

# PROFILE OF GNOSTICISM

- I. Introductory terms and their definitions within Gnosticism.
  - A. **Aeons:** Emanations of Being from the unknowable, the ultimate metaphysical principle or pleroma.
  - B. This means that the universe was not created by a self-aware being (God), but by some absolute, impersonal force that generated lower and lower forms of spiritual being that eventually resulted in the formation of matter.
  - C. **Pleroma:** The Greek word for fulness used by the Gnostics to mean the highest principle of Being where dwells the unknown and unknowable God; this term is used in the New Testament to refer to **fulness in Christ**, who is the known revelation of God in the flesh. Col. 2:10
  - D. **Gnosis:** The Greek word for **knowledge** used by the Gnostics to mean knowledge gained not through intellectual discovery but through a vague, subjective personal experience, which initiates one into esoteric mysteries.
  - E. The experience of gnosis reveals to the initiated the divine spark within; however, this term has a very different meaning in the New Testament which excludes esotericism and self-deification
  - F. **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.
  - G. **Esotericism:** The teaching that spiritual liberation is found in a secret or hidden knowledge (sometimes called gnosis) not available in traditional, biblical orthodoxy.
  - H. **Dualism:** While there are a number of differing types of dualistic philosophies, Gnostic Dualism specifically focused on the spiritual (which was good) and matter (which was evil).
  - I. It should be noted that the Christian Gnostics would use biblical language and terms, which often had a very different meaning than they way they were defined or used in the Bible.
- II. Definition and description.
  - A. The term **gnostic** is derived from the Greek noun γνῶσις (gnosis), which means knowledge; the related term γνῶστικος (gnostikos) denotes one that has acquired the knowledge in view.
  - B. Gnosis is not primarily considered to be rational knowledge, which would indicate that it is to be distinguished from scientific or reflective knowledge; neither is it considered to be the type of knowledge that comes through observation or experience.
  - C. Gnosis involves a subjective, intuitive process, which transcends the type of knowledge that one acquires by means of empirical reasoning or rational thought.
  - D. Gnosticism places the emphasis of life and salvation upon the obtaining of this type of mysterious knowledge, which is deemed to be the truth, and which serves to remove ignorance or error.
  - E. Essentially, gnosticism is the concept of salvation through knowledge; the salvation of the soul is accomplished by the possession of a quasi-intuitive knowledge of the mysteries of the universe and of magic formulae indicative of that knowledge.
  - F. Gnostics were **people who knew**, and their knowledge constituted them a superior class of beings, whose present and future status was essentially different from that of those who, for whatever reason, did not know.
  - G. In that regard, Gnosticism represents a distortion of the mysteries of the faith; it seeks to replace the mysteries of sound doctrine with non-biblical, Gnostic mysteries.
  - H. While Gnosticism was active during the time of Jesus and Paul, we will focus specifically on the Gnostic orders that arose during the latter portion of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and flourished into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

- I. These groups constituted the fulfillment of the prophecy found in I Timothy 4:1-3, and were rightly regarded as heretical distortions of Christianity.

### III. Origins of Gnosticism.

- A. While the origins of Gnosticism are still a matter of some debate, there is a consensus with respect to the fact that its origins are likely traced to the pagan philosophies that existed before the time of Christ.
- B. It has been rightly observed that the Gnostic religion was recognized in the Roman world several centuries before the time of Christ (c. 300 BC).
- C. Many scholars have acknowledged that the dualism (mind and matter) of Plato (429-347 BC) is clearly seen in the Gnostic traditions (spirit and matter).
- D. Others have suggested that Gnosticism is a pre-Christian phenomenon which originated in anti-nomian circles in the Jewish community of Alexandria.
- E. This came at a time when the new wine of Hellenistic culture and philosophy was being put into the old wineskins of Jewish religion.
  1. The allegorical method of scripture interpretation was one of the manifestations of this trend.
  2. The Mosaic law was being interpreted allegorically by Jews who had begun to subscribe to Greek philosophy, and the Law was taken to be a revelation of divine philosophy.
- F. Scholars trace these traditions back to such diverse sources as Jewish mysticism, Hellenistic mystery cults, Iranian religious dualism (Zoroastrianism), along with Babylonian and Egyptian mythology.
- G. Therefore, given the fact that the Gnostic tradition likely had roots in many cultures, it is best understood as the product of syncretism (the fusing of multiple systems into one); its origins are likely derived from both pagan and Jewish sources.
- H. With all the division in Gnosticism, it is exceedingly difficult to make general statements that will be universally accurate; however, it can be said that Gnostics of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century attempted to incorporate many facets of Christian belief into the philosophical beliefs of the various strains of Gnosticism.

### IV. Tenets of Gnosticism.

- A. When dealing with the tenets of Gnosticism, the word tradition should be stressed because one of the tenets of Gnosticism is that of a general disdain for authority or orthodoxy.
- B. Gnostics also stressed direct revelation through dreams, visions, and an individual interpretation of the revelations of fellow Gnostics and the scriptures.
- C. Essentially, they developed their own subjective systems of thinking that were synthesized from a number of sources, resulting in becoming laws to themselves.
- D. Beliefs about the nature of the world.
  1. The core beliefs of the Gnostic gospel begin with the assertion that the world in its current state is not good, nor is it the creation of a good god.
  2. In fact, the cosmos is seen as a mistake, the action of a minor deity who was unable to achieve a creation worthy of permanence.
    - a. Orthodox Christianity and Judaism both point to angelic and human rebellion as the source of this flawed existence; however Gnosticism blames the creator.
    - b. One Gnostic version of creation begins with a primal being called Bythos who, after a long period of silence, emanates 30 beings called **aeons** (the complete series of aeons constituted the **pleroma**, the fulness of Divinity). Col. 1:19, 2:9
    - c. Eventually, one of the lowest aeons, Wisdom or Sophia, becomes pregnant and gives birth to a demiurge, Jehovah (the Old Testament god), who in turn creates the physical world.

- d. The world is not good as indicated by the Genesis account; it is flawed and serves as a barrier to humanity's redemption.
  3. The result is a world of pain, sorrow and death filled with human beings that long to be freed from a material existence.
  4. Deep within each person is a divine spark that connects humanity with the ultimate spiritual being, who remains completely hidden from creation.
  5. The only hope for humanity is to acquire the information it needs to perfect itself (self-deification) and evolve out of its current physical state.
  6. In that regard, many strains of gnosticism promote reincarnation as the necessary means to acquire the knowledge one needs to finally shed the material world.
  7. The Gnostic Jesus descended from the spiritual realm to show the way for the rest of humanity, not to die as an atonement for sin, but to make available information necessary for self-perfection.
  8. Gnosticism is merely thinly disguised pantheism that suggests the eternal, undefined, infinite something (not the personal God) was spiritual and from this source evolved the material.
- E. Beliefs about the spiritual realm.
1. The word **aeon**, which means age, the ever-existing, eternity, came to be applied to the divine eternal power, and to the personified attributes of that power.
  2. It was extended to designate the successive emanations from the divinity, which the Gnostics conceived as necessary intermediaries between the spiritual and the material worlds.
  3. The Gnostic concept of the aeon may be traced to the influence of a philosophy which postulated a divinity incapable of any contact with the material world or with evil.
  4. The Gnostics sought to reconcile this philosophy with the Christian concept of direct interaction of God in the affairs of the material world, and particularly in the creation and redemption of man.
  5. Jewish angels, which represented Jehovah ministered to by a court of celestial beings, and Hellenic religious systems, which imagined a number of intermediaries between the finite and the infinite, suggested the emanation from the divinity consisted of a series of subordinate heavenly powers.
  6. Each of these powers was less perfect as it became further removed from the supreme deity, until increasing imperfection would serve as the connecting link between the spiritual world and the material world of evil.
  7. In the Gnostic systems (there were varying types) there is always the primitive, all-perfect aeon, the fountain-head of divinity, and a co-eternal companion aeon (dualism again).
  8. From these emanate a second pair, who in turn engender others, generally in pairs or in groups of pairs; thus, keeping with the Egyptian idea of divine couples.
  9. Then follows the creation of the material universe.
  10. Finally, there is evolved the aeon Christ, who is to restore harmony in the aeon-world, and heal the disorder in the material world, which resulted in catastrophe in the ideal order, by giving to man the knowledge which would rescue him from the dominion of matter and evil.
- F. Beliefs about humanity.
1. Gnostics believed that the soul pre-existed the physical body and fell from the divine sphere and was trapped in flesh.
  2. Flesh, as a part of the material world, was evil and the soul essentially lost consciousness of its divine origin or spark.
  3. Once souls fell into the lower levels of consciousness, they became enamored with it and burned with the desire to experience the pleasures of matter.
  4. The soul then no longer wanted to disengage itself from these lower levels and from that moment the soul forgot itself; it forgot its original habitation, its true center, and eternal being.

5. Like the Hindu, Sikh, Iranian, and Greek philosophies before them, Gnostics believe that the process of returning to the divine is accomplished by a series of births and rebirths—reincarnation is an important tenet of these philosophies.
  6. This process is accomplished by gaining the correct knowledge about reality, which involves enlightenment about what the Gnostics call this world of illusion.
  7. The illusion presented to us by the world can only be corrected by the right knowledge; any guilt we feel for our rebellion against an all-powerful holy God is false guilt; for such a God doesn't really exist.
  8. Women did not fare well in the Gnostic traditions since they tended to accept tenets of Platonic philosophy, especially his attitude concerning women.
    - a. Plato found little use for women since they desired a family life, forcing the male to make a living and distracting him from the cultivation of his mind.
    - b. The Gnostic attitude towards women, therefore, was exceedingly negative, portraying all forms of evil as **becoming female**.
    - c. The following quote from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas illustrates the attitude that prevailed in these traditions.
    - d. *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". Thomas 114*
- G. Beliefs about God and Jesus Christ.
1. As will become evident, there are many inconsistencies and contradictions among Gnostic traditions since they are at best human viewpoint and at worst the doctrines of demons.
  2. The Gnostics believed that the Old Testament God (Jehovah) was the result of a cosmic accident in which one of the aeons (Sophia) gave premature birth to a god, who is known as the **Demiurge**.
    - a. In philosophy, a Demiurge is a subordinate god who fashions and arranges the existing physical world to make it conform to a rational and eternal ideal.
    - b. Plato used the term in an exposition of cosmology in which the Demiurge is the agent who takes the pre-existing materials of chaos, arranges them according to the models of eternal forms, and produces all the physical things of the world, including human bodies.
    - c. The term was later adopted by some of the Gnostics, who, in their dualistic worldview, saw the Demiurge as one of the forces of evil, who was responsible for the creation of the despised material world and was wholly alien to the supreme God of goodness.
    - d. Gnostics identified the demiurge with the male creator god of the Old Testament, Yahweh/Jehovah, and consequently denied that entity any role in the good direction of humanity.
    - e. On the contrary, Yahweh is a demented deity, a god who works against humanity; in the Old Testament, it is clear that the monotheistic status demanded by Jehovah is due to the madness of the pseudo-god.
    - f. This Old Testament God of the Jews was perceived to be in opposition to the Christ of the New Testament, the Only-Begotten Son of the Supreme and Good God, who came to free us from the deranged Demiurge.
    - g. The last development in the character of the Demiurge involved the giving of the Law on Sinai, and hence becoming the originator of all restraint on the human will.
    - h. As the Demiurge was essentially evil, all his work was such; in consequence all law was intrinsically evil and the duty of the children of the Good God was to transgress this law and to trample upon its precepts.

3. The Gnostic beliefs about Jesus Christ rejected any idea that He was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person of the Godhead.
  - a. Christ was not truly God, the second Person of the Trinity; He was merely a created being who was the lowest of the aeons, a group of semi-divine beings between God and man.
  - b. The purpose of Christ's coming as Saviour and Redeemer was to rescue us from the power of the Demiurge, the lord of the world of this darkness, and bring us to the light of the Good God, His Father in heaven.
  - c. However, Jesus Christ did not come to redeem us from sin; He came as a spiritual leader to make us whole, imparting to us gnosis and redeeming us only from our ignorance.
  - d. Therefore, the Gnostic Jesus did not come to offer Himself as a sinless, vicarious sacrifice to save humanity from sin and its consequences. Jn. 1:29; I Tim. 2:6; Gal. 1:4
  - e. Although Christ appeared to be human, many Gnostics considered His humanity to be merely an illusion; today He would be considered some sort of hologram. I Jn. 4:2; II Jn. 7
    - 1.) If Jesus is the Christ who comes to restore God's creation, He must come as one of its own, a real man.
    - 2.) If He had a material, physical nature (which was evil) then He Himself would have had to be evil.
    - 3.) 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 material form.
    - 4.) It was even claimed by some groups that Jesus left no footprints behind him when he walked on the sand.
    - 5.) Some forms of Gnosticism directly state that the savior was not a man with a human nature, he was an aeon.
  - g. Christ appeared to die, but did not really die; as someone has put it, “*the crucifixion was really a cruci-fiction*”.
  - h. Although some of the Gnostic texts do seem to indicate a belief in the resurrection (which would not be consistent with their lack of belief in the crucifixion), Jesus Christ is disclosed only in spiritual visions and not by physical means. Acts 1:3
    - 1.) Since the Gnostic abhors matter and seeks release from its grip, the physical resurrection of Jesus would not only be anticlimactic, it would be actually absurd.
    - 2.) A material resurrection would be counterproductive and only serve to recapitulate the original problem of matter.
    - 3.) There were some forms of Gnosticism that believed that the resurrection occurred at the moment that one recognized his mortality and thus transcended it.
    - 4.) It could very well be that Hymenaeus and Philetus accepted this belief, and left the faith for a form of Gnosticism. II Tim. 2:17-18

V. The two primary types of Gnostic practice.

- A. Since the Gnostic traditions believe that this world is simply an illusion and that matter is evil, salvation simply involves gaining enough knowledge to free oneself from this horrific plight.
- B. The principle that matter is evil led to two distinct practices as the Gnostics sought to put their theology into practice.
- C. The first was extreme antinomianism and lasciviousness, which came about since the Gnostic believed the material body was evil and the only good was the soul's search for knowledge.
  1. These types of Gnostics tended to believe that since the flesh was inferior to the spirit, the deeds of the flesh were irrelevant as long as the spirit aimed for higher knowledge.

2. Some of these libertines argued that since the body was evil the best thing they could do was defile it.
3. As one might surmise, they were very well-known for their widespread immorality.
- D. However, while the majority of Gnostics accepted the fact that the flesh was evil and the spirit was good, most of them pursued the opposite approach.
  1. Many Gnostics took great pains to supplant all fleshly desires and opted for an ascetic life-style.
  2. Hippolytus (??-235 AD) wrote that these people “*pass their days inflated with pride. They suppose, that by meats they magnify themselves, while abstaining from animal food, (and) being water-drinkers, and forbidding to marry, and devoting themselves during the remainder of life to habits of asceticism.*” *Refutation of all Heresies viii. 13*
  3. It is quite well known that most Gnostics practiced celibacy and considered it necessary to attain spiritual perfection.
  4. Beyond that, they advocated that the spiritualist idea that one must bring the body under control in order to achieve maximum spiritual power.
  5. The indispensable rules of this discipline are abstinence from flesh, alcohol, and absolute chastity.

VI. Concluding information and observations.

- A. The rise of Gnosticism that was predicted by the Holy Spirit through Paul was already beginning to manifest itself in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and continued to be a factor until sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. ITim. 4:1-3
- B. There is some evidence that Paul was already beginning to combat this deviation from orthodoxy in his letters to Timothy, Ephesians and the Colossians.
  1. The last portion of I Timothy is understood to refer to the Gnostics that were already present.
  2. The use of Gnostic terms in the context of these letters suggests that Paul is correcting their misuse of them. *Pleroma Col. 1:19, 2:9; Archon Eph. 2:2 Aion Eph. 2:2*
- C. There is pretty clear evidence that the first epistle of John is designed to counter the gnostic and docetic tendencies of these sects, which John labels as **antichrist**. IJn. 4:1-3
- D. These sects are heretical and could be found under various names that included the Ophites, Ebonites, Encratites, Cainites, and the Naassenes.
- E. Some of their leading exponents were men such as Simon Magus, Menander, Cerinthus, Basilides, Marcion, and Valentinus.
- F. Tertullian speaks of the Gnostic sect of the Nicolaites (Rev. 2:6,15), led by a man named Carpocrates, whom he calls a “*magician and a fornicator*”.
- G. Their writings included The Gospel of the Twelve, The Gospel according to the Egyptians, The Gospel of Peter, A Gospel of Thomas, The Acts of Peter, and most importantly, The Acts of Thomas.
- H. The various sects were unorganized and possessed no central authority for either doctrine or discipline.
- I. These heretical groups were opposed by men such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Theophilus of Antioch and Clement of Alexandria, who rejected their doctrine and practices as being heterodox.
- J. Irenaeus and Eusebius make their positions quite clear when they state that “*the reputation of these men brought infamy upon the whole race of Christians*”.
- K. Their doctrines are still seen in the spiritualist systems that thrive today.