and other pairings of males and females represent active and passive attributes of the divine. In some Gnostic traditions Sophia or Zoe, embodied in Mary Magdalene, is in syzygy with Jesus. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, also in the Nag Hammadi Library, Jesus says to Thomas that when he comes to know who he really is he will discover that he is identical to Christ, that he and Jesus are identical twins. The readers of these gospels and *VALIS* are apparently meant to understand themselves as the twins of Jesus, Thomas, and Dick.

Dick relates his lifelong obsession with his twin sister, who had died five weeks after their premature births, to syzygy. He thought of her as a missing part of his life he longed to under-

stand. The lost twin is often a motif in his books and also plays out in other pairings, like Zina-Yah and Herb-Linda Fox in *The Divine Invasion*. Dick told Gregg Rickman, in an interview published as *Philip K. Dick: The Last Testament*, that the tragic element running through his life is the perpetual re-enactment of the death of his twin. The death of a woman is central to the books of the *VALIS* trilogy. In Entry 32 of the Exegesis at the end of *VALIS*, Dick explains the unfolding of the world as a narrative about the death of a woman he describes as half of the divine syzygy.

Linda Fox is thought by critics to be based on Linda Ronstadt, who is also mentioned in *The Divine Invasion*. In the paired realities created alternately by Emmanuel and Zina, she is in some sense like the clay model of Eve, not really human until Zina endows her with spirit. The dying woman Rybys is also strangely real and unreal. Although Herb comes in contact with her during cryonic suspension, she gives birth to the savior child. The divine pairing of Emmanuel and Zina is mirrored in the human pairing of Herb and Linda. There is also a pairing of seeming good and evil, and of spiritual and material in the father-of-the-entirety (with male and female aspects represented by Emmanuel and Zina) and the androgynous Belial.

In his essay "Cosmogony and Cosmology," written in 1978, three years before *VALIS*, Dick describes time and creation as the simultaneous movement of two events respectively related to these pairings. Humanity is moving toward reincorporation with the incorruptible and materiality is moving toward dissolution in the immaterial. Linda Fox explains how this plays out on the microcosmic level of humanity, saying that every man has an Advocate, a beside-helper, as well as an Accuser. While there is syzygic pairing in human and divine male and female spirituality, there is also human and divine pairing of spirituality and materiality. In other macro- and microcosmic pairings there is *VALIS* the movie in *VALIS* the book, *Radio Free Albemuth* in *VALIS*, and *VALIS* in *The Divine Invasion* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*.

Results of the Primordial Rape

The Gnostic texts say that, in order to keep a watch on him, the rulers put Adam in a garden and cause him to fall into a deep

sleep. The stories differ here. *The Hypostasis of the Archons* says the rulers take the spirit from Adam's side and model a female likeness. *On the Origin of the World* does not say the rulers formed the female. Instead, Sophia sends a luminous female companion who breathes spirit into Adam. Seeing this, the rulers cause him to fall into a deep sleep. The woman is identified as Zoe, daughter of Sophia. When Adam awakens, Yaltabaoth lies by saying he created the female from Adam's side. In both versions the rulers lust for the spiritual woman, who laughs at their foolish belief that they can overpower her. She secretly creates out of clay another mirrored replica of herself as a replacement. The real luminous woman enters a tree that thereby becomes the Tree of Knowledge (gnosis). Afterwards, Yaltabaoth tells the man and woman they can eat from any tree in the garden except for the Tree of Knowledge, and that the fruits of that tree will kill them. Yaltabaoth doesn't know why he says this, but in fact the father-of-the-entirety causes him to do so in order to draw attention to the tree, so the man and woman will want to eat its fruit.

The replacement woman, Eve, has a soul, which is life, but no spirit. Still believing it is Zoe, the rulers descend on her and "defile her in every way." The real spiritual woman sees that they only defile themselves with a clay dummy, the primordial blow-up doll. After the primeval rape, the rulers are happy thinking they have now controlled and diminished the light of the woman—perhaps Deckard's unconscious motive as well, in his sexual aggression in *Blade Runner*. The rulers believe they have also corrupted the potential strength of future humanity, Zoe's progeny, by interbreeding with her.

Then a divine instructor of humanity comes into the garden. *On the Origin of the World* says the instructor is born from a drop of light Sophia drips into the water. The instructor tells Adam and Eve that Yaltabaoth lied about the forbidden tree; that eating from it would not kill them but give them gnosis. Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and their eyes are opened to the reality of their real circumstance. They see they are bodily-bound spirits separated from the incorruptible by the confines of matter. Their perception that they are naked is the realization that they are "naked" of unity with spirituality, primordial unity with Sophia and the father-of-the-entirety.

Yaltabaoth sees they are behaving oddly. Discovering they have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, he is angered because he's afraid they have seen his deception. He especially fears the inevitability that this gnosis will eventually lead to his demise. To delay this, he expels them from the garden. The other rulers place a spinning, flaming sword around the tree so no one may eat from it again. (Apparently they cannot simply destroy it.) Yaltabaoth also gives humankind a number of burdens so that we will not realize our spiritual potential. He makes people work to fill up their time, gives us pain in childbirth, and other problems to worry about. Yaltabaoth also lies by telling Adam and Eve that the instructor was "the beast" who had now been punished for its dishonesty. In fact the rulers had only cursed the instructor, and were powerless to do anything else. As in Dick's trilogy, it's difficult to discern who is telling the truth in all of this. Gnosis, transcendental insight, would be the key to understanding.

From the depraved union of Eve and the rulers, Cain and Abel are born. Lucky for humankind, Adam and Eve have their own children—Seth and Norea—who are not defiled by the alien bloodline of the rulers. In these and other Gnostic writings, Norea is Zoe, and so humanity begins to improve. Seeing their power is again threatened, the rulers decide to flood the Earth and tell only Noah. Next the rulers descend and attempt to rape Norea, telling her to serve them as her mother had. Norea tells the rulers they are living in darkness and that they had not defiled her mother but a clay image of her. The rulers close in on her, but Norea cries out to father-of-the-entirety. An angel appears and saves Norea, telling her and retelling the reader the details of the events of this story.

In the end, we learn that those who know these things about the spiritual nature of humanity and the illusory nature of matter will become free from death, that which appears only through the deception of the rulers. But this liberation will not take place until the arrival of a savior, the authentic person in who will reveal the truth of the existence of the spirit sent by the father-of-the-entirety. If there is a movie version of the Nag Hammadi texts, and it works out anything like adaptations of Dick's writings, this savior will either be played by Daniel Craig or maybe Keanu Reeves, since he's already played several saviors.

Pink Light

Scholars feel that when Gnostics read and contemplated texts, they believed they entered into a dialogue with the writer, the savior, or a sacred being. Gnostics claim that, in this way, they received the direct and authentic teachings of Jesus, Paul, and others. On the other hand, they believed that inventing one's own stories is also evidence of gnosis. This is precisely what Dick does in the *VALIS* trilogy.

Dick experiences the light of Sophia and reinterprets it in his writings. In *The Divine Invasion*, Dick explains that the intelligent light in the novel is experienced as being pink because that is how the human eye discerns celestial radiance. The *Exegesis* notes his amusement at the pink light appearing like the color of strawberry ice cream while he was listening to the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever." He concludes the divine has again manifested in the most mundane, another reference to Gnostic belief.

Among Dick's numerous theories about what he experienced through pink light are speculations about messages from three-eyed aliens he saw in a dream; projections from VALIS, a Vast Active Living Intelligence System that is like a satellite in space; and transmissions formed by god through Sophia, bypassing VALIS. Dick sees VALIS as acting like or being Yaldabaoth. That is, VALIS the satellite is not god but is only the ruler over and conveyer of the material realm. In his essay "Cosmogony and Cosmology," Dick speculates that God created VALIS so that the incorruptible might experience self-reflection. Among his descriptions of what happens to him during the transmissions are the ideas that he is taken over by the spirit of the prophet Elijah, who appears as a character in *The Divine Invasion*; that he breaks through the illusory screen of time, and realizes that we live in the time of the *Acts of the Apostles*; and that he is really Thomas, the twin of Jesus.

Generally, in contrast to orthodox Christians who seek salvation through faith, sacraments, the Bible, and church, Gnostics find salvation through inner experience related to direct divine revelation. *The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas* says the divine truth inside us will save us from death and suffering caused by the material world, if we bring it out. However, if we do not bring it out it will destroy us. This seems an apt descrip-

tion of Philip K. Dick's assumption about his pink light visions. He responds by fervently interpreting his visions in hopes of an understanding that will bring salvation from his madness. Madness as ignorance of the divine is a condition shared alike by all humanity and Yaltobaath. *The Gospel of Truth*, in the Nag Hammadi Library, describes the human condition as a nightmare in which a man with bloody hands is pursued for murder. He cannot escape until he receives gnosis. In another image in the text, a man is depicted as a mountaineer who has lost his way in the fog. He finds the way out only when he hears his name called. This is said to be like experiencing gnosis. Like the fog, Dick consistently describes ordinary reality as deception, the veil of Maya or "occlusion." In some of his descriptions this is brought about by a malicious ruler. Herb Asher tells a policeman all this is illusion and that he, the cop, is unaware that he is working for evil. In some of Dick's versions the ruler is insane. In others, people have an injury and cannot access their own divine knowledge.

Both *On the Origin of the World* and *The Hypostasis of the Archons* say all of the problems with the material world sculpted by Yaltobaath are in accord with the will of the father-of-the-entirety. At first glance this statement seems to weaken the point of the Gnostic gospels. Why introduce a blind god if we cannot blame it for ignorance? Why would the true god do this?

Dick gives various answers. In "Cosmogony and Cosmology," it is for self reflection. In *The Divine Invasion*, god likes games, but the rulers do not. In *VALIS*, we are the architects who formed the material universe to see if we could build a labyrinth so elaborate we could not escape. Maybe in the same way Dick wanted to see if he could write a novel so strange not even he could understand it. If these books resulted from exposure to the Nag Hammadi Library imagine what he would have done if he had had access to the Internet!