

Gnosticism

Irenæus Against Heresies

Chapter XI.—The opinions of Valentinus, with those of his disciples and others.

page 880

3. *There is another, who is a renowned teacher among them, and who, struggling to reach something more sublime, and to attain to a kind of higher knowledge, has explained the primary Tetrads as follows: There is [he says] a certain Proarche who existed before all things, surpassing all thought, speech, and nomenclature, whom I call Monotes (unity). Together with this Monotes there exists a power, which again I term Henotes (oneness). This Henotes and Monotes, being one, produced, yet not so as to bring forth [apart from themselves, as an emanation] the beginning of all things, an intelligent, unbegotten, and invisible being, which beginning language terms "Monad." With this Monad there co-exists a power of the same essence, which again I term Hen (One). These powers then— Monotes, and Henotes, and Monas, and Hen—produced the remaining company of the Æons.*

4. *Iu, Iu! Pheu, Pheu!—for well may we utter these tragic exclamations at such a pitch of audacity in the coining of names as he has displayed without a blush, in devising a nomenclature for his system of falsehood. For when he declares: There is a certain Proarche before all things, surpassing all thought, whom I call Monotes; and again, with this Monotes there co-exists a power which I also call Henotes,—it is most manifest that he confesses the things which have been said to be his own invention, and that he himself has given names to his scheme of things, which had never been previously suggested by any other. It is manifest also, that he himself is the one who has had sufficient audacity to coin these names; so that, unless *he* had appeared in the world, the truth would still have been destitute of a name. But, in that case, nothing hinders any other, in dealing with the same subject, to affix names after such a fashion as the following: There is a certain*

Proarche, royal, surpassing all thought, a power existing before every other substance, and extended into space in every direction. But along with it there exists a power which I term a *Gourd*; and along with this Gourd there exists a power which again I term *Utter-Emptiness*. This Gourd and Emptiness, since they are one, produced (and yet did not simply produce, so as to be apart from themselves) a fruit, everywhere visible, eatable, and delicious, which fruit-language calls a *Cucumber*.

Along with this Cucumber exists a power of the same essence, which again I call a *Melon*. These powers, the Gourd, Utter-Emptiness, the Cucumber, and the Melon, brought forth the remaining multitude of the delirious melons of Valentinus. For if it is fitting that that language which is used respecting the universe be transformed to the primary Tetrad, and if any one may assign names at his pleasure, who shall prevent us from adopting these names, as being much more credible [than the others], as well as in general use, and understood by all?

The translator of this document by Iranaeus was **Phillip Schaff**. He summarizes this delightful refutation of Gnosticism by quoting: **1 Kings 18:27 (NASB)**

²⁷ It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them

Schaff says "This *reductio ad absurdum* of our author is singularly applicable to certain forms of what is called "Modern Thought."

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## THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY BULTMANN'S THEOLOGY

### IS BULTMANN'S THEOLOGY A NEW GNOSTICISM?

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RUDOLF BULTMANN is unquestionably one of the great theological scholars of the twentieth century. Because of some of his opinions about the New Testament, moreover, he has become famous (or infamous) in almost every theological circle.

To gain an appreciation of Bultmann and thereby attempt to criticize this great scholar justly one must seek: first to understand if possible the writers who have most influenced him. Every theologian stands on the shoulders of others and Bultmann is no exception. Those which appear to have left a lasting impression upon Bultmann include Wrede, Heidegger and Bousset. W. Wrede's work on the messianic secret ultimately led Bultmann to his investigation of the Synoptic Tradition. In addition, the works of K. L. Schmidt and M. Dibelius undoubtedly influenced him in this study.

In the area of Existentialism the influence of Heidegger and Kierkegaard-as mediated through the early Barth-is significant. Barth is especially important for understanding Bultmann's view of eschatology. The early Barth sought to solve the problem of Schweitzer by means of a timeless eschatology wherein the parousia was made part of the essential content of faith. Barth soon realized, however, that timeless eschatology was not the New Testament view. Instead of a timeless view he chose, as Torrance has pointed out, a view which is little more than the Doctrine of Grace as it concerns history. But the interest here is not in Barth except to point out that what Barth has rejected as contrary to the New Testament still continues to fascinate Bultmann.

When turning to the area of Christian origins it is important to notice that on the one hand the works of Bousset seem to have made a significant contribution to Bultmann's thought while on the other hand the works of Schlatter seem to have made very little except a negative or a revulsive impact upon Bultmann, as is indicated in his article in the Goguel *Festschrift*. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Bultmann's major works on the Christian origins

generally give only passing attention to Old Testament antecedents. With respect to Bultmann's investigations into Christian origins his opinions about Gnosticism are extremely significant. In Gnosticism Bultmann locates the basis of many Christian ideas and he employs this Gnosticism to dispatch the importance of the Old Testament as the foundation for Christian thought. Bultmann attacks Schlatter because he considers the Tübingen scholar to have been subject "to peculiar inhibitions" and one who incessantly interpreted the "New Testament one-sidedly out of the Old Testament-Jewish tradition". It is not out of place in this connection to point out that Bultmann has a similar problem. Building upon the work of Reitzenstein's *Poimandres*, Bousset's *Hauptprobleme*, Mark Lidzbarski's work on the Mandaeans, and subsequently on Hans Jonas's *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, and the investigations of the famous English scholar Lady Drower, Bultmann incessantly interprets the New Testament, especially the works of John and Paul, one-sidedly out of the Gnostic tradition.

The problem with the approach of Bultmann as over against that of Schlatter, however, is intensified because the Marburg theologian collapses chronology. Beginning with his articles in 1923 it becomes increasingly obvious that Bultmann favoured a pre-Christian Gnosticism. In order to support this view Bultmann's method necessitated a cavalier use of chronology similar to that which has often been condemned in Reitzenstein. Those who along with Bultmann argue that the existence of a pre-Christian Mandaean sect can be viewed in the basic strata of the Mandaean sources have not faced squarely the many problems in their sources, including the origin of the triple baptism, and the protection of the tombs of the dead for three days; not to mention the fact that even if certain strata can be isolated, these scholars have produced nothing but a subjective basis for dating the strata. But even more important is the fact that these scholars have not taken seriously the devastating criticisms of Lietzmann, Burkitt and Casey, who have shown quite clearly that the Syriac Church has left an indelible mark upon Mandaeanism whereas even the Bultmannian scholar Schmithals has had to admit that simply

because Paul uses tenninology which is also employed by the Gnostics. it does not thereby follow that Paul meant what the Gnosties meant by this terminology. While Schmithals considers that Paul derived his terminology from the Gnostics ; the reverse, indeed, is just as possible and more probable if one takes history seriously.

Because of his captivating arguments and his vivid writing Bultmann has influenced a number of scholars to search out Gnostic influences upon the writings of the New Testament. Heinrich Schlier reworked the book of Ephesians into a Gnostic document and turned hell into a purgatory by shifting the middle wall of partition from the human to the supra-human situation. Waiter Bauer in his enthusiastic acceptance of Bultmann's views completely re-structured the Fourth Gospel in terms of late Mandaean sources. In the revision of his commentary it is worthy of note that Bauer has dropped without comment his earlier proposed Mandaean emendations of the Fourth Gospel. Bultmann's own work on the Fourth Gospel, however, continues to stress with increasing force the impact of Gnostic influence.

Bultmann has carried this Gnostic emphasis even into the study of the Essenes. Wherever there is a dualism, it is a Gnostic dualism. In this respect a most surprising statement occurs in the third German edition of Bultmann's *Theologie* wherein he says that the investigations of the Dead Sea Scrolls have not changed any of his opinions. One of Bultmann's pupils, K. G. Kuhn, began his work with similar opinions but soon realized that what Bultmann was calling Gnostic in the scrolls was in fact based more on an ethical dualism and far closer to the dualism of the Fourth Gospel than the dualism of the Gnosties.

Before discussing the relationship between the theology of Bultmann and the theology of the Gnostics it is necessary to remember that Bultmann is a German and Emeritus Professor in a German State University. Since the time of Luther, German Protestantism has been the bed-rock upon which much of the

increased understanding of biblical studies has been built. Moreover the freedom for investigation-including the encouragement of originality which is available within the German university system has been responsible not only for novel notions in modern Christianity but has also been responsible for calling forth the great conservative defences. Taken together these novel notions and conservative defences have constantly demanded deeper penetration into the meaning of Scripture. In a Christian community where men believe that they have not only the inspired Word but have also the inspired interpretation superficiality reigns supreme because men suppose that their minds have been able to incorporate all of God's truth. It is in fact, as Nile Cailliet has often said, nothing less than the temptation "to colonize the reality with the intelligible" taken to its ultimate conclusion. Nevertheless, adequate interpretation must take the writers of Scripture seriously and no argument about *Vorverstlndnis* can nullify this basic fact. As the Aarhus scholar J. Munck has stated, the existential theologians who have treated the biblical writers as "fools" and incapable of presenting the facts accurately are without excuse.

In turning to the similarities between Bultmann and the Gnostics, therefore, this writer does not propose to have given a complete exposition of Bultmann's theology, but to set down what appears to be striking similarities in Bultmann's work with those of certain so-called Gnostic Christians in order that the contributions which Bultmann has made to our understanding of the Bible might be distinguished from his tendency to adopt Gnostic views. To a discussion of these similarities attention is now directed.

First the refining of form-criticism has been one of Bultmann's major tasks. Yet the form-critical knife often seems to cut only in a more refined fashion than the knife of Marcion. How often the ecclesiastical redactor is employed as a convenient means for sidestepping issues. But Bultmann's writing may not only bring to mind Marcion. Bultmann's interpretations especially of Paul-in terms of the subjective Easter-faith of the Apostles combined with an existential view of realized eschatology-may bring to the minds

of critics Tertullian's statement about Valentinus that "although he seems to use the entire volume he has none the less laid ... hands on the truth only with a more skilful ingenuity than Marcion" (*De Praescr.* 38).

Second, a very striking similarity between Bultmann and the second-century Gnostics is the fact that both attribute little historical importance to the account of the earthly life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Far more important than the record of the life of Jesus is the record of the words of Jesus and even the records of these words are not accepted as they stand. Accordingly, if one were to write a Gospel according to Bultmann one suspects that it might not differ widely in form from that of the Gnostic Gospel according to Thomas.

Third, the earthly life of Jesus is separated both by the Gnostics and by Bultmann from the resurrected or eternal Christ. In the Gospel of Thomas the "Living Jesus", who is to be identified with the resurrected Jesus, imparts *gnosis* or secret words of knowledge to his disciple Didymus Judas Thomas. For the Gnostics an earthbound Jesus was incapable of delivering the knowledge which would lead to salvation. As over against the Gnostics Bultmann has not specifically held that an earthly Jesus would be incapable of revealing the way to salvation. But what is problematic at this point involves Bultmann's slippery conception of that which constitutes the content of the revelation. Some of his students engaged in the new quest, such as Bornkamm, regard Jesus' work as involving Jesus' life of existential commitment to God; by which is implied that fact that Jesus' life is a challenge standing out before men as their living standard or plumb-line. Now Bultmann would not follow his students in this respect because he believes that the Gospel stories of Jesus are so overlaid with theological accretions that one is not able to catch more than an enigmatic glimpse of the Jesus of history. For the Marburg theologian only the Christ of faith can be seen in the New Testament. According to Bultmann, Jesus made no Christological statement respecting His divine nature because Jesus was simply a prophet and a teacher

who was raised by believers to the right hand of God.

Fourth, the purpose of the revealer in both the writings of Bultmann and the writings of the Gnostics is strangely similar. The *call that comes from without*, which appears for instance in the beautiful Gnostic Hymn of the Pearl, comes to awaken the soul and remind it to assume its destiny. The Cross of Christ, for Bultmann, is the challenge "to undergo crucifixion with him". Only in the light of this challenge can one understand Bultmann's other remark that "the saving efficacy of the cross is not derived from the fact that it is the cross of Christ: it is the cross of Christ because it has this saving efficacy".

Fifth, when one turns to the world-view of Bultmann and of the Gnostics one notices a strange phenomenon. The New Testament, in fact the whole Bible, is set in the framework of the so-called three-story universe. Despite the Hellenistic influence upon the Hebraic tradition, the thought pattern of the Jews, apart from certain noteworthy exceptions, continued to be based upon this three-story framework. Even the angels of God and of the devil were fitted into this structure. Now the striking fact about many of the Gnostic sects which came into close contact with Greek thought is that they developed a new framework which ultimately became known as the Ptolemaic system. The planets were regarded not as isolated balls of matter but were considered to be spheres which Burkitt likens to onion layers encasing the earth. These rings were the dominions or kingdoms of the lower deities through which a person had to ascend successively after death *if* he was to reach **the** state of bliss. In turning to Bultmann one notices that he also rejects the three-story universe although he does not accept the Ptolemaic system. Bultmann is living in the post-Copernican era and his theology has been moulded in accordance with this view. No one can condemn Bultmann for accepting the Copernican system but Bultmann has gone a step further and has made his theology fit into Copernican science. Thus, he rejects the reality of hell except as it is within man and he rejects heaven except as it is likewise within man. ACCOrdingly, it is not surprising to find that



for Bultmann eschatology is meaningless except as it refers to man's present existence. Bultmann's eschatology is, really, timeless as his view of history is, seemingly, purposeless.

Sixth. like the theology of the Gnostics. the theology of Bultmann deals primarily with soteriology. This soteriology is virtually anthropocentric in character. Many of the Gnostics were, indeed, concerned with their deities as is evidenced from their cosmological speculations. But their major interest in the cosmological speculations- such as those of the Barbelo-Gnostics and those of Ptolemaeus and Basilides-concerned *man*. who was entombed in this world yet. in fact, because of his *interlull* light was destined for re-entry into the pleroma. Accordingly the Gnostic is viewed as an immortal being. The man of existential commitment for Bultmann may not be born with immortality in his veins but through faith he enters the realm in which "he is already above time and history". This realm is quite unlike Cullmann's eternity or Vos's higher concept of history. It is, instead, an ideal realm much like that propounded by C. H. Dodd in his *Parables at the Kingdom* (p. 207). Now Bultmann is not concerned with cosmological speculations but his interest in "personal history" as seen in his Gilford Lectures' is not far removed from a demythologized Gnostic concept of man. At this juncture, it is important to remember that *demythologization is not a twentieth-century concept*. It was employed by Plutarch in relation to the Isis and Osiris mystery myth. Accordingly. when the modern interpreter demythologizes the weird myths of the Gnostics he may well be employing a similar method to that used by the Gnostic philosophers when they interpreted these strange myths to their communicants. An interesting illustration of the meaning lying behind one such myth. the myth of the illegitimate offspring of Sophia (Wisdom), can be found in an article by Burkitt in Vol. XII of the *Cambridge Ancient History* (pp. 467 ff.).

Perhaps the major difference between Bultmann and the Gnostics is that the Gnostics over-emphasize the fatalistic element or distort what might be called predestination, while Bultmann, seemingly,

distorts faith. In the *Gospel of Truth*, which is perhaps closest to Christianity and not too far removed from the Augustinian or hyper-Calvinistic tradition, there is the following statement: "The Father is perfect. He knows every space which is within him. If he pleases, he reveals anyone whom he desires by giving him a form and by giving him a name" (R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism*, p. 152).

Over against this predestination stands Bultmann's vivid concept of faith. Anyone who has read much of Bultmann cannot help but be captivated by his dynamic concept of faith. Yet when the substance of faith, as "existential knowledge", is divorced from the historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus one cannot help but feel that he has entered a realm not unlike the Gnostic fog of forgetfulness.

In conclusion, on the basis of these few observations it appears as though Bultmann's theology reflects certain Gnostic patterns, which are constructed in terms of their twentieth-century forms. Now the Gnosticism of the early centuries of the Christian era was rejected because, as Van Unnik correctly judges, there was a great gulf "between biblical Christianity and Gnosticism, even though Gnosticism made use of biblical texts". Accordingly, the Church is reminded that, if she desires to remain true to her biblical basis, wherever Gnostic tendencies appear in twentieth-century theology such theology should be weighed very carefully because the use of biblical texts may not necessarily imply fidelity to the biblical message.

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*1 E.g. in writings such as those in *Kerygma and Myth, I* (1953), etc.*

*2 History and Eschatology (1957), reviewed by J. I Packer in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY xxxi (1959). pp. 225 ff.*

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McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia

A. Gnosis. —

The New-Testament writers were occasionally determined in their choice of prominent words by the expressions which were current among the people they addressed. Such words as *logos* and *gnosis*, having acquired a peculiar signification in the schools, were recognized by them, and appropriated to a sacred use. We

concede, indeed, that the latter word **γνωσι** usually denotes in their writings simply what its etymology implies, the mere act of knowing, or the objective knowledge thus acquired. In those primitive times it was seldom that any systematic or scientific exposition of Christian truth was demanded. The contest was with reference to the simple facts of the Gospel, and Christianity was fain to secure an existence in the world before it had leisure to speculate upon abstract points. Not only was it unwise to divert men's minds from, practical religion, but many true believers were too carnal to be intrusted with a higher wisdom. Paul, therefore, and his fellow-laborers determined to confine their apostolic ministrations to such a historical presentation of Jesus Christ and him crucified as might be called the simplest milk of the word. He declares, however (1 Cor 2:6), that he sometimes made known a higher wisdom among such as were perfect, though a wisdom, he is careful to say, very different from that which some heathen and Jewish philosophers had claimed. In other passages he applies the word **gnosis** to this kind of wisdom. He specifies "the word of knowledge" among those peculiar gifts of the Spirit which were possessed by the more eminent teachers (1 Cor 12:8), and commends a knowledge through which the more discerning believers rose above the fear of the heathen gods, and ate of the things offered to idols as of things in themselves indifferent (1 Cor 8:7). He speaks also of a **gnosis** falsely so called, and thus implies that there was another which truly deserved the name (1 Tim 6:20). In subsequent times this use of the word became common, and great pains were taken to make obvious the distinction between the true **γνωσι** **αληθινη** and the false **γνωσι** **ψευδωνυμο**. A lately (1715) discovered treatise of Irenaeus entitled **γνωσι** **αληθ**, and an extended description of the true Gnostic at the close of the Stromata of Clement of Alexandria, have preserved to us the views of the Church on this subject near the close of the 2 d century.

It was admitted on all sides that there was a knowledge of divine things superior to that of the multitude, not in its importance to the salvation of the soul, but in its intellectual power. It belonged not so much to the pulpit as to the schools, and was important not

so much to the personal salvation as to the comfort and growth of believers, and to the acceptance of the Gospel among the more educated classes. It took up those facts which were objects of the common faith, and made them subjects of speculation and profound thought. It arranged them, drew from them logical conclusions, reconciled their apparent discrepancies with each other and with the conclusions of science, and applied them to long-agitated questions which were only hinted at, but not solved, in the Christian Scriptures. At this point, however, the true and the false gnosis separated, and took different directions. The former submitted itself without reserve to the authority of the Scriptures, and professed never to venture beyond what was written. It presented itself to all men without discrimination of natural talents or social condition. The latter claimed to be above the reach of the vulgar, and to be derived from sources superior to the written word. Clement describes the true Gnostic as one who grows gray in the study of the Scriptures. A scientific culture may be indispensable to the higher departments of that study, and a true spiritual discernment can be acquired only by divine grace, but the natural talents which must be used in its acquisition have been given to all, and each one's success will be proportioned to his prayerful diligence. The sources of knowledge, too, were the same for the humblest believer and the most eminent Gnostic, for all had access to the Scriptures and the common tradition παραδοσι^ν which had been transmitted in 11 the churches. The gnosis was simply a faith made perfect, an expansion of what faith had received, a building constructed wholly of materials supplied by faith. Its advocates made much use of a passage in Isa 7:9 (Sept.): "If ye believe not, neither shall ye understand;" from which they inferred not only that faith is indispensable to knowledge, but that knowledge should spring from faith. And yet it cannot be denied that many, especially of the Alexandrian school, gave an undue prominence to this higher knowledge, as if it were indispensable to all religion, and disparaged the great body of believers πιστικοι as incapable of a true spiritual life, as in communion only with the Christ of an earthly and sensuous life, and as actuated only by a fear of punishment and a desire of personal benefits. The true

Gnostic, — on the other hand, they believed to be favored with such an intuitional faculty for the discernment of truth, and such a perpetual tuition under the divine Logos, that he could dispense, in a great degree, with outward demonstrations; and they claimed that his love of knowledge was so intense and disinterested, that if it could even be separated from his eternal salvation he would not hesitate still to choose it. The subjects on which they delighted to expatiate were chiefly: God, as he must be conceived of in his absolute being, the incarnation and redeeming work of Christ, the influence of these upon our race and upon other beings, the vast chain of existence between man and God, the fall of some links in this chain and their probable recovery, the origin of this world, the source of moral evil and its elimination from the universe, and the future history and destiny of all things. In the discussion of such themes, we need not be surprised to find that they not unfrequently transcended the province both of reason and of faith, and that some of their speculations were condemned by their more temperate brethren (Neander, Hist. 1:544-52; Hase, Hist. § 85; Schaff, Hist. Christ. Church, volume 1, chapter 4).

B. Heretical Gnosticism. —

I. General Character. —

The name Gnosticism has been applied to a variety of schools which had sometimes little in common except the assumption of a knowledge higher than that of ordinary believers. Most of them claimed a place in the Church, and complained bitterly when this was denied them; and yet they generally spoke of Christianity as insufficient to afford absolute truth, and not unfrequently they assumed a hostile attitude towards it. They seldom pretended to demonstrate the principles on which their systems were founded by historical evidence or logical reasonings, since they rather boasted that these were discovered by the intuitional powers of more highly endowed minds, and that the materials thus obtained, whether through faith or divine revelation, were then worked up into a scientific form according to each one's natural power and culture. Their aim was to construct not merely a theory of redemption, but

of the universe a cosmogony. No subject was beyond their investigations. Whatever God could reveal to the finite intellect, they looked upon as within their range. What to others seemed only speculative ideas, were by them hypostatized or personified into real beings or historical facts. It was in this way that they constructed systems of speculation on subjects entirely beyond the range of human knowledge, which startle us by their boldness and their apparent consciousness of reality.

II. External Origin. —

And yet we have reason to believe that Gnosticism originated no speculations which were essentially new. It only recognized and selected what seemed to it true in earlier systems, and then combined these fragments in new relations — not in the way of a crude syncretism, but with mutual affinities and living power. No question, however, has more perplexed historians than that which refers to the direct origin of Gnosticism. We are in possession of scarcely any authenticated documents which have come down to us from persons living at the time and in countries in which it had its birth. We are dependent for our information respecting it almost entirely upon the representations of opponents, who knew almost nothing of Oriental systems, and were acquainted with it only in its maturity. Unfortunately, too, the question of the origin of Gnosticism has recently become complicated with others on which violent party feelings have been exercised. Those who have denied the apostolic origin of the epistles in which traces of Gnosticism have been discovered, have felt an interest in removing both the epistles and Gnosticism to as late a period as possible. From the discussion of this subject, however, there are some facts which may now be regarded as incontrovertible.

1. Ever since the conquests of Alexander the Great, an intense interest had been felt throughout Asia Minor and Egypt in Hellenistic philosophy and Oriental theosophy; and while the old mythologic fables and professed systems of positive revelation had lost their authority, many thoughtful persons had discovered under

these what they looked upon as a uniting bond of truth and the elements of a universal religion.

2. The result was that, near the time of the first promulgation of Christianity, a number of new systems of religious philosophy sprung up independently in different countries, and exhibited similar characteristics. They were usually formed by incorporating with the national religion what seemed attractive elements in foreign systems, and softening down what was harsh and incredible in the popular faith and worship. In this way we discover a nearly simultaneous origin of the Judaistic philosophy at Alexandria, of Essenism and Therapeutism in Egypt and southern Palestine, of the Cabbalistic literature in Syria and the East, and of New Platonism among the Hellenistic nations. These were all offshoots from the same general root, and not necessarily deriving anything original, but unquestionably drawing much assistance from one another. Similar circumstances everywhere called forth similar phenomena with no conscious interdependence.

3. We thus account for the origin of Gnosticism, and easily reconcile the conflicting views of different writers respecting it. As the early ecclesiastical writers were themselves acquainted almost exclusively with Occidental literature, they were in the habit of ascribing the rise of Gnosticism to the study of Grecian philosophy, and especially of Platonism, and they appeal to the cosmogonies of Hesiod and others for the exemplars of the Gnostic speculations. Modern historians, however, have found in most of the Gnostic systems such a predominance of Oriental elements, that- they have been led to infer a direct influence not merely from Alexandrian Judaism, but dualistic Parsism, and even from pantheistic Buddhism. There can, in fact, be no question regarding the influence of all these systems. The Platonic doctrines of a God, without distinctions in his nature, withdrawn entirely within himself, intelligible only to the initiated, and that only through the mediation of the Nous, a higher ideal sphere reflecting itself in a lower phenomenal world, a hyle $\psi\lambda\eta$ and an undefined dualism between it and God, a fall of spiritual beings from the divine to the

sensuous sphere, the derivation of sin from a contact with the material element; the Pythagorean doctrine of numbers; the Brahminic doctrine of emanation eshypostatizing of the divine attributes; the Parsic representation of the divine essence as light. of a dualism in which God is subject to the continual aggression of a world of matter, and of a good principle in eternal conflict with the prince of darkness; and the Buddhist notions of a God in process of development, of souls longing to be freed from the bonds of matter, and to be raised above all sensible things, and reunited with the divine source of life, are all unmistakable, and indicative of their respective sources. We need not, however, suppose that these elements were derived directly from their original sources. The Alexandrian literature, in which most of these elements had found a place, was diffused among the educated classes in all those countries in which Gnosticism flourished, and might have been the mediating agency through which the mind of the East was brought into communication with that of the West. From the heterogeneous commingling of such diverse systems, and especially from their contact with the young energies of Christianity, the Gnostic spirit might easily draw forth such materials as suited its purpose. The sources of Gnosticism, however, like those of the Nile, are to a great extent concealed, and those who imagine they have discovered its principal head not unfrequently learn that another remains far beyond. As its friends boasted, there were secret agencies by which truth was conveyed to the elect race under symbols and an outward letter which only they could understand. (See Baxmann, in the *Ames. Theol. Review* for 1862, page 666-76).

III. Classification. —

It has been found very difficult to arrange the several Gnostic sects according to any principle of classification. They have been grouped together by different writers according to their origin, their geographical position, and their speculative views. Neander (*Hist. Christ. Religion*, 1:379-86) divides them into Judaizing and anti-Judaizing Gnostics, according to their agreement or opposition

to ancient Judaism. Gieseler (Eccl. Hist. volume 1, § 44) arranges them according to their geographical order, as Alexandrian, Syriac, and miscellaneous. Hase (Hist. Chr. Ch. § 76) makes four classes, Syrian, Hellenistic, Judaizing, and specially Christian. Similar to this is Matter's division into those of Svria, Asia Minor, Egypt, and the rest of the Roman world (Hist. crit. du Gnost.). Baur (Chr. Gnosis, 1835) arranges the several sects into three principal classes according to their relation to the three earlier religions with which they came in contact:

- 1. Those who combined Christianity with Judaism and heathenism;**
- 2. Those who entirely separated it from them, and opposed it to them; and,**

3. Those who identified it with Judaism, but opposed it to heathenism. This ingenious, and, in many respects, satisfactory division, fails to bring out the historical progress and internal development of the Gnostic systems, and offers no suitable place for Manichaeism. It has, however, found much favor on account of its simplicity, and has been adopted with some modifications by Niedner, Marheineke (Weltalter, th. 2, page 246), Tennemann (Manual of the Hist. of Philippians § 200), and others. Dr. Schaff proposes a classification, according to an ethical point of view, into the speculative and theosophic, the practical and ascetic; and the Antinomian and libertine (Hist. of the Chr. Ch. 1:234). It is evident that no classification can combine together a chronological local, and logical distribution, and hence we shall probably gain something by presenting these separately.

IV. History. —

In attempting to give a historical outline of the course of Gnosticism, our object is not so much to present particular details of the several schools, since these will be found, as far as possible, under their several heads in this work, but to indicate in general the order and position of each. Lipsius, in a recent work (Gnosticism, its Essence, Origin, and Development, 1860), endeavors to show that this course of development was a curve which commenced

with only a slight departure from orthodoxy, and, after diverging more and more from it, finally comes back again gradually to the true path. Another writer (Hilgenfeld) has attempted a distinct definition of the three stadia of this development. It is difficult to discover in the actual history the regularity of departure and return implied in such a figure, and yet we may derive from it a correct notion of the general direction. In the first stadium we have the Judaizing Gnostics, and then the several classes who, in their opposition to Judaism, deify nearly all the godless characters of the Old Testament. In the second we have not merely Old-Testament history, but Greek philosophy, a contempt of the common faith, the opposition of the psychic and pneumatic natures, and mythical personifications of speculative ideas. In the third and last stadium this opposition between the pneumatic and psychic natures begins to be modified, and finally, under the Marcionites, the Gnostic speculation approximates very nearly that of the more liberal Catholic teachers. It is in this last stadium that we find the greatest difficulty in seeing how the curve approximates with much uniformity the orthodox highway for some classes of the later Marcionaites, and, above all, the Manichees, seem rather to have been the extreme consummation of Gnosticism.

As there were strong tendencies towards Gnosticism both in Judaism and heathenism, we might reasonably infer that the Gnostics must have been powerfully attracted by Christianity. It was, however, more consistent with the essential spirit of that movement to attempt to mold the new system to its fancy than to submit with docility to the exclusive authority of the Gospel. Among the remnants of Oriental tribes in Samaria we are not surprised to find such a man as Simon, who succeeded in making the multitude believe that he was the great power of God. It is said that he called himself the creative world-spirit, and his female companion the receptive world-soul. We have here a likeness of the Gnostic doctrine of aeons and syzigies. In the tradition of the subsequent Church, this half-mythical personage became the patriarch of all heretics, but especially of heathen Gnostics (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* lib. 1, c. 27, § 4; Hippol. 1:62 sq.). During the twenty years which intervened between the first Christian

Pentecost and the later epistles of Paul, we know that theosophic speculations were everywhere prevalent in Syria and Asia Minor, and that these were strangely mixed with Christian doctrines. Great freedom was allowed to religious thought, even among the early Christians, as long as the moral and religious life of the people was not perverted. But Paul very soon discovered dangerous tendencies in the churches which he had recently established in Asia Minor. Josephus tells us that Alexander the Great had sent into the provinces of Lydian and Phrygia 2000 Mesopotamian and Babylonian Jews to garrison the disaffected towns there, and we are informed that the inhabitants of that region have always since been prone to mystical and Oriental superstitions (Alford, How to use the Epistles, Epistle to the Colossians, Sunday Mag. 1867, page 829). The errors which he reprobated at Colossae were doubtless a curious commixture of Jewish and heathen speculations. The ancient historian Hegesippus informs us (Euseb. Eccl. Hist. 3:32) that the heretical gnosis did not make its appearance with an uncovered head until after the death of the apostles, but that it previously worked in secret. After all the contentions of various writers on the question how far this error prevailed in apostolic times, there is a general agreement that, while most of the heresies of that period were Judaistic, there was an obvious difference between those reprobated in the Galatian churches and those noticed in the epistles to the Colossians and Timothy. The latter are treated much more mildly, and we readily perceive that they must have been much less developed and less subversive of the Christian system. They are expressly called (1 Tim 6:20) a false gnosis, and were characterized by empty sounds without sense and subtle oppositions to the truth, a depreciation of the body, and a worship of angels (Col 2:18,23), and interminable genealogies and myths (1 Tim 1:4). These seem more akin to Jewish than to heathen speculations, and imply not the completed Gnosticism of the second century, but the manifest germs of Docetic emanations and Gnostic dualism. Irenaeus, on the authority of Polycarp, relates (Adv. haer. 1:26) that John was acquainted with Cerinthus, and wrote the fourth gospel to refute his errors. Both he and Epiphanius (Haer. page 28) say that

Cerinthu's taught that the world was not made by the Most High God, but by a lower power, or by angels, and that Jesus was an ordinary man, whom the supreme Logos became united with at his baptism, but forsook during his last sufferings, to reunite with him in the future kingdom of Messianic glory. See CERINTHUS. Here the Gnosticism becomes plainly perceptible, and we can certainly understand a number of passages in John's Gospel and Epistles better if we suppose a reference in them to these and similar errors. The Nichaitans of the Apocalypse and the false teachers of the Epistle of Jude despised Judaism as the work of evil angels, ridiculed and trampled upon the law that they might insult these limited powers, and thus fell into a strange complication of gross licentiousness and bodily mortifications (Burton, Heresies of the Apost. Age; Potter in the old and W.L. Alexander in the new edition of Kitto's Cyclop.; Conybeare, in Conybeare and Howson's Life of St. Paul, note at the end of volume 1. Comp. C.C. Tittmanns, *De vestigiis Gnosticor.* in *N.T. frustra quaesitis*, Leips. 1773; transl. and publ. in *Contributions to Foreign Literature*, New York, 1827). No sooner had the direct influence of the apostles and their immediate successors ceased than the speculative interest and numbers of the Gnostics began to increase mightily. Near the commencement of the 2^d century, flourished about the same time Basilides in Alexandria and his son Isidore See BASILIDES, the dualistic and ascetic Saturninus in Antioch, Carpocrates of Alexandria, and his son Epiphanes. The last two maintained that every one who could soar to the same height of contemplation might attain the same powers with Christ, and that Christ differed in no respect from the wise and good of all nations. About the same time we first become acquainted with the party commonly called Ophites, though Origen says that it was founded by a certain Euphrates, who must have lived as early as the time of Christ. Their common appellation (Ophites, Heb. Naasenes) was given them by their opponents (for they always called themselves simply Gnostics), because they were said to pay great honor to the serpent as the instrument of the temptation in Eden. As the prohibition then transgressed was designed to keep man back from knowledge, what is commonly called the Fall was, in fact, a transition to a

higher state. When first known they resided principally in Egypt and in Phrygia. They afterwards became numerous, and branched off into various subdivisions. See OPHITES. Great differences however, are discoverable between those who bear the same name. In the next generation (A.D. 140-160) belongs Valentinus, who flourished first in Egypt and then in Rome, and finally died in the island of Cyprus (about A.D. 160). The school named after him was the most influential of all the Gnostic parties, and contained a large number of talented and eminent teachers. It was divided into an Oriental and an Italian branch, in both of which was inculcated a highly exalted style of religion. Among its most esteemed writers may be mentioned Heracleon of Alexandria, who wrote a commentary on John's Gospel, some extracts from which, preserved in Origen, admirably bring out the profound spirit of this evangelist; Ptolemy, whose epistle to Flora has come down to us in Epiphanius, and endeavors to show that his system was not inconsistent with the Catholic faith; Marcus, probably a Jew of Palestine, in whose poetic and symbolical work divine sons discourse in liturgical forms; and Bardesanes, an Armenian of Edessa (about 170), who, with his son Harmonius, was immensely popular as a writer of hymns and imitations of David's Psalms. (See the articles under these names.) Contemporary with Valentinus lived Cerdon, a Syrian, and his pupil Marcion of Sinope, in Pontus, who carried their zeal for Pauline and primitive Christianity to such an extreme that they rejected not only as secret traditions, but large portions of the New Testament. They opposed heathen religions as the work of the devil, and Judaism as the product of an inferior and wrathful deity, who was to be put down by Christ and the revelation through him of the supreme God. Kindred with him were Apelles of Alexandria, and his pupils Lucas and Marcus, who approximated still nearer a Christian orthodoxy, though with singular inconsistencies. Tatian, a Syrian, a rhetorician in Rome, during the latter part of his life is said to have fallen into Gnostic errors, and to have prescribed a system of extreme abstinence as the only means of disengaging ourselves from the world. A party of Encratites, calling themselves by his name or by that of his pupil Severus, continued as late as the 4 th

century. A class of persons represented by the Clementine Homilies at Rome, and sometimes reckoned among the Gnostics, ought rather to be classed with the Ebionites. See CLEMENTINES. We now come in contact with several classes of the Ophites, many of whom, according to Origen, went so far in their opposition to ordinary views that they admitted none to their assemblies who did not curse Christ (Neander, 1:446 sq.). The whole system of the God of the Jews was looked upon by this sect as oppressive to man, and whoever is represented in the scriptural history as rebelling against it were regarded as saints. Hence some of the worst characters of the Old and New Testament were held in the highest honor. Even Jesus was reckoned among agents of the Jewish Jehovah, and his betrayal by Judas Iscariot was extolled as done with the best of motives and results. Those who maintained this position were called Cainites, while such as dissented from such extravagances were distinguished as Sethites. The Perates, who have recently become known to us through the *Philosophoumena*, appear to have approximated much nearer the Catholic doctrine. During the 3^d century Gnosticism appears to have lost its power, for the orthodox party had now attained more scientific precision of thought, and their formulas of faith presented scriptural doctrine in a style consistent with the highest culture of the age. Towards the close of that century, however, arose in the distant East one more attempt to combine Christianity with Oriental theosophy. Manicheeism sprang up in a region where neither Hellenism nor Judaism was familiar; and its object appears to have been to reform the corrupted Parsism of that day by incorporating with the original system of Zoroaster numerous elements taken from a gnosticized

Christianity and Buddhism.

To Christianity, however, it seems to have been indebted more for its names and symbols than for its essential history or characters. Personages and facts taken from scriptural records find in that system an entirely new significance. Its founder (Mani or Manes, a Magian banished from Persia) discovered many points of

agreement between the doctrines of Parsism, Buddhism and Gnostic Christianity, and endeavored to combine these three systems into one universal religion. He accounted for all things on dualistic principles. His followers were soon driven by persecution from their earliest seats, but were numerous during the fourth century in every part of the East, and in Africa, Sicily, and Italy. Many persons of noble spirit were attracted by it, but it soon fell into gross licentiousness by its professed exaltation above outward things, and of course lost its place in common esteem, and fell into contempt. Some vestiges, however, both of Marcionism and Manichaeism, remained even into the Middle Ages, and by means of the Priscillianists, the Paulicians, the Bogomiles, and the Cathari, transmitted the leading features of Gnosticism to distant ages and countries.

Many of these sects can hardly be recognized as within the pale of Christianity. While some of them claimed a place within the Church, and refused to leave it when they were disowned by its authorities, others openly abjured the Christian name. Certainly such complete subverters of the essentials of the Gospel as the Carpocratians, Perates, Sethites, Cainites, and Manichaeans deserve to be called rather gnosticized heathen than Christian Gnostics. In the history of the Church they deserve a place only because they, like other heathen, influenced it from without. In a history of Gnosticism even these must have no unimportant position. Indeed, no history of this system is quite complete without embracing some still more remote systems — Cabbalistic Judaism, Neo-Platonism, etc., which had their origin under Gnostic influences.

V. General Principles. —

The ultimate aim of Gnosticism was to present a perfect solution of the great problem of the origin and destiny of the universe, and especially of the origin of evil, **πολυθρῦλητον ζητημα, προθεν η(κακια**. The three ideas which were fundamental to all its speculations were:

1. A supreme being, unconnected with matter, and incapable of

being affected by it;

2. Matter, ὕλη, eternal, the source of evil, and opposed to God; and,

3. A series of beings intermediate between these two

The primary source of all spiritual existence was an eternal abyss βυθός, so utterly beyond human representation that no one should venture to name him, or even to conceive of him. He was the absolute one, and virtually and logically non-existent οὐκ ὄν. In his nature, however, there was some inconceivable ground of self-evolution προβολή, in consequence of which his infinite powers became revealed in a series of aeons, or hypostatized divine attributes. It is only through these that he can have communication with finite natures. They are called aeons αἰώνες because they are eternal ones, representing the eternal Source of all αἰών. According to Valentinus, they emanated in pairs (syzygies) of different sexes. Basilides and Marcion ascribed their existence to an act of love and to a creative word, but the more pantheistic sects to a necessary process of emanation which is usually spoken of as by generation. Their number varies in different systems; sometimes it is determined by planetary relations (12), sometimes by the days of the year (365), sometimes by the years in the life of Christ (32), but not unfrequently it is left indefinite. The first eons were Nous, Logos, Sophia, Dunamis, Aletheia, Zoe, etc., generated either by the original being or by one another in ever-increasing imperfection as they recede from their source. Together they constitute the Pleroma, the world of light and divine fullness, but far removed from the infinite abyss with which none can directly communicate.

2. Over against this Pleroma and this eternal abyss stands the world of matter ὕλη, sometimes contradistinguished as the Kenoma, or the world of emptiness or darkness. This was usually spoken of as eternal, but chaotic, and disordered by internal strifes. It was generally described as far removed from the kingdom of light, but sometimes as very near, and even on the confines of that kingdom. Some conceived of it as dead and powerless until it became animated by influences from the Pleroma, but others, and

especially Manes and his followers, represented it as active and aggressive. According to the former, one of the lowest and feeblest of the divine sons (called by Valentinus Sophia, the lower wisdom or Achamoth, the **κατω** in distinction from the **ανω σοφια** fell from the abode of light and came under the power of matter. Though Valentinus makes this, to some extent, a free act of apostasy on the part of the divine eon, as she was wandering beyond the bounds of the Pleroma, and agitated by her intense desire to get out of her proper sphere and enter into more direct communication with the infinite Source, it was usually described as the result of an incapacity to retain a hold upon the superior world, and a consequent precipitation into the darkness of the Kenoma.

3. At this point we meet with the idea of the Demiurge. The name signifies a public worker **Δημιουργος**, and is the same with the Avelion of Basilides and the Jaldabaoth **יְלִדְאֲבָהוּת**, the chaosborn) of the Ophites. He came into being from the commingling of the light-nature in the Sophia (the **πνευματικον σπερμα** with matter. As the fruit of such a parentage, he was possessed of a nature neither pneumatic nor material, but psychical, and he occupies an intermediate position between the supreme God and the material world. He is not, of course, an evil, but only a limited and imperfect being, and yet evil springs from the defects of his work and of his plans. He acts in general with sincerity according to his power and light. By him the chaos of matter was transformed into an organized universe. The planetary heavens, and the sidereal spirits who are over them, and the whole course of the world, are under his control. In all this, however, he is the unconscious instrument of higher powers in the world of light, who secretly influence all his movements. of this control he finally and gradually became aware, and by some teachers he is said to have become vexed and goaded into opposition by the discovery, and by others to have gladly welcomed and submitted to it. He was the author of Judaism, and to some extent of Christianity; and hence by many Gnostics the former system was looked upon as defective, if not false, and even the latter,

especially in its mere letter, as incapable of imparting the highest wisdom. Only by Marcion was he regarded as entirely independent of the supreme God in the work of creation and providence, since he was here in a department which belonged wholly to him. He remained the God of this world until the coming of Christ, who vanquished him at the crucifixion.

4. With respect to anthropology, the Gnostics held that the whole kingdom of the Demiurge was fallen. He was himself the creature of a fallen eon, and the world he created and rules is subject to imperfection. From his connection with matter there was produced a human race, which in its totality is a microcosm, representing within itself the three principles of the great universe, the supreme God, the Demiurge, and matter. This was in consequence of the creation of three classes of men, higher or lower in proportion to their freedom from matter. Marcion alone made this distinction dependent upon the will of man himself; the other Gnostics made it a result of creation, or of a divine communication of the spark of light and life from the upper world. The highest of these, i.e., the spiritual **πνευματικοι**, share largely in the nature of the lowest aeon **σοφια**, who originally fell from the Pleroma, and hence they are the only ones who can attain perfection. They alone are capable of recognizing and receiving the light which is communicated from above. The second class, the psychical **ψυκτικοι**, have the nature of the Demiurge himself, who has power to raise them to some extent above the debasement of matter, and, by giving them legal forms, to impart to them a legal righteousness, but not to afford them a recognition of those divine mysteries which are beyond his own reach. The third class are the fleshly or hylic **σαρκικοι, υ(λικοι** natures, in whom matter has usurped human form and passion **παθο^ς**, has entire control, and who are therefore destined to share the fortunes of matter alone. Historically, the spiritual predominated under the Christian dispensation, the psychical under the Jewish, and the fleshly among the heathen of all ages. Individuals, however, of each class are numerous under all these dispensations. In the aristocratic spirit of ancient Platonism, many Gnostics allowed of no transition from the one to the other of these

classes, while others looked upon it as possible for the lower to rise to the higher in consequence of a divine communication of special powers.

5. The Gnostic idea of redemption was simply that of a liberation of the light-spirit from its connection with matter. of course it is confined to the two higher classes of our race in whom that spirit is found. In every condition of humanity, some favored individuals are represented as sighing for deliverance. In this way were explained some glimpses of a higher knowledge, which break forth at intervals in the prophecies and psalms of the Jewish Scriptures, and in the writings of pagan philosophers. Some sparks of light were supposed to have been thrown into the breasts of nobler persons, and the rational creation, as a whole κτισι^ς, is represented as sighing for redemption (Rom 8:22). A recently discovered work (Pistis Sophia) contains the penitential sighings and longings of the neon σοφια when she had herself fallen from her original condition of divine intuition to that of mere faith. In pity for this sighing spirit, Christ, one of the highest of all the aeons, descends, and brings her, after innumerable sufferings, back to the Pleroma, and undertakes the deliverance of all pneumatic natures. To accomplish this, he assumes, not a material form, since he can have no contact with matter, but only the appearance of one. In answer to the longings of the Jews, the Demiurge had promised and actually sent among them a Messiah with only psychical powers. Most of the Gnostics suppose that the heavenly Christ (Soter) took possession of this Messiah, who had proved himself unable to accomplish what had been promised in his behalf, and that from the baptism by John until the crucifixion this true Redeemer acted through this personage. Some, however, held that the man Jesus, with whom the aeon Christ then became connected, combined in his own nature all human elements with the powers of an aetherial spirit. As this Christ cannot suffer, everything in him which seemed like it, or like any imperfection, was either a docetic illusion, or wholly in the human personage with which he was united: This work of Christ, however, commenced not wholly with the life of Jesus, but, to some extent, with creation itself, in which the

Redeemer inspired the unconscious Demiurge with many divine ideas, and during the whole process of the world's government he is drawing congenial spirits to himself, and correcting many errors of the world-ruler. His redeeming work, however, is effected entirely by the communication of the Gnosis, and especially the revelation of the true God. In the end, all pneumatic and psychical natures capable of redemption will be gathered and raised to the Pleroma. Valentinus supposes that all psychical natures are exalted only to a lower degree of blessedness in a peculiar kingdom of the Demiurge. Matter with all fleshly natures will either be consumed by its own powers, or sink back into its original condition of utter deadness and absolute separation from the light, or of internal confusion.

6. The sources from which the Gnostics professed to derive their knowledge were,

(a.) Tradition, not so much that of the Church, which they generally looked upon as unphilosophical, and fit only for the multitude, but that which was said to have been communicated by Christ to a narrow circle of congenial spirits, and by them transmitted to others. Marcion alone made this tradition accessible to all.

(b.) The ordinary Christian Scriptures were only partially received among them. Marcion and the more strenuous Judaistic Gnostics entirely rejected the Old Testament, and the more moderate recognized a distinction between its pneumatic, psychic, and hylic elements. Many of them disparaged portions of the New Testament also, while others accepted only of Paul's writings and an expurgated gospel of Luke.

(c.) Other writings of highly enlightened persons belonging to particular sects. Thus Manes's writings were much venerated among his followers, and the prophecies of Cain and of a pretended seer named Parchor among the followers of Basilides, and the apocryphal books of Adam, Enoch, Moses, Elias, Isaiah, Baruch, and others.

(d.) Even the writings of the heathen poets and philosophers were much used by some, who, by a course of allegorical explanations,

like those which they applied to the Scriptures, discovered ineffable mysteries under the most unpromising outward letter.

7. With the exception of the followers of Manes, we have no evidence that the Gnostics ever attempted a distinct ecclesiastical organization. Many of them were never excluded from the orthodox churches, within which they only sought to form schools and social circles. They practiced baptism, and believed that in this rite, as in the baptism of Christ, the higher spirit was more abundantly imparted, and the human spirit was emancipated from the power of the Demiurge. Most of them were inclined by their poetic fancies and their love of symbols to a gorgeous style of worship, but the more common ordinances and observances of the Church were neglected as useful only to such as were on the ground of mere faith.

8. Their ethics and practical morality were usually dependent upon dualistic principles. Among the Hellenistic Gnostics it took the form of a struggle against matter, which so unfrequently ran into asceticism, and sometimes into the use of charms and astrological practices. The Oriental Gnostics, on the other hand, are said in many instances to have plunged into immoralities, sometimes with the view of showing their contempt for the Demiurge and his laws, or because they regarded the body as an indifferent thing to a spirit united with the supreme God, and subject to no inferior law. Saturninus, Marcion, and Manes rejected marriage; but many Gnostics not only submitted to it, but looked upon it as the highest law of pneumatic natures. We have no evidence that the standard of morality was lower among the Gnostics generally than among orthodox Christians in general.

One is amazed at the boldness, the fanciful nature, and the high pretensions of Gnosticism. In the course of a century and a half it comes and goes before us like a splendid vision.. And yet its influence upon Christianity was profound and permanent. It gave occasion to a great expansion of Christian thought, to a clearer idea of the historical relation of Christianity to earlier and surrounding religions, and to a better definition of the basis of true faith. It

deserves a more careful study than it has usually received.

VI. Literature. —

The original authorities are the ecclesiastical writers of the period generally, but especially Irenaeus and Epiphanius, *Adv. haereses*; Tertullian, *De praescript. Haer., contra Gnost. scosp., adv. Valentinanos, adt. Marcianum*; Hippolytus, *Κατὰ πασ. αἱρ. εἴλεγο*, and the *Philosophoumena* usually ascribed to him; Theodoret, *Haer. Fabb.* Also Clemens, Alex. and Origen in many passages; Gnostic fragments in Grabe's *Spicilegium*; Munter's *Odae Gnosticae* (Kopenh. 1812); *Pistis Sophia* (a Gnostic work translated from a Copt. Codex by Schwartz and edited by Petermanns Berlin, 1851); *Cerdus Nazaraeus* (ed. by Norberg, and sometimes called the Bible of Gnosticism); *Bardesanes Gnosticus Syrorum primus Hymnologus*, and *Antitheses Marcionis Gnostiici* (two Gnostic works published by Aug. Hahn, Leips. 1819, 1823); also the Neo-Platonist work of Plotinus, *Πρὸς τ. γνωστικῶν* (Emend. 2, lib. 9). The English reader can gain access to many of these ecclesiastical writers by means of the *Ante-Nicene Chr. Lib.*, edited, by Drs. Roberts and Donaldson, now in course of publication at Edinburgh.

The modern literature of Gnosticism is very abundant. Besides the general ecclesiastical histories of Gieseler, Neander, Hase, and Schaff, the doctrinal histories of Hagenbach, F.K. Meier, F.C. Baur, A. Neander, L. Noack, and Shedd, and the histories of philosophy by H. Ritter, Tennemann, F.D. Maurice, and the French history translated by C.S. Henry, the more important special works on the subject are, A. Neander, *Genet. Entwickl. d. vorn. gnost. Syst.* (Berl. 1818); J. Matter, *Histoire crit. et Gnosticisme* (Par. 1828 [1843], 2 volumes); Dr. Edward Burton, *Bampton Lectures on the Heresies on the Apost. Age* (1829; Oxford, 1830); F.C. Baur, *Die christ. Gnosis* (Tub. 1835), and *Das Christenthum* (Tub. 1853), pages 159-213; J.A. Moehler, *Versuch u. d. Urspr. d. Gnost.* (Tub. 1831); Möller, *Gesch. der Kosmologie d. Griech. Kirche* (1862); R.A. Lipsius, *Gnosticismus, etc.* (Leips. 1860); Norton's *Hist. of the Gnostics* (1845); C.A. Lewald, *De doctrina Gnost.* (1818); H.

Rossel, *Gesch. d. Untersuch. it. d. Gnost. in Theol. Nachl.* (Berl. 1847). Articles on Gnosticism have been published by F.R. Licke in *Berl. theol. Zeitschr.* (1819); J.C.L. Gieseler, in *Hal. lit. Zeit.* (1823) and *Stud. u. Krit.* (1830); F.C. Baur, *Stud. u. Krit.* (1837); H. . Cheever, in *Asser. Bibl. Repository*, October 1840; R. Baxmann, in *Deutsche Zeitschr.* (1861), and transl. in *Amer. Theol. Rev.* October 1862; and on the later history of the Nazoreans, or Mandai Jahia, in the *Christian Review* January 1855: an excellent article by J.L. Jacobi may be found in Herzog's *Real-Encyklop. fur prot. Theol.* See also Appleton's, Brande's, and Chambers's *Cyclopaedias.*

C. P. W.

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## **Gnosticism and the Gnostic Jesus**

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Popular opinion often comes from obscure sources. Many conceptions about Jesus now current and credible in New Age circles are rooted in a movement of spiritual protest which, until recently, was the concern only of the specialized scholar or the occultist. This ancient movement — Gnosticism — provides much of the form and color for the New Age portrait of Jesus as the illumined Illuminator: one who serves as a cosmic catalyst for others' awakening.

Many essentially Gnostic notions received wide attention through the sagacious persona of the recently deceased Joseph

Campbell in the television series and best-selling book, *The Power of Myth*. For example, in discussing the idea that “God was in Christ,” Campbell affirmed that “the basic Gnostic and Buddhist idea is that that is true of you and me as well.” Jesus is an enlightened example who “realized in himself that he and what he called the Father were one, and he lived out of that knowledge of the Christhood of his nature.” According to Campbell, anyone can likewise live out his or her Christ nature.<sup>1</sup>

Gnosticism has come to mean just about anything. Calling someone a Gnostic can make the person either blush, beam, or fume. Whether used as an epithet for heresy or spiritual snobbery, or as a compliment for spiritual knowledge and esotericism, Gnosticism remains a cornucopia of controversy.

This is doubly so when Gnosticism is brought into a discussion of Jesus of Nazareth. Begin to speak of “Christian Gnostics” and some will exclaim, “No way! That is a contradiction in terms. Heresy is not orthodoxy.” Others will affirm, “No contradiction. Orthodoxy is the heresy. The Gnostics were edged out of mainstream Christianity for political purposes by the end of the third century.” Speak of the Gnostic Christ or the Gnostic gospels, and an ancient debate is moved to the theological front burner.

Gnosticism as a philosophy refers to a related body of teachings that stress the acquisition of “gnosis,” or inner knowledge. The knowledge sought is not strictly intellectual, but mystical; not merely a detached knowledge of or about something, but a knowing by acquaintance or participation. This gnosis is the inner and esoteric mystical knowledge of ultimate reality. It discloses the spark of divinity within, thought to be obscured by ignorance, convention, and mere exoteric religiosity.

This knowledge is not considered to be the possession of the masses but of the Gnostics, the Knowers, who are privy to its benefits. While the orthodox “many” exult in the exoteric religious trappings which stress dogmatic *belief* and prescribed behavior, the Gnostic “few” pierce through the surface to the esoteric spiritual *knowledge* of God. The Gnostics claim the Orthodox mistake the shell for the core; the Orthodox claim the Gnostics dive past the true core into a nonexistent one of their own esoteric invention. To



adjudicate this ancient acrimony requires that we examine Gnosticism's perennial allure, expose its philosophical foundations, size up its historical claims, and square off the Gnostic Jesus with the figure who sustains the New Testament.

### MODERN GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is experiencing something of a revival, despite its status within church history as a vanquished Christian heresy. The magazine *Gnosis*, which bills itself as a "journal of western inner traditions," began publication in 1985 with a circulation of 2,500. As of September 1990, it sported a circulation of 11,000. *Gnosis* regularly runs articles on Gnosticism and Gnostic themes such as "Valentinus: A Gnostic for All Seasons."

Some have created institutional forms of this ancient religion. In Palo Alto, California, priestess Bishop Rosamonde Miller officiates the weekly gatherings of Ecclesia Gnostica Myteriorum (Church of Gnostic Mysteries), as she has done for the last eleven years. The chapel holds forty to sixty participants each Sunday and includes Gnostic readings in its liturgy. Miller says she knows of twelve organizationally unrelated Gnostic churches throughout the world.<sup>2</sup> Stephan Hoeller, a frequent contributor to *Gnosis*, who since 1967 has been a bishop of Ecclesia Gnostica in Los Angeles, notes that "Gnostic churches...have sprung up in recent years in increasing numbers."<sup>3</sup> He refers to an established tradition of "wandering bishops" who retain allegiance to the symbolic and ritual form of orthodox Christianity while reinterpreting its essential content.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, these exotic-sounding enclaves of the esoteric are minuscule when compared to historic Christian denominations. But the real challenge of Gnosticism is not so much organizational as intellectual. Gnosticism in its various forms has often appealed to the alienated intellectuals who yearn for spiritual experience outside the bounds of the ordinary.

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, a constant source of inspiration for the New Age, did much to introduce Gnosticism to the modern world by viewing it as a kind of proto-depth

psychology, a key to psychological interpretation. According to Stephan Hoeller, author of *The Gnostic Jung*, “it was Jung’s contention that Christianity and Western culture have suffered grievously because of the repression of the Gnostic approach to religion, and it was his hope that in time this approach would be reincorporated in our culture, our Western spirituality.”<sup>5</sup>

In his *Psychological Types*, Jung praised “the intellectual content of Gnosis” as “vastly superior” to the orthodox church. He also affirmed that, “in light of our present mental development [Gnosticism] has not lost but considerably gained in value.”<sup>6</sup>

A variety of esoteric groups have roots in Gnostic soil. Madame Helena P. Blavatsky, who founded Theosophy in 1875, viewed the Gnostics as precursors of modern occult movements and hailed them for preserving an inner teaching lost to orthodoxy. Theosophy and its various spin-offs — such as Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy, Alice Bailey’s Arcane School, Guy and Edna Ballard’s I Am movement, and Elizabeth Clare Prophet’s Church Universal and Triumphant — all draw water from this same well; so do various other esoteric groups, such as the Rosicrucians. These groups share an emphasis on esoteric teaching, the hidden divinity of humanity, and contact with nonmaterial higher beings called masters or adepts.

A four-part documentary called “The Gnostics” was released in mid-1989 and shown in one-day screenings across the country along with a lecture by the producer. This ambitious series charted the history of Gnosticism through dramatizations and interviews with world-renowned scholars on Gnosticism such as Gilles Quispel, Hans Jonas, and Elaine Pagels. A review of the series in a New Age-oriented journal noted: “The series takes us to the Nag Hammadi find where we learn the beginnings of the discovery of texts called the Gnostic Gospels that were written around the same time as the gospels of the New Testament but which were purposely left out.”<sup>7</sup> The review refers to one of the most sensational and significant archaeological finds of the twentieth century; a discovery seen by some as overthrowing the orthodox view of Jesus and Christianity forever.

## GOLD IN THE JAR

In December 1945, while digging for soil to fertilize crops, an Arab peasant named Muhammad 'Ali found a red earthenware jar near Nag Hammadi, a city in upper Egypt. His fear of uncorking an evil spirit or *jin* was shortly overcome by the hope of finding gold within. What was found has been for hundreds of scholars far more precious than gold. Inside the jar were thirteen leather-bound papyrus books (codices), dating from approximately A.D. 350. Although several of the texts were burned or thrown out, fifty-two texts were eventually recovered through many years of intrigue involving illegal sales, violence, smuggling, and academic rivalry.

Some of the texts were first published singly or in small collections, but the complete collection was not made available in a popular format in English until 1977. It was released as *The Nag Hammadi Library* and was reissued in revised form in 1988.

Although many of these documents had been referred to and denounced in the writings of early church theologians such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, most of the texts themselves had been thought to be extinct. Now many of them have come to light. As Elaine Pagels put it in her best-selling book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, "Now for the first time, we have the opportunity to find out about the earliest Christian heresy; for the first time, the heretics can speak for themselves."<sup>8</sup>

Pagels's book, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, arguably did more than any other effort to ingratiate the Gnostics to modern Americans. She made them accessible and even likeable. Her scholarly expertise coupled with her ability to relate an ancient religion to contemporary concerns made for a compelling combination in the minds of many. Her central thesis was simple: Gnosticism should be considered at least as legitimate as orthodox Christianity because the "heresy" was simply a competing strain of early Christianity. Yet, we find that the Nag Hammadi texts present a Jesus at extreme odds with the one found in the Gospels. Before contrasting the Gnostic and biblical renditions of Jesus, however, we need a short briefing on gnosis.

## THE GNOSTIC MESSAGE

Gnosticism in general and the Nag Hammadi texts in particular present a spectrum of beliefs, although a central philosophical core is roughly discernible, which Gnosticism scholar Kurt Rudolph calls “the central myth.”<sup>9</sup> Gnosticism teaches that something is desperately wrong with the universe and then delineates the means to explain and rectify the situation.

The universe, as presently constituted, is not good, nor was it created by an all-good God. Rather, a lesser god, or demiurge (as he is sometimes called), fashioned the world in ignorance. The *Gospel of Philip* says that “the world came about through a mistake. For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He fell short of attaining his desire.”<sup>10</sup> The origin of the demiurge or offending creator is variously explained, but the upshot is that some precosmic disruption in the chain of beings emanating from the unknowable Father-God resulted in the “fall out” of a substandard deity with less than impeccable credentials. The result was a material cosmos soaked with ignorance, pain, decay, and death — a botched job, to be sure. This deity, nevertheless, despotically demands worship and even pretentiously proclaims his supremacy as the one true God.

This creator-god is not the ultimate reality, but rather a degeneration of the unknown and unknowable fullness of Being (or pleroma). Yet, human beings — or at least some of them — are in the position potentially to transcend their imposed limitations, even if the cosmic deck is stacked against them. Locked within the material shell of the human race is the spark of this highest spiritual reality which (as one Gnostic theory held) the inept creator accidentally infused into humanity at the creation — on the order of a drunken jeweler who accidentally mixes gold dust into junk metal. Simply put, spirit is good and desirable; matter is evil and detestable.

If this spark is fanned into a flame, it can liberate humans from the maddening matrix of matter and the demands of its obtuse originator. What has devolved *from* perfection can ultimately evolve *back into* perfection through a process of self-discovery.

Into this basic structure enters the idea of Jesus as a Redeemer

of those ensconced in materiality. He comes as one descended from the spiritual realm with a message of self-redemption. The body of Gnostic literature, which is wider than the Nag Hammadi texts, presents various views of this Redeemer figure. There are, in fact, differing schools of Gnosticism with differing Christologies. Nevertheless, a basic image emerges.

The Christ comes from the higher levels of intermediary beings (called aeons) not as a sacrifice for sin but as a Revealer, an emissary from error-free environs. He is not the personal agent of the creator-god revealed in the Old Testament. (That metaphysically disheveled deity is what got the universe into such a royal mess in the first place.) Rather, Jesus has descended from a more exalted level to be a catalyst for igniting the gnosis latent within the ignorant. He gives a metaphysical assist to underachieving deities (i.e., humans) rather than granting ethical restoration to God's erring creatures through the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

### **NAG HAMMADI UNVEILED**

By inspecting a few of the Nag Hammadi texts, we encounter Gnosticism in Christian guise: Jesus dispenses gnosis to awaken those trapped in ignorance; the body is a prison, and the spirit alone is good; and salvation comes by discovering the "kingdom of God" within the self.

One of the first Nag Hammadi texts to be extricated out of Egypt and translated into Western tongues was the *Gospel of Thomas*, comprised of one hundred and fourteen alleged sayings of Jesus. Although scholars do not believe it was actually written by the apostle Thomas, it has received the lion's share of scholarly attention. The sayings of Jesus are given minimal narrative setting, are not thematically arranged, and have a cryptic, epigrammatic bite to them. Although *Thomas* does not articulate every aspect of a full-blown Gnostic system, some of the teachings attributed to Jesus fit the Gnostic pattern. (Other sayings closely parallel or duplicate material found in the synoptic Gospels.)

The text begins: "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And

he said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’”<sup>11</sup> Already we find the emphasis on secret knowledge (gnosis) as redemptive.

## JESUS AND GNOSIS

Unlike the canonical gospels, Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are not narrated and neither do any of the hundred and fourteen sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* directly refer to these events. Thomas’s Jesus is a dispenser of wisdom, not the crucified and resurrected Lord.

Jesus speaks of the kingdom: “The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”<sup>12</sup>

Other Gnostic documents center on the same theme. In the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, Jesus speaks “secret words” concerning self-knowledge: “For he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge of the depth of the all.”<sup>13</sup>

Pagels observes that many of the Gnostics “shared certain affinities with contemporary methods of exploring the self through psychotherapeutic techniques.”<sup>14</sup> This includes the premises that, first, many people are unconscious of their true condition and, second, “that the psyche bears within itself the potential for liberation or destruction.”<sup>15</sup>

Gilles Quispel notes that for Valentinus, a Gnostic teacher of the second century, Christ is “the Paraclete from the Unknown who reveals...the discovery of the Self — the divine spark within you.”<sup>16</sup>

The heart of the human problem for the Gnostic is ignorance, sometimes called “sleep,” “intoxication,” or “blindness.” But Jesus redeems man from such ignorance. Stephan Hoeller says that in the Valentinian system “there is no need whatsoever for guilt, for repentance from so-called sin, neither is there a need for a blind

belief in vicarious salvation by way of the death of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>  
Rather, Jesus is savior in the sense of being a “spiritual maker of wholeness” who cures us of our sickness of ignorance.<sup>18</sup>

### **Gnosticism on Crucifixion and Resurrection**

Those Gnostic texts that discuss Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection display a variety of views that, nevertheless, reveal some common themes.

James is consoled by Jesus in the *First Apocalypse of James*: “Never have I suffered in any way, nor have I been distressed. And this people has done me no harm.”<sup>19</sup>

In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, Jesus says, “I did not die in reality, but in appearance.” Those “in error and blindness....saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I was rejoicing in the height over all....And I was laughing at their ignorance.”<sup>20</sup>

John Dart has discerned that the Gnostic stories of Jesus mocking his executors reverse the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where the soldiers and chief priests (Mark 15:20) mock Jesus.<sup>21</sup> In the biblical Gospels, Jesus does not deride or mock His tormentors; on the contrary, *while suffering from the cross*, He asks the Father to forgive those who nailed Him there.

In the teaching of Valentinus and followers, the death of Jesus is movingly recounted, yet without the New Testament significance. Although the *Gospel of Truth* says that “his death is life for many,” it views this life-giving in terms of imparting the gnosis, not removing sin.<sup>22</sup> Pagels says that rather than viewing Christ’s death as a sacrificial offering to atone for guilt and sin, the *Gospel of Truth* “sees the crucifixion as the occasion for discovering the divine self within.”<sup>23</sup>

A resurrection is enthusiastically affirmed in the *Treatise on the Resurrection*: “Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth! Indeed, it is more fitting to say that the

world is an illusion rather than the resurrection.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, the nature of the post-resurrection appearances differs from the biblical accounts. Jesus is disclosed through *spiritual* visions rather than *physical* circumstances.

The resurrected Jesus for the Gnostics is the spiritual Revealer who imparts secret wisdom to the selected few. The tone and content of Luke’s account of Jesus’ resurrection appearances is a great distance from Gnostic accounts: “After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

By now it should be apparent that the biblical Jesus has little in common with the Gnostic Jesus. He is viewed as a Redeemer in both cases, yet his nature as a Redeemer and the way of redemption diverge at crucial points. We shall now examine some of these points.

### **DID CHRIST REALLY SUFFER AND DIE?**

As in much modern New Age teaching, the Gnostics tended to divide Jesus from the Christ. For Valentinus, Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism and left before his death on the cross. Much of the burden of the treatise *Against Heresies*, written by the early Christian theologian Irenaeus, was to affirm that Jesus was, is, and always will be, the Christ. He says: “The Gospel...knew no other son of man but Him who was of Mary, who also suffered; and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the passion; but Him who was born it knew as Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again.”<sup>25</sup>

Irenaeus goes on to quote John’s affirmation that “Jesus is the Christ” (John 20:31) against the notion that Jesus and Christ were “formed of two different substances,” as the Gnostics taught.<sup>26</sup>

In dealing with the idea that Christ did not suffer on the cross for sin, Irenaeus argues that Christ never would have exhorted His disciples to take up the cross if He in fact was not to suffer on it Himself, but fly away from it.<sup>27</sup>

For Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who himself was a disciple



of the apostle John), the suffering of Jesus the Christ was paramount. It was indispensable to the apostolic “rule of faith” that Jesus Christ suffered on the cross to bring salvation to His people. In Irenaeus’s mind, there was no divine spark in the human heart to rekindle; self-knowledge was not equal to God-knowledge. Rather, humans were stuck in sin and required a radical rescue operation. Because “it was not possible that the man...who had been destroyed through disobedience, could reform himself,” the Son brought salvation by “descending from the Father, becoming incarnate, stooping low, even to death, and consummating the arranged plan of our salvation.”<sup>28</sup>

This harmonizes with the words of Polycarp: “Let us then continually persevere in our hope and the earnest of our righteousness, which Jesus Christ, “who bore our sins in His own body on the tree” [1 Pet. 2:24], “who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” [1 Pet. 2:22], but endured all things for us, that we might live in Him.”<sup>29</sup>

Polycarp’s mentor, the apostle John, said: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16); and “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10).

The Gnostic Jesus is predominantly a dispenser of cosmic wisdom who discourses on abstruse themes like the spirit’s fall into matter. Jesus Christ certainly taught theology, but he dealt with the problem of pain and suffering in a far different way. He suffered for us, rather than escaping the cross or lecturing on the vanity of the body.

### **THE MATTER OF THE RESURRECTION**

For Gnosticism, the inherent problem of humanity derives from the misuse of power by the ignorant creator and the resulting entrapment of souls in matter. The Gnostic Jesus alerts us to this and helps rekindle the divine spark within. In the biblical teaching, the problem is ethical; humans have sinned against a good Creator and are guilty before the throne of the universe.

For Gnosticism, the world is bad, but the soul — when freed from its entrapments — is good. For Christianity, the world was

created good (Gen. 1), but humans have fallen from innocence and purity through disobedience (Gen. 3; Rom. 3). Yet, the message of the gospel is that the One who can rightly prosecute His creatures as guilty and worthy of punishment has deigned to visit them in the person of His only Son — not just to write up a firsthand damage report, but to rectify the situation through the Cross and the Resurrection.

In light of these differences, the significance of Jesus' literal and physical resurrection should be clear. For the Gnostic who abhors matter and seeks release from its grim grip, the physical resurrection of Jesus would be anticlimactic, if not absurd. A material resurrection would be counterproductive and only recapitulate the original problem.

Jesus displays a positive attitude toward the Creation throughout the Gospels. In telling His followers not to worry He says, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matt. 2:26). And, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matt. 10:29). These and many other examples presuppose the goodness of the material world and declare care by a benevolent Creator. Gnostic dualism is precluded.

If Jesus recommends fasting and physical self-denial on occasion, it is not because matter is unworthy of attention or an incorrigible roadblock to spiritual growth, but because moral and spiritual resolve may be strengthened through periodic abstinence (Matt. 6:16-18; 9:14-15). Jesus *fasts* in the desert and *feasts* with His disciples. The created world is good, but the human heart is corrupt and inclines to selfishly misuse a good creation. Therefore, it is sometimes wise to deny what is good *without* in order to inspect and mortify what is bad *within*.

If Jesus is the Christ who comes to restore God's creation, He must come as one of its own, a *bona fide* man. Although Gnostic teachings show some diversity on this subject, they tend toward docetism — the doctrine that the descent of the Christ was spiritual and not material, despite any *appearance* of materiality. It was even claimed that Jesus left no footprints behind him when he

walked on the sand.

From a biblical view, materiality is not the problem, but disharmony with the Maker. Adam and Eve were both material and in harmony with their good Maker before they succumbed to the Serpent's temptation. Yet, in biblical reasoning, if Jesus is to conquer sin and death for humanity, He must rise from the dead in a physical body, albeit a transformed one. A mere spiritual apparition would mean an abdication of material responsibility. As Norman Geisler has noted, "Humans sin and die in material bodies and they must be redeemed in the same physical bodies. Any other kind of deliverance would be an admission of defeat....If redemption does not restore God's physical creation, including our material bodies, then God's original purpose in creating a material world would be frustrated."<sup>30</sup>

For this reason, at Pentecost the apostle Peter preached Jesus of Nazareth as "a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22) who, though put to death by being nailed to the cross, "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (v. 24). Peter then quotes Psalm 16:10 which speaks of God not letting His "Holy One see decay" (v. 27). Peter says of David, the psalm's author, "Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave nor did his body see decay. God raised Jesus to life" (vv. 31, 32).

The apostle Paul confesses that if the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical fact, Christianity is a vanity of vanities (1 Cor. 15:14-19). And, while he speaks of Jesus' (and the believers') resurrected condition as a "spiritual body," this does not mean nonphysical or ethereal; rather, it refers to a body totally free from the results of sin and the Fall. It is a spirit-driven body, untouched by any of the entropies of evil. Because Jesus was resurrected bodily, those who know Him as Lord can anticipate their own resurrected bodies.

### **JESUS, JUDAISM, AND GNOSIS**

The Gnostic Jesus is also divided from the Jesus of the Gospels over his relationship to Judaism. For Gnostics, the God of the Old

Testament is somewhat of a cosmic clown, neither ultimate nor good. In fact, many Gnostic documents invert the meaning of Old Testament stories in order to ridicule him. For instance, the serpent and Eve are heroic figures who oppose the dull deity in the *Hypostasis of the Archons (the Reality of the Rulers)* and in *On the Origin of the World*.<sup>31</sup>

In the *Apocryphon of John*, Jesus says he encouraged Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,<sup>32</sup> thus putting Jesus diametrically at odds with the meaning of the Genesis account where this action is seen as the essence of sin (Gen. 3). The same anti-Jewish element is found in the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* where the disciples say to Jesus, “Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you.” To which Jesus replies, “You have omitted the one living in your presence and have spoken (only) of the dead.”<sup>33</sup> Jesus thus dismisses all the prophets as merely “dead.” For the Gnostics, the Creator must be separated from the Redeemer.

The Jesus found in the New Testament quotes the prophets, claims to fulfill their prophecies, and consistently argues according to the Old Testament revelation, despite the fact that He exudes an authority equal to it. Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). He corrects the Sadducees’ misunderstanding of the afterlife by saying, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures...” (Mark 12:24). To other critics He again appeals to the Old Testament: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39).

When Jesus appeared after His death and burial to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, He commented on their slowness of heart “to believe all that the prophets have spoken.” He asked, “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into glory?” Luke then records, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

For both Jesus and the Old Testament, the supreme Creator is the Father of all living. They are one and the same.

### **GOD: UNKNOWABLE OR KNOWABLE?**

Many Gnostic treatises speak of the ultimate reality or godhead as beyond conceptual apprehension. Any hope of contacting this reality — a spark of which is lodged within the Gnostic — must be filtered through numerous intermediary beings of a lesser stature than the godhead itself.

In the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the ultimate reality is said to be the “unrevealable, unmarked, ageless, unproclaimable Father.” Three powers are said to emanate from Him: “They are the Father, the Mother, (and) the Son, from the living silence.”<sup>34</sup> The text speaks of giving praise to “the great invisible Spirit” who is “the silence of silent silence.”<sup>35</sup> In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Jesus is asked by Matthew, “Lord...teach us the truth,” to which Jesus says, “He Who Is is ineffable.” Although Jesus seems to indicate that he reveals the ineffable, he says concerning the ultimate, “He is unnameable...he is ever incomprehensible.”<sup>36</sup>

At this point the divide between the New Testament and the Gnostic documents couldn't be deeper or wider. Although the biblical Jesus had the pedagogical tact not to proclaim indiscriminately, “I am God! I am God!” the entire contour of His ministry points to Him as God in the flesh. He says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The prologue to John's gospel says that “in the beginning was the Word (Logos)” and that “the Word was with God and was God” (John 1:1). John did not say, “In the beginning was the silence of the silent silence” or “the ineffable.”

Incarnation means tangible and intelligible revelation from God to humanity. The Creator's truth and life are communicated spiritually through the medium of matter. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling place among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The Word that became flesh “has made Him [the Father] known” (v. 19). John's first epistle tells us: “The

life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard..." (1 John 1:2-3).

Irenaeus encountered these Gnostic invocations of the ineffable. He quotes a Valentinian Gnostic teacher who explained the "primary Tetrad" (fourfold emanation from ultimate reality): "There is a certain Proarch who existed before all things, surpassing all thought, speech, and nomenclature" whom he called "Monotes" (unity). Along with this power there is another power called Hentotes (oneness) who, along with Monotes produced "an intelligent, unbegotten, and undivided being, which beginning language terms 'Monad.'" Another entity called Hen (One) rounds out the primal union.<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus satirically responds with his own suggested Tetrad which also proceeds from "a certain Proarch":

But along with it there exists a power which I term *Gourd*; and along with this *Gourd* there exists a power which again I term *Utter-Emptiness*. This *Gourd* and *Emptiness*, since they are one, produced... a fruit, everywhere visible, eatable, and delicious, which fruit-language calls a *Cucumber*. Along with this *Cucumber* exists a power of the same essence, which again I call a *Melon*.<sup>38</sup>

Irenaeus's point is well taken. If spiritual realities surpass our ability to name or even think about them, then *any name under the sun* (or within the Tetrad) is just as appropriate — or inappropriate — as any other, and we are free to affirm with Irenaeus that "these powers of the *Gourd*, *Utter Emptiness*, the *Cucumber*, and the *Melon*, brought forth the remaining multitude of the delirious melons of Valentinus."<sup>39</sup>

Whenever a Gnostic writer — ancient or modern — simultaneously asserts that a spiritual entity or principle is utterly unknown and unnameable and begins to give it names and ascribe to it characteristics, we should hark back to Irenaeus. If something is ineffable, it is necessarily unthinkable, unreportable, and unapproachable.

## ANCIENT GNOSTICISM AND MODERN THOUGHT

Modern day Gnostics, Neo-Gnostics, or Gnostic sympathizers should be aware of some Gnostic elements which decidedly clash with modern tastes. First, although Pagels, like Jung, has shown the Gnostics in a positive psychological light, the Gnostic outlook is just as much *theological* and *cosmological* as it is *psychological*. The Gnostic message is all of a piece, and the psychology should not be artificially divorced from the overall world view. In other words, Gnosticism should not be reduced to psychology — as if we know better what a Basilides or a Valentinus *really* meant than they did.

The Gnostic documents do not present their system as a crypto-psychology (with various cosmic forces representing psychic functions), but as a religious and theological explanation of the origin and operation of the universe. Those who want to adopt consistently Gnostic attitudes and assumptions should keep in mind what the Gnostic texts — to which they appeal for authority and credibility — actually say.

Second, the Gnostic rejection of matter as illusory, evil, or, at most, second-best, is at odds with many New Age sentiments regarding the value of nature and the need for an ecological awareness and ethic. Trying to find an ecological concern in the Gnostic corpus is on the order of harvesting wheat in Antarctica. For the Gnostics, as Gnostic scholar PHEME PERKINS puts it, “most of the cosmos that we know is a carefully constructed plot to keep humanity from returning to its true divine home.”<sup>40</sup>

Third, Pagels and others to the contrary, the Gnostic attitude toward women was not proto-feminist. Gnostic groups did sometimes allow for women’s participation in religious activities and several of the emanational beings were seen as feminine. Nevertheless, even though *Ms. Magazine* gave *The Gnostic Gospels* a glowing review<sup>41</sup>, women fare far worse in Gnosticism than many think. The concluding saying from the *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, has less than a feminist ring:

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.”

Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>42</sup>

The issue of the role of women in Gnostic theology and community cannot be adequately addressed here, but it should be noted that the Jesus of the Gospels never spoke of making the female into the male — no doubt because Jesus did not perceive the female to be inferior to the male. Going against social customs, He gathered women followers, and revealed to an outcast Samaritan woman that He was the Messiah — which scandalized His own disciples (John 4:1-39). The Gospels also record women as the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10) — and this in a society where women were not considered qualified to be legal witnesses.

Fourth, despite an emphasis on reincarnation, several Gnostic documents speak of the damnation of those who are incorrigibly non-Gnostic<sup>43</sup>, particularly apostates from Gnostic groups.<sup>44</sup> If one chafes at the Jesus of the Gospels warning of “eternal destruction,” chafings are likewise readily available from Gnostic doomsayers.

Concerning the Gnostic-Orthodox controversy, biblical scholar F. F. Bruce is so bold as to say that “there is no reason why the student of the conflict should shrink from making a value judgment: the Gnostic schools lost because they deserved to lose.”<sup>45</sup> The Gnostics lost once, but do they deserve to lose again? We will seek to answer this in Part Two as we consider the historic reliability of the Gnostic (Nag Hammadi) texts versus that of the New Testament.

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## NOTES

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## GLOSSARY

**aeons:** Emanations of Being from the unknowable, ultimate metaphysical principle or pleroma (see pleroma).

**Apostolic rule of faith:** The essential teachings of the apostles that served as the authoritative standard for orthodox doctrine before the canonization of the New Testament.

**Demiurge:** According to the Gnostics (as opposed to Plato and others who had a more positive assessment), an inferior deity who ignorantly and incompetently fashioned the debased physical world

**esotericism:** The teaching that spiritual liberation is found in a secret or hidden knowledge (sometimes called gnosis) not available in traditional

orthodoxy or exotericism.

**exotericism:** A pejorative term used by esotericists to describe the mere outer or popular understanding of spiritual truth which is supposedly inferior to the esoteric essence.

**gnosis:** The Greek word for “knowledge” used by the Gnostics to mean knowledge gained not through intellectual discovery but through personal experience or acquaintance which initiates one into esoteric mysteries. The experience of gnosis reveals to the initiated the divine spark within. “Gnosis” has a very different meaning in the New Testament which excludes esotericism and self-deification.

**Pleroma:** The Greek word for “fulness” used by the Gnostics to mean the highest principle of Being where dwells the unknown and unknowable God. Used in the New Testament to refer to “fulness in Christ” (Col. 2:10) who is the known revelation of God in the flesh.

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http://www.searchingthescrptures.net/main_pages/articles/gnosticism_jesus.htm

Gnosticism and the Gnostic Jesus

By David Webb

In our time there has been a renewed assault on the biblical Jesus – the Jesus found in the inspired word of God. Many of the conceptions about Jesus that are presently being promoted are coming from **New Age** circles and are rooted in an ancient movement known as **Gnosticism**. The New Age portrait of Jesus reveals a completely different Jesus than the one found in the New Testament writings of the inspired apostles. For example, the current view of Jesus is that he is not the Son of God, as his followers claimed, nor was he born of a virgin, nor resurrected from the dead following his crucifixion. The claims of Jesus that he and “the Father are one” (John 10:30) and that “the Father is in me and I in Him” (John 10:38) are explained in New Age language as meaning that Jesus realized in himself that he and the One he called the Father were One in the sense that they are both illuminated with a knowledge that transcends mere human understanding, and that Jesus lived his life out of this illuminated knowledge that shaped and molded his god-like nature. To the Gnostic, anyone can attain this awakening of the essence of their

true nature and live it out their lives. In other words, God is in all of us and it is our purpose in life to be awakened and illuminated with the true knowledge of this divine nature that is already in us all so that we can live it out in our lives. This philosophy finds its roots in **Buddhism** as well as in the ancient Gnostic beliefs about God and the nature of man.

Gnosticism is a philosophy that refers to a body of teachings that stress the acquisition of “gnosis,” or inner knowledge. This knowledge is not mere intellectual, but mystical knowledge; not merely knowing *about* something or someone, but a mystical knowledge that comes from within each of us. This special mystical knowledge allows us to discover an esoteric divine nature within each of us that is obscured by ignorance and false teaching about God and Jesus.

Furthermore, the Gnostics believe this knowledge is not in the possession of the masses, but only to the Gnostics (the Knowers) who truly understand its benefits and how to attain it. To the Gnostic, the masses are trapped in the ignorance of religious teaching and doctrine that serves to control and regulate the conduct of believers. The Gnostic, on the other hand, believes he has pierced through the ignorance and trappings of organized religion and has reached the core of special spiritual knowledge about God and the God-nature in each of us. The only problem is that this “core of special spiritual knowledge” of God and the God-nature is a “core of special spiritual knowledge” of their own creation. In reality, this special enlightened spiritual knowledge claimed by the Gnostic simply doesn’t exist.

Therefore, to deal with this ancient belief that even troubled Christians in New Testament times, and was addressed in the writings of the apostle Paul and John, there are certain things we need to understand. First we need to understand why Gnosticism is becoming popular in our own day and examine the threat it poses. Then we need to examine its origin and historical claims of this heresy. And finally, we need to expose the false teachings and beliefs about the so-called Gnostic Jesus, and compare this false Christ with the One revealed in the divinely inspired word of God.

Modern Gnosticism

Gnosticism is experiencing a revival in our day, and is being promoted through various publications, through popular novels and soon-to-be-released movies (such as *The Di Vinci Code*), and through the broadcast media in special documentary-style programs that subtly endorse ancient Gnostic writings (including the *Gospel of Thomas* and the discovery 30 years ago of the *Gospel of Judas*). There has also been the creation of so-called “Gnostic churches” that hold to some of the basic symbolic and ritual forms of orthodox Christianity while reinterpreting the essential and core beliefs of Christianity.

Gnosticism appeals to many self-proclaimed intellectuals who are searching for some kind of unique spiritual experience and spiritual enlightenment. Many are advocates of the Swiss psychologist **Carl Jung**, who believed that Christianity has repressed the Gnostic approach to religion, and that our culture has suffered by remaining in the ignorance of organized religion. Yung believed that Gnosticism and all its related beliefs are far superior to what he called “the orthodox church.”

Nag Hammadi

In December, 1945, an Arab farmer was digging in the soil near the Egyptian city of **Nag Hammadi** when he uncovered an earthen jar containing thirteen leather-bound papyrus books (or **codices**), dating back to the third century – some two hundred years after the birth of Christianity. Since that time, some fifty-two texts were eventually recovered. Gnosticism has gained the interest of many with the discovery of these ancient writings that have since been called the Gnostic Gospels. The most recent discovery, an ancient papyrus manuscript called the *Gospel of Judas*, has fanned the flame of interest even further. Although these ancient Gnostic writers produced an unknown number of manuscripts, including some that were written around the same time as the gospels of the New Testament, they were identified by the early church fathers as heretical and were intentionally left out of the Bible as we know it

today. However, today these ancient texts are being promoted as perhaps the most significant archeological find of modern times and are believed by many as archeological and textual proof that will eventually overthrow the orthodox view of Jesus and Christianity forever.

Those who deny the basic teachings of the New Testament and who deny the deity of Christ find these Gnostic Gospels very appealing. The reason being, they present a view of Jesus that is completely different from the Jesus of the New Testament.

The Gnostic Message

So, what do these Gnostic Gospels actually teach that caused them to be labeled as heresy by early Christians? For example, Gnosticism teaches that the universe and the world was not created by an all-knowing God, but by a lesser god, who lacked the intellect to create a perfect universe. The *Gospel of Philip* says that “the world came about through a mistake. For he who created it wanted to create it imperishable and immortal. He fell short of attaining his desire.” It is believed that this lesser god came from fall out among cosmic beings, making him a substandard deity. The result of his creation was a universe polluted with ignorance, pain, decay and death. And yet this deity demands worship and even proclaims himself to be the one true God.

The Gnostic belief, as one theory has it, is that this inept creator-god accidentally infused into humanity a spark of the highest form of a so-called “spiritual reality.” And that perfection can be attained through a process of self-discovery. Closely coupled with this desire to attain the highest form of spiritual reality through self-discovery is the belief that the spirit is good and desirable, but matter and the flesh is evil and detestable.

This is where the **Gnostic Jesus** begins to emerge, not as a sacrifice for sin, but as one who descended from one of the higher spiritual realms with a message of self-redemption. He is not the son of the creator-god revealed in the Old Testament – the creator-god who got the universe into a royal mess in the first place. Rather, Jesus came to assist humanity with achieving

enlightenment through self-discovery, and not as the means of eternal salvation through his death, burial and resurrection.

The Gnostic Jesus is a remarkable counterfeit of the biblical Jesus in that the Gnostic concept of Jesus borrows closely from the Jesus of scripture and gives a “Gnostic spin” to the teachings of Jesus found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and in the writings of the apostles. Since Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36) and “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21), the Gnostic belief is that Jesus came to awaken those trapped in ignorance (often called “darkness” by Jesus) by helping them to discover the “kingdom of God” within themselves.

The Gospel of Thomas

Among the most widely read and most popular of the Gnostic Gospels is the *Gospel of Thomas*. Although scholars do not believe it was actually written by the apostle Thomas, it is, nevertheless, composed of one hundred fourteen alleged sayings of Jesus. Some of the teachings attributed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* are clearly Gnostic in origin, while others closely parallel or even mirror the teachings of Jesus found in the synoptic Gospels. The text begins: “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’” From the very opening words of the *Gospel of Thomas* we find that eternal life does not come through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, but rather through the attainment of a special knowledge (gnosis) from the secret sayings of Jesus.

The Gnostic Jesus

The Gnostic Jesus presented in the *Gospel of Thomas* is not one who was crucified and resurrected from the dead, but rather one who is the giver of wisdom. In fact, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are not mentioned at all in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Instead, Jesus speaks of the kingdom. He says, “The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come

to know yourself, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”

Other Gnostic writings carry the same theme. In the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, Jesus says, “he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge of the depth of the all.”

According to **Valentinus**, a Gnostic teacher of the second century, Christ is “the Paraclete (Helper) from the Unknown who reveals... the discovery of self – the divine spark within you.”

Therefore, the issue for the Gnostic is freedom from ignorance (sometimes called “sleep,” “blindness” or “darkness”), and not in freedom from sin. To the Gnostic teacher Valentinus there is no need for guilt or for repentance from sin, and there is certainly no need for a blind belief that salvation comes through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. According to Valentinian beliefs, Jesus is savior in the sense of being one who provides for “spiritual wholeness” by curing us of the sickness of ignorance.

Gnosticism on the Crucifixion and the Resurrection

Although the *Gospel of Thomas* makes no mention of the crucifixion and resurrection, other Gnostic texts give a new and completely different concept of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus from that found in the inspired writings of the apostles. For example, in the *First Apocalypse of James*, Jesus comforts James by saying, “Never have I suffered in any way, nor have I been distressed. And this people has done me no harm.” In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, Jesus says, “I did not die in reality, but in appearance.” Those “in error and blindness... saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I was rejoicing in the height over all... and I was laughing at their ignorance.”

The Gnostic stories of Jesus have him mocking his executioners while the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke have the soldiers and chief priests mock Jesus. (Matthew 27:29, 31; Mark 15:20;

Luke 22:63; 23:11, 36) Furthermore, the Jesus of divine scripture, while suffering on the cross, prays for his Father to forgive his executioners. (Luke 23:34)

In the teachings of Valentinus, the crucifixion and death of Jesus is presented as a very moving event, and yet he sees the purpose of the death of Jesus as being completely different from the purpose presented in the synoptic gospels. Although the *Gospel of Truth* says “his death is life for many,” the “life” mentioned here is not seen as the acquisition of eternal life. Nor is it a “newness of life” that comes through being “buried with Him (Christ) through baptism into death” and thus being raised to a newness of life free from the bondage of sin. (Romans 6:1-14) To Valentinus, the “life” that Jesus accomplished for many through his death is the imparting of gnosis – a special, secret knowledge that allows one to discover the divine self within.

In the *Treatise of the Resurrection*, the resurrection story is affirmed: “Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth! In deed, it is more fitting to say that the world is an illusion rather than the resurrection.” However, the appearances of Jesus to his disciples following the resurrection differ significantly from the accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In the *Treatise of the Resurrection*, the appearances of Jesus are through *spiritual* visions rather than *physical* appearance. This differs significantly from the claims of Luke in the opening of Acts of the Apostles: “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:1-3) Obviously, the biblical Jesus has very little in common with the Jesus portrayed in the Gnostic gospels.

Did Christ Really Suffer and Die?

One of the most significant points of difference between the biblical account of Jesus and the Gnostic Jesus is the question of

whether the Christ actually suffered and died.

Valentinus contended that Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism but left him before his death on the cross. To counter this teaching, **Irenaeus** (a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) wrote the treatise *Against Heresies*. He writes, "The Gospel... knew no other son of man but Him who was of Mary, who also suffered; and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the passion; but Him who was born... as Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again." Irenaeus also quoted from the Gospel of John that "Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31) in an effort to counter the Gnostic claim that the Jesus and the Christ were "formed of two different substances."

Irenaeus contended that Christ would have never exhorted his disciples to take up the cross if he was to escape the pain and suffering of the crucifixion by flying away from it. Furthermore, Irenaeus argues that the suffering of Jesus the Christ on the cross was absolutely essential to bring about salvation for all mankind. He also argued there was no divine "spark" in the human heart to rekindle and that self-knowledge was not at all equal to biblical concept of knowing God as presented by the apostle John: "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked." (1 John 2:3-6) The apostle John also wrote: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." (1 John 5:20)

Irenaeus contended that "it was not possible that the man...who had been destroyed through disobedience, could reform himself," the Son brought salvation by "descending from the Father, becoming incarnate, stooping low, even to death, and consummating the arranged plan of our salvation."

Near the end of the first century, when the apostle John penned his collection of three letters known as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, the

heresy of Gnosticism was already troubling the church. In his letters, John argued: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world." (1 John 4:2-3) He also warned first century Christians against being deceived by these false teachings: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds." (2 John 7-11)

Polycarp (disciple of the apostle John) likewise argues: "Let us then continually persevere in our hope and the earnest of our righteousness, which Jesus Christ, "who bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24), "who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22), but endured all things for us, that we might live in Him."

The apostle John said: "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us." (1 John 3:16); and "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

The Matter of the Resurrection

Gnosticism categorically denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. The reason being, to the Gnostic, the world and the flesh are evil. The soul or spirit of man is good. Therefore, to attain ultimate good, the soul must be freed from the flesh. When faced with the belief among Christians that Jesus Christ was bodily and physically resurrected from the dead, the Gnostic sees the whole resurrection story as completely absurd. To their way of thinking a bodily resurrection would continue to confine the soul or spirit of man in a fleshly body.

And yet, on Pentecost the apostle Peter preached that Jesus of Nazareth was "a Man attested by God... whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it." To support his claim, the apostle Peter quotes a prophecy of David from the Psalms. Peter says, "For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the LORD always before my face, for He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'" (Acts 2:22-27) In conclusion, Peter tells the crowd on Pentecost that David, "foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption." (Acts 2:31) The apostle Peter then summarizes by claiming that he and his fellow apostles have all seen the resurrected Jesus. "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses." (Acts 2:32)

Furthermore, the apostle Paul claims that if the bodily resurrection of Jesus is not a historical fact, the faith of every Christian is useless. "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up — if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." (1 Corinthians 15:14-19)

While it's true that Paul speaks of a "natural body" that is raised a "spiritual body," he is not speaking about some nonphysical, ethereal, mystical body, but rather a body raised in "incorruption," "glory," and "power."

When Jesus was resurrected from the dead he had an identifiable body with nail holes in his hands and a spear wound in his side (John 20:19-29). His disciples were able to touch Him. In fact, the apostle John affirms that he and his fellow apostles did not just see and hear the resurrected Christ, but actually touched Him:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life... we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” (1 John 1:1-3)

Jesus, Judaism and Gnosticism

Modern supporters of Gnosticism claim that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and especially John are anti-Semitic and speak of the Jews and their role in the crucifixion of Jesus in a highly inflammatory and accusing nature. It is argued that the Gnostic Gospels, on the other hand, are far from being anti-Semitic, and actually see the relationship between Jesus and his Jewish brethren in a much more positive light. In a recent documentary on the *Gospel of Judas*, it was suggested that the tone of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have helped promote anti-Semitism in modern times.

However, the Gnostic Gospels actually ridicule some of the most basic and cherished beliefs of Judaism. For example, the god of the Old Testament is seen by Gnostics as an inferior deity who lacked the ability to create a world and a universe as good. Furthermore, this god demands complete obedience and claims that he is the one true God – something Gnosticism denies. Many Gnostic documents completely pervert the Old Testament stories in an effort to mock the Hebrew God. For example, in the *Apocryphon of John*, Jesus allegedly says he encouraged Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – the reason being that the attainment of God-like knowledge (gnosis) is the highest goal for humanity, and the very purpose for Jesus coming into the world.

This same anti-Semitic element is found in the *Gospel of Thomas*, where the disciples say to Jesus, “Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you.” To which Jesus replies, “You have omitted the one living in your presence and have spoken (only) of the dead.” By this, the Gnostic Jesus simply

brushes away the significance of the Old Testament prophets and their prophecies because they are “dead.” And yet, the Jesus of the Bible frequently quotes the prophets, claiming he has come to fulfill their prophecies. He further stresses the significance of the Old Testament prophecies as providing proof of his deity. To his critics he says, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.” (John 5:39)

When Jesus appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, after his death, burial and resurrection, he mildly rebuked them for being disheartened over the crucifixion. He told them they were “slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” Then we’re told, “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” (Luke 24:25-27)

Jesus of the New Testament honors the God of the Old Testament as his Father whose will he came to accomplish in offering himself for the sins of all mankind. He furthermore quotes from the Old Testament prophets, not only giving them credibility as prophets of the One true God, but emphasizing the fact that they repeatedly spoke of Him. The Gnostic Gospels mock the God of the Old Testament as an inept minor deity who made a complete mess of creation, and demands that he be accepted as the only true God who alone is worthy of worship and praise. And the Jesus of the Gnostic Gospels did not come to do the will of this minor deity in offering himself to redeem mankind from their sins, but came to simply enlighten mankind with a secret knowledge to discover the spark of a God-like essence within themselves.

The Gnostic Jesus – Anti-Feminist

The Gnostic attitude toward women was definitely not pro-feminist. Occasionally Gnostic groups allowed a women's participation in religious activities since several of the divine beings were seen as feminine. However, even though the feminist movement in the 1980's saw the Gnostic Gospels in a favorable light, women fare far worse in Gnosticism than many think. In the concluding statements from the *Gospel of Thomas*, Simon Peter

says: "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus allegedly says, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Jesus of the New Testament never spoke of making a woman into a male as a requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven. Jesus never thought of women as being inferior to the male. He had women disciples, and silenced the mob that had entrapped a woman in the act of adultery and were demanding her death by stoning. (John 8:2-11) Jesus also went against the custom of his day by speaking to an outcast Samaritan woman, telling her that he was the Messiah. Even his disciples were upset over what they considered inappropriate behavior. (John 4:1-39) The New Testament also records the testimony of the women who first witnessed the resurrected Jesus. (Matthew 28:1-10) All this was done in a society where women were denied a number of legal rights, and where they were never considered qualified to be legal witnesses.

Is God Knowable or Unknowable?

The Gnostic Gospels frequently speak of the ultimate reality or godhead as beyond the comprehension of mankind and that to contact this reality requires one to go through numerous intermediary beings of lesser stature than the godhead itself.

For example, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* says the ultimate reality is the, "unrevealable, unmarked, ageless, unproclaimable Father." He is described as "the great invisible Spirit" who is "the silence of silent silence." In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Matthew asks Jesus, "Lord... teach us the truth," to which Jesus replies, "He Who Is, is ineffable... He is unnameable... he is ever incomprehensible."

However, the Jesus of the New Testament says he came to reveal the true nature and character of his Father in heaven. When

Jesus told his disciples, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him," Philip replied by saying, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." This is the moment when Jesus made one of his most profound statements. He said, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves." (John 14:7-11) In essence, he is telling his disciples they are able to understand the true nature and character of God by looking at the nature and character of Jesus.

The writer of the Hebrew letter affirms the divine nature of Jesus in his opening remarks. He writes that the Son is the "brightness of His (God's) glory and the express image of His person." (Hebrews 1:3) Therefore, the very fact that Jesus came into the world shows that God is neither "unrevealable" or "silence of silent silence," but chose to reveal Himself and His true nature through his Son, Jesus Christ. While it's true that His judgments are "unsearchable" and "His ways past finding out," His divine nature and character are clearly seen in Jesus. And even though not everyone will accept the life and testimony of Jesus as evidence of God's attributes, the apostle Paul says the divine nature of God is revealed another way. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20)

The Gnostic God is unknown and unknowable. The God of the Bible has revealed his divine attributes and character through Jesus Christ and through creation itself.

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