

The Gnostic Demiurge



Figure 1: A sketch of an ancient Greco-Egyptian amulet that depicts a creature similar in appearance to Yaldabaoth

The demiurge (Greek *demiurgos*,^[1] “craftsman”^[2]) is the being who created the world in Gnosticism. The Gnostics identified him with the god of the Old Testament. The Gnostic scriptures portray him as ignorant, malicious, and utterly inferior to [the true God](#) who sent [Christ](#) to earth to save humankind from the demiurge’s evil world.

The demiurge is given many names in the Gnostic scriptures, but the three most common ones are Yaldabaoth (also spelled “Ialdabaoth”), Samael, and Saklas. “Saklas” comes from the Aramaic word for “fool,” and “Samael” is Aramaic for “Blind God” or “God of the Blind.”^[3] The meaning of “Yaldabaoth” is uncertain. The Gnostic text *On the Origin of the World* fancifully translates it as “Youth, move over there,” but no word or string of words that sounds like “Yaldabaoth” meant that in any ancient Mediterranean language.^[4] “Yaldabaoth” is somewhat close to “child of chaos” in Aramaic, but that’s still a stretch,^[5] as is the intuitively plausible suggestion that it could be a condensed form of “Yahweh, Lord of Sabbaths.”^[6]

In the [Gnostic creation myth](#), Heaven – which the Gnostics called the “[Pleroma](#),” “Fullness” – was all that existed until a divine entity named [Sophia](#) tried to conceive on her own, without the involvement of her heavenly partner or the consent of God. Sophia gave birth to a son that was the product of the rebellious and profane desire that had arisen within her.

This son of hers was the demiurge. The Gnostic text [Reality of the Rulers](#) describes “him” as an androgynous being, an “arrogant beast” that resembled an aborted fetus in both appearance and character.^[7] The [Secret Book of John](#) adds that he had the body of a snake and the head of a lion, with eyes like lightning bolts.^[8] (In ancient Greek philosophy, the lion was frequently a symbol of irrational passions. The Gnostics were steeped in the Greek philosophical tradition, so their

description of the demiurge as having a lion's head was probably intended to show that he was a being who couldn't or wouldn't control his base urges.[9] That certainly fits the demiurge's personality as described in their texts.)

When Sophia saw the horrifying, twisted being that had come from her, she was deeply ashamed and afraid. She disowned him and cast him out of Heaven.

From his lonely position where his madness and conceit could go unchecked, the demiurge gave birth to the [archons](#) ("rulers"[10]), beings who were like him and could help him administer the material world. He then created the material world, which, like all creations, was a reflection of the personality of its creator.

The demiurge then created Adam and Eve and imprisoned divine sparks from Heaven within them. He told them that he was the only god and issued the Ten Commandments, even though he himself broke each and every one of those commandments. For example, he lied when he claimed to be the only god and that Adam and Eve would die if they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; he insulted his mother and father by refusing to acknowledge their existence; he made a graven image of the divine when he modeled the material world on his corrupt and ignorant misunderstanding of Heaven; and he committed adultery by attempting to rape Eve.[11]

Where the Idea of the Gnostic Demiurge Came From

How could the Gnostics have possibly come up with the idea that such a being created the earth? It seems quite incongruous with Christianity as we understand it today. But in the time when Gnosticism arose ([the late first or early second century AD](#)), that wasn't really the case. To be sure, Jews, Roman pagans, and the Gnostics' fellow Christians found the Gnostic idea of an evil creator to be shocking and blasphemous. But when we consider the intellectual and spiritual environment within which Gnosticism arose – one that was dominated by Plato's long shadow, and where Christians were still trying to decide on the basics of their new religion and separate it from Judaism – the Gnostic conception of the demiurge makes a lot more sense.

The word "demiurge" comes from Plato, although Plato's demiurge was far from evil. For Plato and other pagan Greek and Roman philosophers who followed him, the material world was the creation of a divine "craftsman" who made the world the best reflection of the perfect spiritual world of the Forms that was possible given the constraints of matter.[12]

In Judaism, it was an established tradition to split off particular faculties of God from God himself and credit those lesser divine beings, such as Wisdom, with having assisted God in the creation of the world, as in the eighth chapter of Proverbs and the twenty-fourth chapter of Sirach. Christians inherited and extended this tradition, such as when the first chapter of the Gospel of John identifies Christ with God's Word/*Logos* and gives him an indispensable role in creation.[13]

So the Gnostics' attribution of the act of creation to someone other than the ultimate God was hardly radical by the standards of the Christianity and Judaism of their time – indeed, it was downright conventional. But the Gnostics' influences all portrayed these divine helpers as benevolent and their work as in harmony with the wishes of the perfectly good ultimate God. How did the Gnostics get the idea that the demiurge was instead *malevolent*?

Strange as it may at first seem, this, too, was probably a good-faith interpretation of Christian scriptures that were already widespread, popular, and authoritative in the Gnostics' time. After all, the Gospel of Luke (4:6) and the Gospel of Matthew (4:8) assume that Satan is the ruler of the world when Satan offers Jesus the world in exchange for his worship. Likewise, the Gospel of John mentions an evil "ruler (*archon*) of this world" in no less than three places (12:31, 14:30, and 16:11). Luke (10:18) and John (12:31) both speak of Satan or a Satan-like entity ruling the earth from the sky and being vanquished by Jesus's ministry.[14] 1 John 5:19 is even more blunt: "We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one." [15]

The Christians of the first and second centuries, including the Gnostics, were tasked with the monumental project of figuring out what to do with the "Old Testament" that they were supplanting with their own "New Testament." In the words of Simone Pétrement, they were attempting "to limit the value of the Old Testament within a religion *that nevertheless preserves it.*" [16]

Early Christians were highly critical of many of the particulars of Judaism, asserting that Christ had come to correct what the Jews had gotten wrong. Consider the Apostle Paul's remarks to Peter on the Mosaic Law, the centerpiece of Judaism, in Galatians 2:11-21:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. ... I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. [17]

The Gnostics took all of these pieces and combined them. If the world had been created by a lesser being rather than the ultimate God, and if the world was currently ruled by a demonic being, and if Christ had come to correct the flaws of Judaism, why not posit that the Jewish creator god was the demonic being who ruled the world – that Christ came as an emissary from the ultimate God to save humankind *from the creator?*

Note, by the way, that the Gnostics could arrive at this position even while upholding the sanctity of the Jewish scriptures: everything those books said was accurate, but their authors had been ignorant of the true meaning of what they had written about. [18]

Such a view also had the effect of enabling the Gnostics to make sense of several passages in the Old Testament that had long troubled Christians and even Jews. "The god of Genesis," notes David Brakke,

walks in an earthly garden and must ask where Adam is (Genesis 3:8-9); he concludes that his creation of humanity and animals was a mistake and decides to destroy all people, except for a single family and a few beasts (6:5-22); and he later annihilates entire cities by raining sulfur and fire down upon them (19:24-25). [19]

The Gnostics took Genesis at its word and concluded that this god was simply malicious, hot-tempered, stupid, and inept.

References:

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- [19] Ibid.