

Gnosticism: “Science falsely so-called”

When the Apostle Paul writes to condemn “Science falsely so-called,” in 1 Timothy 6:20 he is referring to the confused spiritual beliefs of “Gnosticism.” The very name “Gnosticism” comes from the same Greek word here translated as “science” (knowledge – S.1108, “*gnosis*”) and “Gnosticism” is a deceptive *path of inner “knowing”* that has been bitterly fought against from the time of the apostles and onward. In the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, Gnosticism stands second only to witchcraft as a heresy and it has always been violently suppressed.[1] While we might relegate this conflict between the Church and Gnostic belief to the dark blood-stained pages of Church history, and while we might believe this conflict all is in the past, we live in an era where this *path of inner “knowing”* is enjoying new publicity and a revival of interest.

Recent publicity emerges from two widely different camps. In 2006 Hollywood put forward a movie based on the best-selling novel for a few years running called *The Da Vinci Code*. In this movie, a convincingly-acted “scholar” explains in grave tones that Gnostic writings in the early church were no more than alternate view of the life of Jesus and that these histories were suppressed by a Church hierarchy obsessed with bringing everyone into orthodox conformity and obsessed with hierarchical control. In this case, the “knowledge, falsely so-called” is that Jesus was married, and had children. This was a secret “knowledge” to be suppressed at any cost.

Was Jesus Married?

The Gospel accounts describe the reaction to Jesus’ ministry in his hometown of Nazareth and lays out the natural family of our Lord in detail (Matthew 13:55-56). Joseph, presumably was deceased at this point. Thus out of respect Joseph is not referred to directly except as “the carpenter.” Jesus’ mother, his four brothers, James, Joses, Simon, and Judas are named along with “sisters.” The family’s subsequent history within the earliest stages of the church is a subject in its own right. Happily, despite their early doubts (John 7:5) we find our Lord’s family supportive of his ministry and part of the fellowship of believers after his resurrection.(Acts 1:14) Passing over other family such as a wife and children in these passages would not have happened had there indeed been a wider family. Again in the Gospel of Matthew 19:12 we have our Lord’s own words on the subject of his voluntary abstinence from earthly marriage – his marriage would be one in heaven.

Eusebius, the Church historian writing in the 320’s A.D. in his *Ecclesiastical Histories* (Chapter 20) records that the Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.) tried to locate the family of Jesus; that is, the descendents of his four brothers and at least two sisters. Rome had just finished a long, brutal, expensive, and nearly unsuccessful war against the Jews (66-73 A.D.) As prophesied by our Lord, this war left Herod’s once proud temple in Jerusalem destroyed without a stone-upon-stone. Jerusalem had been salted out spite. For Rome the issue of interest was to learn whether these relatives of our Lord — as possible claimants to the throne of David and Messianic promises — could potentially become the focal point for yet one more costly war. Domitian’s investigators found two

direct male descendents who were “the grandchildren of Judas, called the brother of the Lord, according to the flesh.” These two were living in Israel employed as farmers. They showed the Romans their heavily calloused hands and the Romans surveyed their 39-acre farm of less than prime land. As these two descendents clearly posed no threat to Rome, they were left in peace. Eusebius takes this record from the now lost earlier account by a writer named Hegesippus.

The Da Vinci Code failed to study history. The suppression of marriage in the church, this deep secret “knowledge” that forms the core of the story is in reality the heresy of “forbidding to marry” that the Apostle Paul specifically warned against (1 Timothy 4:1-3). This heresy did not become the official position of the Roman Church until 385 A.D. under Siricius, Bishop of Rome. It then took nearly 800 years to bring the Roman Church into conformity, while the Eastern Orthodox Church never accepted the decrees from Rome. In Eastern Orthodoxy priests and deacons *may* marry. However, since Eastern Orthodoxy *does* ask for celibacy of the bishops, it also stands condemned of failing to heed the Apostle’s warning.

Gnostic Judas

Nearly simultaneously in 2006 with the Hollywood feature, the National Geographic Society decided to add New Testament textual criticism to its chartered portfolio of “research projects of earth, sea, and sky.” At considerable cost, and working through an antiquities dealer that the Geographic themselves characterized as unscrupulous, they purchased and funded the painstaking textual restoration and translation of the badly damaged *Gospel of Judas*. The fragile and broken papyrus of *Judas* was recovered from the unauthorized pilfering of an archeological site on the Nile about 100 miles upriver from Cairo. In *Judas* – for even though “Gospel” is part of its title it is painful to use that blessed word – the Gnostic-Christ there speaks in admiration of Judas as the only apostle who *truly understands* his need to be free from his human body. We immediately see that the first lie, “Thou shall not surely die,” and the setting aside of the ransom-sacrifice is at the core of Gnosticism. In *Judas* – Gnostic-Christ seeks to be free from his human body so he can rise to a higher spiritual plane. Thus Gnostic-Christ in speaking to Judas says, “You will exceed all of them [*that is, the other eleven apostles*]. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.”

National Geographic was not shy about the significance of their efforts in bringing to light from its well-deserved and complete obscurity this erring and confused offering of “knowledge falsely so-called.” Lead translator Rudolphe Kasser characterized the restoration effort saying, “this script comes back to light *by a miracle*.” (National Geographic, May 2006, p.93) A television documentary treating the discovery was released to coincide with the magazine publication.

The Apostle John on Gnosticism

The Apostle John already was confronting Gnostics in his day (1 John 4:3) [2]. The confrontation between the apostle and these erring ones is not always clear since the words involved; “truth”, “knowledge,” “acknowledge,” “light,” and “wisdom,” have meaning to us outside the context of Gnosticism. The Gnostic approach to spirituality, or Gnostic “consciousness” needs to be emphasized because it represents a perverse view of reality and feeling about life that is shocking to us. There is simply little or no common frame of reference in orthodox Jewish, Christian, or even pagan belief systems such as the philosophy of Plato. Clearly more is involved with Gnosticism than differences of doctrinal understanding. June Singer, one of Gnosticism's better published contemporary advocates, explains it is a “particular psychological approach to life” [3]. It is indeed “particular!”

Gnosticism's Roots

Gnosticism's beginnings preceded Christianity and by the first century B.C., Gnosticism had set roots in the fringe elements of the Jewish community. The Essene sect that left behind the famed Dead Sea scrolls is one of the best known of these Gnostic groups. These inroads of Gnosticism into Judaism are described by June Singer:

“Unwilling to accept the authority of the priesthood and the Torah without question, [Gnostic] lay teachers - rabbis - asserted the revelation had not only taken place in the past, but that the divine presence continued to reveal itself in history and that these revelations were not limited to the privileged few...*any person might have a direct experience of God.* Thus people need not be totally dependent upon a priesthood for religious authority. This was still the situation at the time of Jesus...”[4]

The emergence of “New Age” religion is part of this current revival of interest in Gnostic experience and as Singer points out, we are focusing on a psychological approach to life, not just a set of doctrines. Three areas of this “psychological approach” emerge. First, is an interest in a direct religious experience of God. Gnostics seek something akin to experiences of the prophets, without recourse to the Bible, a redeemer, or an advocate. Satan and his angels are eager to supply this desire for the experience the divine presence. Let us hear the words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, and the light, no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” (John 14:6). We do not directly experience the divine presence.

Second, is an emphasis on the error of trying to reconcile the duality of the good and evil in our nature. While we have the capacity for both good and evil, we live to do the good only. Gnostics embrace our fallen nature as well believing that we are most Godlike and mature when we merge *both* the good and evil aspects of our nature into a complete character.

Lastly, there is a heightened significance of the feminine in Gnosticism [5]. To quote from June Singer [with emphasis added] we see the arguments that *The Da Vinci Code* would later set forth:

“The [organized] Church was successful in establishing itself as preeminent...The Gnostics had the foresight to go underground with their aberrant ideas...Nevertheless, the Gnostic myths persisted and the particular psychological approach to life that emerged out of their world view found other forms of expression. The core ideas of gnosis have been ever-present in the culture (or perhaps one should say, “in the counterculture”) of the West as a counterpoint to those of the major religions. These ideas appear in the mystical writings of Judaism and her daughter religions Christianity and Islam, and they describe the ways in which ordinary people, as well as those specially gifted, *experience the divine presence* in the world here and now. They surface as an emphasis on the dualism between the world of light above and the world of darkness and ignorance below, and they seek out ways to support the tension of these opposites *with a view towards reconciling them.*”[6]

The Challenge of Orthodoxy

What are simple questions within main line Christianity become complex questions within the framework of Gnosticism:

Do we access God through Christ Jesus, confessing he has come in the flesh as our mediator, or do we “replace” – “anti” Christ Jesus with our own “direct” religious revelation? Is Christ the one mediator between God and man, or can we find atonement by an act of will? Do we seek to reconcile the dark with the light, or do we turn from darkness to the light? Is Christ a person who gave himself as our ransom, is he come in the flesh, or is he an idealized mental projection? Will the dead be raised, or is the resurrection a spiritual concept?

The strange Gnostic answers to these moves you from building upon a foundation of solid rock to trying to build upon a foundation of water.

A Gnostic Jesus Not Here in the Flesh

Some quotes from the Gnostic texts translated from the Nag Hammadi Coptic Egyptian manuscripts will better illustrate the Gnostic views that John was writing against in his first epistle:

“Jesus took them all by stealth.
He did not appear as he was,
but in a manner in which they would be able to see him.
He appeared to them all.
He appeared to the great as great,
and to the small as small.
He appeared to the angels as an angel,
and to men as a man.
Because of this, his word hid itself from everyone.
Some indeed saw him, thinking they were seeing themselves,
but when he appeared in glory on the mount he was not small.
He became great, but he made the disciples great,
that they might be able to see them in his greatness.”
-- *Gospel of Philip* (Gnostic) [7]

How different is Jesus the “lamb that taketh away the sin of the world” in the New Testament. How more than an appearance of the spiritual! As John writes, “Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.” The *Gospel of Philip* denies such a view of Jesus entirely.

The Gnostic “Resurrection”

Other Gnostic errors such as those regarding the resurrection are addressed in the New Testament. Gnosticism seems to be the basis for the errors of Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Timothy 2:17-18) “who concerning the truth have erred, saying the resurrection is already past, and overthrow the faith of some.” The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* is very direct on this point:

“You who say you will die first and then rise are in error.
If you do not receive the resurrection while you live,
when you die you will receive nothing.” -- *Gospel of Philip* (Gnostic) [8]

The same error on the resurrection reappears in other Gnostic writings. Bearing in mind that in Greek “soul” (S.5590, *psyche*) is a feminine noun, see what happens as the Gnostic imagination reflects on “soul” and this shy maiden moves out into the larger world:

“When the soul had again adorned herself in her beauty,
she enjoyed her beloved and he also loved her.
And when she had intercourse with him
she got seed from him that is the life-giving spirit,
... now it is fitting that the soul regenerate herself
and become again as she formerly was.
The soul then moves of her own accord.
She receives the divine nature from the Father
for her rejuvenation so that she might be restored.
*This is the resurrection from the dead,
the ransom from captivity.
This is the way of ascent to the Father.*”
-- *The Exegesis on the Soul* (Gnostic) [9]

It is not our present beauty as a church that seduces the beloved, for the church is an espoused virgin to Christ, elect by the grace of God. (2 Corinthians 11:2) Since our Lord likened the Kingdom class to virgins (Matthew 25:1-11), the contrast between our Lord’s actual teaching and this Gnostic invention can hardly be more striking. There is only one ransom through Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:6) and there is only one way of ascent to the Father (John 14:6).

The Trinity as Viewed by Gnostics

Like Gnosticism, Trinitarian belief had its roots in Egyptian religion long before it was brought into the Christian church. An amulet in the British Museum (100 A.D.) contains the following entreaty:

“One is Basit, one is Hator, one is Achori,
to these belong one power.
Be greeted, father of the world,
be greeted, god in three forms [*trimorphos theos*].” [10]

One last Gnostic manuscript bears on their view of Trinitarian doctrine. Please observe that nowhere in true scripture does the image presented undergo a metamorphosis before the viewer:

“I John heard these words ... in the light I beheld a youth who stood beside me. Even as I looked he became like an old man, and then like a servant... He said to me, ‘... *I am the father, I am the mother, I am the son.*’ ”

-- *The Apocryphon of John* (Gnostic) [11]

How ironic that John, the fighter against Gnosticism, is misused by this Gnostic author as the mouthpiece for this invention. The consternation of the Roman Catholic Church over this proposed Trinitarian formula speaking of father and mother can only be imagined, yet in the final analysis *any form* of Trinitarian belief embraces error.

Concluding Thoughts

Gnostic consciousness is so counter to the culture of main line Christian thinking and belief that it is difficult for us to comprehend. Without the balance of sound doctrine, it leads to spiritual shipwreck as the quotations from these Gnostic writings illustrate. However, we should not dismiss it as without power, particularly when it is presented in such an appealing “alternate view of Jesus” through the modern media. We have not yet heard the last of this error.

REFERENCES

1. The crusade against the Albigenses, or *Cathari* (pure ones) was a particularly bloody suppression of the Gnostic community that was gaining a foothold in France and Pastor Russell cites these as brutal acts of power by Roman Catholicism (Russell, C.T., The Time is at Hand, 1916, p.334-337.) This most brutal crusade inside of Europe left blood flowing in the streets throughout the districts of Southern France as the Albigensian Crusade (1209 A.D.) violently exterminated the “Cathari” teachings emanating from the diocese of Albi.
2. Antichrist does not solely mean “against” Christ, although it certainly means that. It also has the sense of what displaces, or replaces Christ, John uses the Greek word “*anti*” this way when in his Gospel he translates Jesus saying, “grace *for* (that is, “in place of”-*anti*) grace.” John 1:16
3. Singer, J., A Gnostic book of hours: keys to inner wisdom, Harper Collins (1992), p. 154.
4. Singer, J., op. cit., p.151.
5. The theological debate over feminine consciousness now going on seeks to bring into balance both feminine and masculine consciousness. To illustrate this debate, as well as to capture the scriptural thought, the following quotation from: Ruether, R.R., Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing, Harper, 1992, p. 149, may be of interest, italics added:
“Christianity and other religions of patriarchal transcendence have taught us to look away from the mutable world of nature [*i.e. feminine consciousness*] with its cycles of birth, death and decay, and regeneration, and its tragic costs of eating and being eaten. These religious cultures have taught us to identify our true selves with our capacity for abstract consciousness and to allay this abstracted self with an intellectual God outside of this process of mutability.”
6. Singer, J., op. cit., p.154.
7. Singer, J., op. cit., p.138.
8. Singer, J., op. cit., p.144.
9. Singer, J., op. cit., p.110.
10. Morenz, Siegfried, Egyptian Religion, (trans. Ann E. Keep), Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1973, p.255.
11. Singer, J., op. cit., p.4.

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APPENDIX

Gnosticism Defined

Because of this modern confusion, it is necessary to dig into the historical setting of the epistles of both the Apostles Paul and John against Gnosticism, for Gnosticism is strange even within pagan belief. Two scholarly definitions will show this. The first comes from the *McClintock & Strong's Cyclopedia* (1887):

“GNOSTICISM 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. 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, 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, so utterly beyond human representation that no one should venture to name him, or even to conceive of him. He was the absolute one...”

McClintock and Strong scholarship relied heavily on the writings of early Christian fathers who were opposed to Gnosticism and on the early 19th century recensions of the still extant Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. Archeological discovery of new Gnostic texts in Coptic and Greek after World War II has added considerably to the scholarship on this confused and strange set of beliefs. Below is a current definition from the influential contemporary historian of religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade who acted as editor-in-chief of *Macmillan's Encyclopedia of Religion* and spent thirty years as director of History of Religions department at the University of Chicago.

Mircea Eliade, *World Religions*, HarperCollins (1991): “GNOSTICISM was an outlook contemporary with early Christianity [in general there]... are variants of two basic myths...the myth of a female Trickster, the heavenly goddess Sophia (Wisdom) who produces the catastrophe or at least the unpleasant situation that leads to the creation of the visible world; and the myth of a male Trickster, the miscarried son of Sophia, who makes the world ...This demiurge or fashioner of this world is usually identified with the Old Testament God. He is not unequivocally evil, except in a few testimonies; he is said to be ignorant, proud, and “mad” in a number of Coptic texts that are part of the collections of Gnostic codices, the largest of which was dug up in Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. In testimonies pertaining to the gnosis of Valentinus (fl. 140—150), the ignorant demiurge repents and is pardoned for having created the world...Within the spectrum of ideas of the epoch, Gnosticism is revolutionary insofar as it contradicts the two principles asserted both by the Bible and by Plato: the principle of an ecosystemic intelligence, according to which the world has been created by a benevolent and intelligent cause, and the anthropic principle, according to which this world has been purposefully created for this human species and this human species has been created for this world. On the contrary, Gnosticism asserts that the demiurge of the world is bumbling and ignorant, so that consequently the world is bad and human beings are superior to both the world and its creator for being endowed with a spark of Spirit stemming from the distant and good Father of the divine emanations. The goal of the Gnostic is thus to escape from the prison of the world.”