

Introduction

The Levant was unimaginably complex in the period directly following the crucifixion of Christ. The Roman Empire, freshly formed from the death of Julius Caesar and the ascension of Augustus created fertile grounds for the transfer of new religious, mystical, and magical ideas across the Mediterranean. Hellenism, Greek religion and philosophy, was introduced by Alexander III (the Great) in the fourth-century CE. Here it cross-pollinated native Judaism with Zoroastrianism and various indigenous pagan beliefs, leaving the trace of Plato, Zoroaster, and Hermes Trismegistus on the contours of Judaea. From this crucible came the burgeoning Jesus movement, flowering out of an apocalyptic preacher from Galilee. He would be deified in the centuries after his death and mythological resurrection. However, this Jesus movement was not a unified religion. Indeed, the writings of heresy-hunters such as Iranaeus and Justin Martyr paint a surprisingly heterogeneous pastiche of Levantine religious life in these adolescent years of Christianity.

The most infamous of these movements was what Iranaeus and other heresy-hunters termed the γνωστικοί (gnōstikói), "ones who know," from Greek γνώσις (gnôsis), "knowledge." For centuries of scholarship, the only sources for this ancient sect were, save fragments of tracts and a handful of gems carved with magical words, polemics authored by those who sought to marginalize it. By negating the comparatively esoteric philosophy, supposedly obsessed with mystery, secrecy, and hidden knowledge (that is, *gnôsis*), they could create a clearer image of Christian orthodoxy.

In 1945, the discovery of a cache of thirteen codices near the hamlet of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt placed lost scriptures within reach of archaeologists and historical theologians. One could now glimpse a more comprehensive image of these Gnostics.

What interest is this to scholars of anime and manga studies? The most apparent intersection, I maintain, can be seen in the prescient *Serial Experiments Lain*. It has amassed a significant cult following since its release in 1998. Prophetically, it explores conspiracy, identity, and reality in the birth of a global, digital world. Comparisons to an ancient heresy may thus seem contradictory: to what extent can the ancient relate to the postmodern? However, I contend that four themes, or mythemes, can be distilled, and this rubric can be fruitful for a study of *Serial Experiments Lain*:

- (1) A dualism between ontologically separate worlds;
- (2) A divine drama in which a feminine divinity sits at the confluence of these two worlds;
- (3) An ignorant or evil creator god -- a demiurge, or fashioner -- generally associated with hubris; and
- (4) An esoteric or occult ecclesiology – cults, secret societies, and mystical organizations.

Methods

This analysis adopts a particular critical lens: *SEL* as myth. That is to say, not simply as a fiction or piece of 'mere' literature, but neither as a literal historical document. It is neither simply fiction nor fact; instead, it is a mediating narrative between an abstract system of ideas and the everyday world embodied in a particular narrative. As a myth, the method most fruitful for interpretation is that of ἀναγωγή (anagōgē), reasoning "upward" -- the identification of esoteric, hidden themes in a narrative. In short, by bringing *Serial Experiments Lain* into a broader Gnostic tradition, one can juxtapose the strategies – the exegesis – that would typically be

applied to scripture to divine a novel, useful, and interesting interpretation of the text at hand. The Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* begins: "Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings shall not taste death."

Gnostic cosmology

Of course, it would be incredibly confusing to juxtapose the archetypes of Gnosticism with those of *Serial Experiments Lain* without a prior introduction. Thus, a broad sketch of Gnosticism is necessary.

One must note that Gnosticism is a second-order term. That is to say, the "Gnostics" of antiquity almost certainly did not refer to themselves as "Gnostics" and probably had no understanding of themselves as a separate movement. Indeed, these "Gnostics" probably thought of themselves as Christians, Jews, or neither. Iranaeus *et al.* did delineate between proto-orthodoxy and these Gnostics; however, though Iranaeus was an astute observer, his polemics were just that: polemics, they served an *abject* function. By ejecting the marginal elements of Christianity, a more smooth, codified Christianity could be born. Thus, one cannot trust them as neutral, objective sources. Further, it is not entirely clear whom Iranaeus is referring to when he speaks of Gnostics. The Nag Hammadi corpus reflects a deeply complex amalgamation of many different schools, some of which certainly were opposed to each other.

Gnosticism, then, is best classified by movements, by mythological similarity, or by similar tropes. Thus, I will, where possible, reference particular works and movements and try my best to refer to Gnostic movements, plural, rather than a monolithic Gnosticism. However, this is not always possible.

Two movements of interest to this study are Sethianism and Valentinianism.

For the first movement, the Sethians, the root of gnosis is with Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, and sometimes identified with Jesus Christ. Sethian cosmology is most succinct in the *Secret Book of John*, which we will discuss shortly as our primary Sethian source.

The second movement, the Valentinians, were named for their founder, Valentinus, rebuked at length by Church Fathers Iranaeus and Epiphanius. Instead of focusing on a single scripture, as with the Sethians, I have relied primarily on scholar David Brons' synthesis of Valentinian theology.

The *Secret Book of John* opens with a narration by John. He identifies himself as a son of Zebedee and brother of James. After the resurrection of Christ, a Pharisee named Arimanios, who flagrantly rejects and condemns Jesus, accosts John. Disheartened by this rebuking, John goes to a mountainous, barren place to contemplate the mysteries of the ascension. Here, the heavens open up, and a figure with three forms, "visible through each other," appears to him. This figure says, "I am the Father, the Mother, and the Child." This figure is the Sethian Jesus, who begins to elucidate the mystical history of the universe.

This history begins with an incomprehensible One, the Father, who is beyond all understanding. This One "beholds" himself in the light surrounding him, falling in love with his reflection. This reflection becomes a reality and takes the name of Barbelo, the androgynous Mother. This divine sexual pairing sets off a long cosmogony, pairs who beget pairs, in a set of four "luminaries," with the divine ordination of the Father. Together, these emanations, called aeons in the text, are the pleroma, or fullness of divinity.

At the end of this long emanation, Sophia, or wisdom, is born in the fourth luminary. Wanting to "bring forth something like herself," without the consent of the Nameless Father and without her pair. In this act of passion, she gives birth to an imperfect, deformed child – a seven-faced serpent with the head of a lion. He has three names: Yaldabaoth, "child of chaos," Sakla, "fool," and Samael, "blind god." Sophia loses some of her light in this act of illicit creation, trapped in Yaldabaoth. Ashamed of her abomination, she hides it away from her kin in the pleroma. Thus, Yaldabaoth is rendered ignorant of the celestial hierarchy above him.

Yaldabaoth "mates with the mindlessness inside himself" and creates twelve other aeons with "luminous fires," followed by three-hundred-sixty-five angels. These are the zodiac and the yearly cycle, while his seven faces render the days of the week. The implication was clear for ancient Hellenistic Jews, who were well-versed in astrology. Yaldabaoth creates not only the material world but fate itself. He proclaims he is the sole God, a jealous God -- a call-back to Genesis which implies that Yaldabaoth is the God of the Old Testament. The framing narrative stresses this through the Pharisee who accosts John: a conservative, traditionalist, anti-syncretic Jew. In control of the material world, the aeons of Yaldabaoth are now archons, literally "rulers."

Sophia becomes agitated and repents. All of the pleroma sings her praise, feeling sympathy and pity for her plight. The Father moves her to a position just above Yaldabaoth until she restores what is lacking in herself.

Yaldabaoth and his archons decide to create a human. A whole host of demons, each with an obscure name, preside over this. Meanwhile, Sophia and the other aeons trick Yaldabaoth into "breathing his spirit" into Adam – the power he inherited from Sophia. The Nameless Father sends down Eve, who imparts some sacred knowledge to Adam. The archons, in response, hide the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil -- the tree of gnosis -- from Adam, but an aeon

reveals it to him. The narrative snaps back to the framing device, and John states that it was the serpent of temptation, not an aeon, who accomplished this. Jesus, however, laughs and states that it was, in fact, him who guided Adam to the tree.

Thus, humans, inundated with the divine light from Sophia and utilizing divine knowledge or gnosis, make their way from the material world to the heavens to rejoin Sophia. Thus, they break free from the flesh-prison of the body and return to the divine Father above all. The *Secret Book* ends with a short prayer: "Jesus Christ, Amen."

Like the Sethians, the Valentinians affirmed an unknowable, limitless, androgynous Father above all. As with Sethianism, all reality comes forth from a process of overflowing, or emanation, from this Father. The first of these emanations is the Son, who in turn emanates twenty-six aeons, again, in sexual pairs. These aeons long to know the unknowable Father, but cannot, as he is unknowable.

The youngest of the aeons, Sophia, longed to know the unknowable especially. Acting alone and without her partner, in an act of passion, she loses sight of reality and unreality, thus becoming cleft into a lower part, and a higher part. This lower part becomes the material world, whereas the high part returns to the pleroma with her partner. This fall results in the miraculous creation of the demiurge, who fashions the pre-existent prima materia in the image of the divine hierarchy. He is ignorant and, uniquely in Valentinian theology, somewhat neutral. He views himself as the true God, and does not know his mother, nor the unknowable Father.

The Son, transformed now into the Savior, brings divine knowledge – gnosis – which dissolves the ignorance and returns the lower Sophia into the pleroma through "spiritual seeds" trapped in the material world. Thus the entire world is a drama of these seeds attaining maturity, of the divine seeds returning to the fullness of God.

In both these systems, a more general Gnostic mythology is glimpsed. A feminine aeon emanated by the Nameless Father falls and traps sparks of the divine in the material world. This fall creates an ignorant false God, the demiurge, and the drama of all human life is concerned with the return of these sparks to the immaterial world.

Here we can see the Gnostic counterpart of the initial four themes:

- (1) A dualism between a higher pleroma and the lower material;
- (2) The Sophia cycle;
- (3) An evil, ignorant demiurge – Yaldabaoth; and
- (4) .Esoteric knowledge – gnosis.

Once again, we must ask: what interest is this to anime and manga studies, and *Serial Experiments Lain* more narrowly?

Cosmology according to *Lain*

SEL is notoriously complex and difficult to parse. Placing it into a linear narrative is near impossible without leaving out reams of details and subtext. *Serial Experiments Lain* is more an 'atmospheric' anime than one driven by narrative. Instead of being arranged in episodes, it is stratified in layers. It is not always clear where and when events occur, and even when it is, there is seldom clear causality. I will attempt a short synopsis as best as I can.

The backdrop of the series is an increasingly globalized world connected by the Wired. This omnipresent network begins, it appears, to encroach on the real, making the boundary between the spheres blurry. The Wired is accessed through navis. The Wired and navis appear as stand-ins for the Internet and computers. However, the former are intensified in many ways and made much more present.

Serial Experiments Lain opens with a disturbing event: Chisa Yomoda, a schoolgirl, jumping to her death. Eerily, her classmates begin receiving emails from her, seemingly beyond the grave. In response to this, Lain Iwakura, an innocent, soft-spoken, and introverted girl turns on her navi for the first time in ages. Here, she has a ghostly conversation with Chisa. She tells Lain that through suicide, she has transcended her bodily form and that God is in the Wired.

Gradually, the series reveals a wide conspiracy as a number of strange, surreal, or psychedelic events unfold, all concerned with the alleged appearance of (a) God in the Wired.

First, unethical experiments conducted by a Professor Hodgeson, called KIDS, lay bare the latent power of psi, or psychic energy, imbued within children.

Second, an enigmatic Protocol 7, the brainchild of an engineer named Masami Eiri at Tachibana General Laboratories, the corporation where the Wired originates. Protocol 7 is the interface between the Wired and the real, made possible by a Psyche chip developed by Eiri, which vastly improves the computing power of existing infrastructure.

Last, the Schumann resonance is introduced, a real-world concept the nameless narrator describes as the "brainwave of earth." Eiri seeks to use this Schumann resonance to connect the collective unconscious of all humanity. Eiri, through suicide, is now wholly native to the Wired and has self-styled himself as God. Eiri's primary goal is the collapse of the real into the Wired. Lain is at the center of this collapse for reasons that remain largely unexplained. Eiri consistently harangues her through numerous guises.

A subplot of Lain's relationship with her school peers, especially her friend Alice, complicates this narrative. A persistent current of loneliness permeates the series. Additionally, her identity appears fractured, tripartite. There appears a Lain of the real, a soft-spoken and immature girl portrayed in childlike clothing, especially her iconic "bear suit"; a more bold Lain

of the Wired who appears at a nightclub early in the series; and an evil Lain who seeks to cause harm wherever she can. These Lains interact and converse throughout each layer. At one point, Eiri and Lain even appear to switch bodies, speaking in each other's voices. Lain discusses the nature of "God" with her father, Yasuo, implied to be a colleague of Eiri:

Yasuo: God is only a concept in this real world. But I think that there may be a Deus-like entity in the Wired.

Lain: A God?

Yasuo: I don't know if it should be called a God or not, but I think that he may rule the Wired, as it is written in myth.

Lain: I may have talked to God.

Yasuo: Deus in the Wired may affect this real world in some way. Yes, by a prophecy.

Central to the events in the series is a tension, a rivalry, between a secret society of hackers called the Knights of the Eastern Calculus – a reference to a hacker in-joke named for an abstract computing model – and men in black employed by Tachibana General Laboratories. The former worship Eiri, and the latter are directly opposed to him. Eventually, the men in black assassinate all members of the Knights of the Eastern Calculus. However, they are themselves betrayed by Tachibana, which appears interested in the Wired-real merger.

In the climax of the series, Lain is confronted by Eiri in the presence of Alice. Eiri becomes a convulsing body of flesh and, ironically, is killed by a mass of falling computer equipment. Lain sardonically comments: "You said that your flesh wasn't necessary, didn't you?" She rebukes Eiri, denying that the Wired is an upper layer of reality.

After Eiri's death, Lain – who has seemingly become omnipotent herself – resets reality, fully expecting to be wiped from existence in a sort of self-sacrifice. There is a final identity break where Lain discusses her true nature with her fractured self. Then, Lain is comforted by a figure appearing to be her "father," looming in the sky. He tells her she no longer needs to wear

her bear suit, symbolizing her immaturity and childlike safety. The series ends with a fourth-wall break: Lain appears to the viewer and says, "I'm here. So I will always be with you. Always."

We can now fit these disparate mythemes within the rubric discussed earlier, much as we did with the *Secret Book* and the *Valentinian* fragments.

- (1) A dualism between the real and the Wired;
- (2) Lain, a divine feminine figure who sits at the confluence of these worlds;
- (3) An evil, plainly ignorant god – Masami Eiri – who is defined by his hubris; and
- (4) An esoteric or occult ecclesiology, that is, the rivalry between the Knights and the men in black.

We must note essential caveats. Firstly, the dualism between two separate but ontologically-related spheres. The primary conflict of *SEL* can be said to be the tension between the Wired and the real. This opposition deceptively mirrors the classic Gnostic binary of the immaterial pleroma and the material world of matter.

One must be careful, however, not to take a vulgar understanding of the dualism within *SEL*. It is tempting to apply a simple equivalence between the Wired and the real, and the pleroma and the material, respectively, with characters outwardly attempting to transcend the real and enter the Wired. It seems obvious that when analyzing *SEL* with this lens, the Wired is the counterpart to the pleroma.

However, the figure of Masami Eiri problematizes this notion. Eiri's demiurgic nature – his hubristic affirmation that he is God – and his imagined dominion over the Wired implies an inversion of the Sethian or Valentinian dualism. As Lain explicitly notes in the climax, it is the Wired which emanates from the real, not vice-versa. For Eiri, an ignorant demiurge, the Wired is the ontological prior, and reality is but a projection of neurological data. However, the sparse

narrative implies the opposite: if the flesh is no longer necessary, it was once necessary. Thus it is the real which is prior to the Wired. However, unlike classic Gnostic theology, there is no clear affirmation of either element in the dualism. It is unclear whether Lain affirms the real or the Wired. For Susan J. Napier, Japanese professor at Tuft, *SEL* is concerned with a question of return: either to "an empty 'real'" or a "dark 'virtual'". It can be read as an affirmation of bodily existence and a negation of the virtual, or as an affirmation of the virtual and a negation of bodily existence. Ultimately however, these dualisms come undone. Lain at least appears to transcend the material, but her material connection with Alice is central to her defeat of Eiri. Further, the theme of memory implies that Lain will no longer exist upon the "reset" of the world as there is no one to believe in her. However, Lain persists after the reset. The separation of worlds is rendered fatally ambiguous: Lain is present in both and neither at once.

Thus, the Sophianic drama of *SEL* concerns not a vulgar dualism but rather an unraveling of dualisms. The *Gospel of Philip*, likely of Valentinian provenance, reads: "Light and darkness, life and death, the right and the left are each other's brothers. They cannot separate from one another. Therefore, the good are not good, nor are the evil evil, nor is life life, nor death, death." For the Valentinians, the pleroma encloses the material world; it sits just outside the fixed firmament of stars. Lain's confusion, and by extension our confusion, at the confluence of the dual worlds mirrors the fall of Sophia in the Valentinian fragments. In both the Valentinian corpus and *Serial Experiments Lain*, the Sophianic figure, unaware of her true origin, loses sight of reality and unreality.

In the end of the series, Lain sees her father appear in the sky – in the image of, but perhaps not, her father. The theme of God is recurrent throughout the series, and I argue in this

final event, there is an implication that there is indeed a God. That he appears in the guise of Lain's father is similar to the metaphor of fatherhood as it is used in the Gnostic corpus: not a literal, biological fatherhood, but fatherhood as an allegory for the act of emanation, of flowing-over.

The ambiguity of this God's very existence is appropriate. He remains unspoken – an unspeakable Father, merely an implication. Lain does, implicitly mention an otherwise unnamed God in Layer 12, when confronting Eiri: "Yes, you were a God in the Wired. But before the Wired appeared... You were only the proxy God for those waiting for the Wired's appearance." A proxy God is by definition a proxy for something else. Whether or not Lain is referring to herself or the "real" God is debatable, and from this lens it can be understood as both, and neither. She is and is not the nameless Father. In this final act of communion with her Father she reaches her *telos*, the final end of the Sophianic cycle, her maturity, her return to the fullness of divinity.

In this manner, *Serial Experiments Lain* represents a postmodern retelling of a Gnostic mythology. Central to this mythology is the tension between the real and the virtual, which is no longer the evident "mitigated dualism" of the ancient heretics, but something more complex, more problematic, and certainly more familiar for contemporary viewers. On other hand, at the confluence of these spheres is a thoroughly fractured subject, who's only sin is ignorance, just as in the ancient papyri dug out of Egyptian sand. Through secret knowledge, participation in a mystic secret, and an overcoming of a demiurgic power, communion with the root of all existence, with wholeness, is once again possible.