

1. Allegro, John M., *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth* (Second Revised Edition, Prometheus Books, 1992)

Despite its title I found this book to be quite respectful and thoughtful. For the purpose of my present inquiry into the relationship between the Gnostics and early Christians, the book has only a few things to say, but they bear repeating here.

Allegro, now deceased, did a heroic job publishing and interpreting the Dead Sea Scrolls against the expressed wishes of many scholars who wanted to work on the materials for a long time and publish what they learned in accepted scholarly journals. There is always a tension between the popularizers and the scholars, especially when one is both like Allegro.

Allegro does a very nice job showing that these materials, produced before 68 A.D. and going back into the last century B.C. give a lot of information that can be related to the New Testament. In fact, they state that the correspondence between the Essene views of faith and religion and salvation with the writings of Paul and John, who produced the earliest and latest additions to the New Testament, are astonishing (page 15):

Significantly, it is just here, in the earliest and the latest of the New Testament writings, that we come closest to the Scrolls. One important fruit of recent comparative researches has been to bring the Johannine writings back into the fold of Jewish ideas, and to resist previous inclinations to assign them to sources on the very fringe of extra-Palestinian Judaism. So, in terms of a continuum of religious tradition, we must now count the Pauline and Johannine writings

more 'authentic' witnesses to the earliest beliefs of the Church, and the first three so-called synoptic 'single-viewed' Gospels, for all their easier reading and seemingly realistic portraits of the man Jesus and his friends, will command less confidence as factual records.

Allegro precedes and follows this statement with a discussion of the dramatic differences between the Christian messiah and the one expected by the Jews, however. He is not suggesting the Essenes were the original Christians, just that the Christians were obviously aware of and believers of the type that was comfortable with the Essene view. Nevertheless, his allegation that Paul and John are closer to the pulse of early Christianity than the seemingly more straightforward work of the three evangelist's works is surprising and contradicts what it said by others.

What was the relation between the Essenes and the Gnostics? They also have much in common, and one is the successor of the other, according to Allegro (p. 151):

As has been frequently urged throughout these pages, to understand Christian origins we have to put ourselves back in the time and place of the Essenes and their immediate gnostic successors, and try to look at their traditions and expectations through their eyes.

Allegro indeed makes frequent comparisons between Essene and gnostic ideas. One example is the imagery of Christ as the Lamb of God in the writings of John. He shows that this is a symbol for the light of knowledge of the Gnostics as well as of the Essenes on page 96 (and following pages) and page 174 (and following pages). What does Allegro make of these similarities? The "unrestrained theological speculation" of Essene mysticism was frowned on by rabbinical Judaism,

says Allegro (pp. 98-99), and it might be added that this was also the relationship between Gnostics and orthodox Christians later. On page 176 Allegro wrote (see item # 10 below, by Crossan, for a discussion of the same point Allegro makes here):

By running together similarly-based myths from the gnostic story-book, we have tried to show that in all there is a common fount of inspiration, with a long history of theological development. At the end of the day we may feel that we have lost the historical Jesus of the Gospels, but discovered—or rediscovered—a timeless revelation of the divine purpose.

To the point of the purpose of this review is Allegro's last chapter (pages 223-234). In this chapter Allegro summarizes the different strains of Gnosticism (some who love God who made the world, and some who love God because he didn't make the world—the more extreme dualists). The Essenes and New Testament both show signs of both flavors of these different gnostic world views. The Essenes changed flavors to the dualist position as things turned sour for them. Allegro suggests the Church tried to find a compromise, hence the mix of world-loving and world-hating scriptures one can cite. The best compromise is, of course, John 3:16-17 which suggests God love the world so he sent his Son to redeem it.

Allegro goes well beyond the early history of the church when he describes how after it wiped out the opposition voices it settled on the idea of a Bible that was fixed and could not be questioned, and all the problems that has created. Where Allegro and I agree to an extent is in his description of the gnosticism that survives with and even in Christianity, a point that seemed to have completely escaped Freke and Gandy (p. 230):

The gnostics may have been skeptical of the great Church's historical claims, but their dissenting voice was stifled by their defeat in the battle for survival. The question may now be asked, however, did they really lose that struggle? Many died, certainly, their books were burned, and those who managed to escape the persecutions fled into the desert or were forced into fearful concealment. But the individuality they sought in their relationship with God remained an essential part of Christian religion, not only in the monasteries and anchorites' cells, but in those persistent 'heresies' which have periodically forced their attentions upon the ecclesiastical hierarchy and suffered from its vengeful fury. But the Catharists and the Waldensians of the Middle Ages have no lack of successors in the modern world of so called 'fringe' Christianity. . . . For religion, like human love, is at the heart an affair of sentiment and personal commitment, a relationship between the believer and his God. At its deepest and most satisfying level there is no room for the priestly intermediary.

My take is even kinder than this rather harsh account: I believe there have been gnostics in the Great Church, among its laity and hierarchy as well as among its most common members. These are all those who came to know the Divine Nature for and in themselves, and they were there from the start in the form of the earliest anchorites, a few of the celebrated Church fathers, through Francis of Assisi and the Beguine and other mystics whose writings have inspired me. The Great Church was never the monolith its detractors try to make of it. It has been a terrible thing, done terrible things, but always and at the same time in other places wondrous revelations were experienced and recorded in the hearts of people who believed in and loved that same institution.