

# Gnosticism

Did Jesus really have an identical twin? Was he married to Mary Magdalene? Were gospels destroyed that should have been in the **Bible**? Did Jesus talk to the cross on which he died and did the cross walk out of the tomb speaking? Was Judas a hero who alone of the disciples understood Jesus and, in betraying Him, was carrying out Christ's secret instructions?

Writings from the second through fourth centuries either make these claims outright or suggest them to modern readers. Produced by individuals whom we now identify as "Gnostic," these texts have been put forward in recent years as reasonable alternative forms of Christianity, as branches which were unjustly suppressed, as teachings which should be allowed to modify the dogma that came down to us or as books that should have been incorporated into the Bible. Naturally this is of concern to those orthodox Christians who understand what the texts actually contain. There is a danger that those who do not may be confused or misled by the popular claims. In this article Christian History Institute seeks to show who the Gnostics were, how we know about them, what were their main writings, what they taught and what, if anything, we can learn from them.

## What Was Gnosticism?

Gnostics did not call themselves by that name and there were many variations of what we now call Gnosticism. While some forms were completely unrelated to Christianity, others considered themselves a higher type of Christian. But although Gnostic beliefs varied a good deal, we can sum up a few essential points on which all agreed:

- The material world is bad, the spirit world is good. The material world is under the control of evil, ignorance or nothingness.
- A divine spark is somehow trapped in some (but not all) humans and it alone, of all that exists in this material world, is capable of redemption.
- Salvation is through a secret knowledge by which individuals come to know themselves, their origin and destiny.
- Since a good God could not have created an evil world, it must have been created by an inferior, ignorant or evil god. Usually the explanation given is that the true, good God created or emanated beings (Archons) who either emanated other Archons or conjugated to produce them until a mishap by Sophia (Wisdom) led to the creation of the evil Archon who created our world and pretends to be God. He hides truth from humans, but sparks of Sophia in some humans fill them with an urge to return to the Pleroma (divine realm) where they belong.

These ideas had implications that could not be squared with either the Old Testament or apostolic writings, which is why early Christians rejected them.

## What Were Some Implications of Gnosticism?

Since Gnostics held matter to be corrupt, they considered the body to be corrupt, too. The trend of some Gnostics was to teach that there is no harm in indulging fleshly desires since the body is utterly corrupt and beyond redemption anyhow. Other Gnostics, perhaps the majority, held that the body must be kept in check by strict asceticism. Whether one chooses plan A or plan B, the underlying doctrine makes it impossible to understand how God could become a true man with a fleshly body in Christ Jesus.

If matter is corrupt, Christ's body also was corrupt. Since the "Christian" Gnostics accepted Christ as in some sense the savior, they were prone to a heresy called docetism, which taught that Christ only *appeared* to have a man's body. Those Gnostics who avoided docetism and allowed Christ a real material body taught that the Christ spirit entered into the Jesus body at some point and was later withdrawn. Even on this point Gnostic writings differ. Some say that the Christ spirit abandoned the man Jesus and left him to die alone on the cross, others that someone other than Jesus was executed. In Gnostic writings, the resurrection was either ignored or viewed as a spiritual, rather than a physical, event. There was no settled Gnostic position on these points. Each Gnostic worked out a solution as he or she pleased, freely inventing myths to his or her own satisfaction, borrowing at will from the thoughts of predecessors.

## When Did Gnosticism Arise?

The origins of Gnosticism are not known. Some of its ideas, especially the pervasive theme of androgyny, can be found in Plato. Various scholars have attempted to trace Gnostic dualism to Zoroastrianism and other features of Gnosticism to Buddhism or Judaism. A treasure trove of Gnostic documents found at Nag Hammadi include several works which represent a sour, blasphemous Jewish Gnosticism that takes a perverse delight in saying spiteful things about God as He is revealed in the Old Testament.

As this suggests, elements of Gnosticism existed before the **advent** of Christianity. Peter, Paul, John and the writer of Hebrews were probably addressing budding Gnostic ideas when they insisted that Jesus came in the flesh and was a man like us. John's Revelation mentions groups who incorporated sexual acts into worship, which was also the practice of some Gnostic groups. However, the majority of Gnostic manuscripts found at Nag Hammadi as well as the *Gospel of Judas* and other such writings are clearly a reaction to the already-existing history-based Christianity of those whom we call the orthodox-- those whose faith was based on the oral teaching and writings of the apostles and their associates (the apostolic writings were widely distributed and accepted throughout Christendom although not every area had all of

the books that made it into the New Testament and some accepted books that did not make the cut).

## **Valentinus Invents "Christian" Gnosticism**

The founder of "Christian" Gnosticism was Valentinus, who was born in Carthage about 100 A.D. He became connected with the Christian church. After almost being elected Bishop of Rome (i.e.: pope) he drifted into open heresy. Apparently he was a poet; some have credited him with authorship of the earliest version of the poetical Gnostic homily *Gospel of Truth*. Desiring to present apostolic authority for his teaching (without which he knew Christians would ignore him), he claimed that he had received instruction from a follower of Paul named Theodas or Theudas. Even if this Theodas really had been a follower of Paul, it would not validate Valentinus' teaching, for we know that some followers of Paul fell away, for he and other apostles warn of those who shipwrecked their faith and of wolves in sheep's clothing who will come among them. With the deaths of the apostles and their immediate successors, falsehood found it easier to take root. There were no eyewitnesses left to repudiate false claims.

As Valentinus' life dates show, the "Christian Gnostic" movement and its writings date from the middle of the 2nd century AD or later. By then, most, if not all, of the writings that became our New Testament were 80 to 100 years old. Consequently various Gnostic writings quote from or allude to almost every one of them. In turn, Gnostic writings spurred a whole new Christian literature when it became necessary to refute the spreading falsehood. Late in the 2d century, orthodox leaders began to produce works to counter the growing Gnostic influence.

## **Why Did Early Church Leaders Oppose Gnosticism?**

Why did orthodox leaders oppose Gnosticism? First and foremost, Gnosticism did not square with what they had been taught or with the accepted writings of either the Old Testament or of the apostolic period. Gnostic gospels, coming, as they did, decades--if not centuries-- after the original Christian Scriptures, were not more likely to contain truth than the received apostolic writings, but instead more likely to be inaccurate because of their longer reliance on oral transmission (assuming they attempted to base their thought on any kind of tradition, which is doubtful). Secondly, orthodox leaders feared that Gnostic cults would deceive members of their flocks and lead them to hell. Having examined Gnostic teachings, they were convinced that Gnostics were employing the old deception used by Satan in the Garden of Eden: that by knowledge one can become like God. In their opposition to Gnosticism they appealed to the older scriptures, to history, to tradition and to their own authority as properly appointed Christian leaders. The resultant battles helped remake the church.

The three main results of the battle with Gnosticism were an increased emphasis on apostolic succession, the tightening of the church hierarchy and the definition of the Scriptural canon. One way to counter the inventions of the Gnostics was to show that as a church leader you had the truth because you had been trained and commissioned by a man who was trained and commissioned by a man who had been trained and

commissioned by an apostle who had been trained and commissioned by Christ: thus the church developed the idea of *apostolic succession*. When only a few generations of church leaders separated a church leader from Christ, this argument held considerable force. Another way to resist heresy was to emphasize a hierarchy of church leadership in which no man could be made priest or bishop unless he stood in the tradition of previous leaders. This also happened. And finally, with spurious books emerging claiming the authority of apostles or their associates, it became necessary to decide just which writings were authoritative and which were not. Efforts to settle that question defined the canon of Scripture.

## **Wrong to Reject Gnosticism?**

Were the orthodox wrong to reject the new form of "Christianity?" Several modern writers make it seem unfair of them. However, consider it this way: if you have a faith with specific teachings handed down to you by mentors you trusted and who backed up their position with writings of the apostles and their associates, and then along comes a new sect demanding that you change what you have been taught and deny the clear teaching of your tradition and books, are you obliged to do so? Hardly. On the contrary, it is more reasonable to expect the new cult to prove itself and defend its emerging practices. If the rival faiths clash, may that faith win which is best able to inspire its followers and meet their spiritual needs.

The opponents of Gnosticism won the battle. In fact, they were so successful that Gnosticism was long known almost exclusively through the sharp critiques that the orthodox wrote against it.

## **How do we know about Gnosticism?**

For many years our knowledge of Gnosticism was primarily through the refutations made by the orthodox. Orthodox Christians of the early church, including Epiphanius, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Hippolytus took issue with the Gnostics and other heretical groups. They declared that the Gnostics invented myths about Christ and human origins, blasphemed and created new gospels at whim. Some of the orthodox descriptions tally closely with actual Gnostic documents that have now turned up.

Since the 18th century, we have recovered a number of Gnostic writings. Modern champions of Gnosticism claim that the orthodox were mistaken, that they misunderstand the attempt by the Gnostics to explain reality through myth. However, from the Gnostics' own writings it is more than apparent that the early defenders of orthodoxy got the story right in all its essentials. If anything, they *understated* the blasphemy and folly of many Gnostic writings.

The greatest Gnostic find to date has been the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in 1945. Portions of 46 different treatises (duplicates brought the total to 52) were discovered in a clay pot near Luxor, Egypt. These are by no means all of the Gnostic writings. Other books, such as the *Gospel of Mary* were known from earlier times and

orthodox writers mention others that we have not yet found. One work that Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons discussed has been known for centuries but only recently released in English translation--making quite a splash. This is the forged *Gospel of Judas* which makes Judas the greatest of the apostles because he helped Jesus achieve liberation from his body.

## **What Was the Relationship of Christianity and Gnosticism?**

Gnosticism was largely an attack on historical Christianity or an attempt to infiltrate or undermine it. Gnostics quoted from or alluded to most of the writings which entered our New Testament and wrote in opposition to them or distorted them. In order to entice Christians into accepting their books, Gnostics made out that the books were written by apostles or other famous figures from the Gospels and Acts. In other words, they forged them. No major scholar of any persuasion that I know of accepts that any of them were written by those whom they name as authors.

Gnostics claimed Christians were a step lower than themselves in the scale of enlightenment, that Jesus gave secret knowledge which the uninitiated did not share. For instance, the *Gospel of Judas* claims Jesus gave secret instructions to Judas who was therefore the most enlightened disciple. As the *Gospel of Judas* shows, one class of Gnostics took a demonic delight in standing Christian teachings on their head and inventing stories that would discredit God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit--the equivalent of a modern artist who puts a crucifix in a bottle of urine.

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