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Histories of the Hidden God

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April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson (eds.)

Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western, Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions, Gnostica: Texts & Interpretations, Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2013. x + 358 pp. ISBN 978-1-84465-687-5 (hardcover).

DeConick and Adamson's edited collection, *Histories of the Hidden God*, originated "out of select proceedings from the first international symposium on Gnosticism, Esotericism and Mysticism held at Rice University"—itself titled *Hidden God, Hidden Histories* (p. vii). As such, both the contents of the individual papers themselves as well as the unity they find in this volume are tied to the conference's theme of exploring the gnostic, esoteric, and mystical dimensions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In particular, the conference's keynote speaker, Kocku von Stuckrad's conception of 'the esoteric' (as opposed to 'esotericism') as a discourse in European religion characterized by a dialectic of revelation and concealment (p. 315) provides something of a common ground for nearly all of the book's chapters, which are by and large concerned with elucidating different aspects of this dialectic within the discourses of their respective areas of focus. In between an introduction from DeConick and an afterword from von Stuckrad, the book is divided up into three parts which nominally designate groupings of essays within the book whose topics respectively pertain to either the concealment (Part I, 13–119), human quest for (Part II, 120–204), or the revelation of the 'Hidden God' (Part III, 205–311).

As is the case with many edited volumes, the chapters which comprise it vary considerably both in terms of content as well as form. *Histories of the Hidden God* is no exception to this rule, being comprised of contributions which run the gamut from expository essays, such as Robin M. Jensen's "The Invisible Christian God in Christian Art", which introduces the theme of divine concealment in Christian art (217–233); to argumentative papers, like DeConick's "Who is Hiding in the Gospel of John? Reconceptualizing Johannine Theology and the Roots of Gnosticism", which cogently advances a novel hypothesis regarding Johannine theology's relationship with Gnosticism (13–29); to analytical studies, such as Andrei A. Orlov's "Adoil Outside the Cosmos: God Before and After Creation in the Enochic Tradition", which is principally an exegesis of the pseudepigraphic text, 2 (*Slavonic*) *Apocalypse of Enoch* (30–57). This being the case, the book as a whole can be evaluated on several different levels, the two foremost being (1) as a collection of individual contributions to their respective bodies of knowledge, and (2) as a whole which supervenes over the individual contributions, functioning as a unified contribution to a field.

In the first sense, *Histories of the Hidden God* is a strong volume, as many of its constituent chapters make novel and important contributions to their authors'

fields. Viewed through this interpretive lens, there are several stand-out papers, which are bound to become required reading for any scholars working with the subjects treated therein. This group includes: DeConick's aforementioned chapter; Claire Fanger's "God's Occulted Body: On the Hiddenness of Christ in Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*", which forcefully argues for a hidden Christological reading of the text (101–119); John D. Turner's "From Hidden to Revealed in Sethian Religion, Ritual, and Protology", which explores both the epistemological and ontogenetic dimensions of God's hiddenness through the exegesis of three Nag Hammadi texts (149–174); Jeffrey J. Kripal's "On the Mothman, God, and Other Monsters: The Demonology of John A. Keel", which presents a complex, two-layered analysis of the discourse of the monstrous in Keel's writings (234–258); and Stephen C. Finley's "Hidden Away: Esotericism and Gnosticism in Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam", wherein the reader is treated to a groundbreaking reading of the Nation of Islam through Antoine Faivre's six-fold model of 'esotericism' (pp. 259–280).

For all of these individual strengths, however, *Histories of the Hidden God* does not fare so well when viewed in the second sense. The book's difficulty in cohering successfully stems from the extremely divergent foci of its constituent chapters. While it is easy to imagine an edited volume of a more encyclopedic nature (e.g. Wouter J. Hanegraaff's *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*) presenting similarly heterogeneous topics in an introductory manner so that the book as a whole would be suitable for general readers, the challenge faced by DeConick and Adamson's book is that many of the essays seem to have been written for very narrow sectors of specialist readers. This is exemplified in DeConick's own chapter, whose argumentation—typical of the methods of classical philology—depends on a careful analysis of the grammar of John 8:44's original Greek. Were this book aimed solely at classicists, this would be a non-issue. But the fact that the volume's chapters span the spectrum from antiquity to late modernity forces the reviewer to question what type of reader at whom the book is aimed. While there may, for example, be *some* late modern specialists conversant enough in Koine Greek to critically evaluate DeConick's argument, this reader would tend to be an exception to the norm—as would be the classicist who takes a keen interest in the theoretical dimensions of late modern esoteric discourse analyzed by Kripal and Finley. This difficulty in determining the book's intended readership seems largely owed to the overly-broad theme which the book attempts to tackle. This general theme of divine hiddenness which is loose enough to accommodate a diverse collection of excellent specialist studies, but is not tight enough to result in a book which succeeds in cohering well enough to match the quality of its constituents as a single supervening work.

In formal execution, *Histories of the Hidden God* is rather handsomely produced. While the glued case binding is not likely to be as durable as a Smyth sewn edition, it can be lain flat open without any damage. The interior and exterior design of the book is, like the previous members of the Gnostica series, both visually appealing and easily legible. This reviewer was, however, distracted by one error in the copyediting that cropped up in multiple chapters. It appears that at some stage of copyediting, a find/replace function was run on a word processor to replace all instances of 'gnostic' with 'Gnostic.' Were this done manually, it would be all well and good, except in this case it appears to have been done systematically, resulting in oddly capitalized words like "proGnostication" (p. 64) and "aGnostic" (p. 224). If the volume sees a new edition under Routledge—as some other titles in the Gnostica series have—hopefully these will be corrected. These issues aside, this book will make a fine and necessary addition to any university library collection with significant holdings in either antique, medieval, or late modern esoteric or gnostic currents, and several of its chapters will likely become focal points of discussion within their respective disciplines for some time to come.

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