



WEEK 4 10.02.2019

GNOSTICISM A variety of second-century AD religions whose participants believed that people could only be saved through revealed knowledge, or *γνῶσις* (*gnōsis*). Gnostics also held a negative view of the physical or material world. Early church fathers, such as Irenaeus, deemed Gnosticism heretical.

Introduction

Gnosticism shared some characteristics with Judaism and Christianity, but remained markedly distinct from either. Traditionally, Gnosticism was thought to have emerged from within Christianity (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 18–25). Recent scholarship, however, has acknowledged that Gnosticism may have been an existing belief that only later came into contact with Christianity (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 11; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 44).

Origins and Definitions

Origins of the Term

The earliest example of a group being described as “gnostic” comes from the work of Irenaeus, a second-century Greek church father (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 9), who described certain groups of heretics as the gnostic heresy. Henry More coined the modern term “Gnosticism” in the 17th century to describe the heresy of the church in Thyatira (Rev 2:18–29; Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 9).

Definition of the Term

The term “Gnosticism” may be an inadequate description of “the great variety of phenomena attributed to it” (Logan, *The Gnostics*, 1) because it elicits “misleading generalizations and unwarranted stereotypes” (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 8). Williams has argued that the term reflects a “dubious category” which should be dismantled and abandoned (Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*). Pearson has likewise acknowledged that there is a “bewildering degree of variety” in the historical expressions of Gnosticism (Pearson, “Gnosticism as a Religion,” 89).

Pearson argues that Gnosticism is purely a historical term used to classify religious features that are “clearly distinguishable from anything that is found in Christianity, Judaism, or other religions of antiquity” (Pearson, “Gnosticism as a Religion,” 95–96). Therefore, Gnosticism should be defined as a descriptive category arising from historical observations rather than a prescriptive system of unilateral belief.

The Church Fathers and Gnosticism

The church fathers of the second century and later condemned gnostic teachers and beliefs as heretical. Church fathers who spoke against gnosticism include the following people:

- Justin Martyr’s (ca. 100–165) lost work *Compendium against the Heretics* (mentioned in Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 26) included arguments against Simon Magus and his disciple Meander, who came to be seen as proto-gnostics. In the brief discussion in his *First Apology*, he says that the followers of Simon Magus worshipped him as a god and that Meander persuaded his followers that they would not die (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 26).
- Hegesippus (late 2nd c.) mentions as heretical a variety of gnostic groups and traces their origin back to Simon Magus; an excerpt of his work is preserved in Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.22). In this passage, Hegesippus does not describe the teachings of the gnostic groups in detail but says that the founder of each group introduced his own opinion and that their teachers divided the church with doctrines against God and his Christ.
- Irenaeus of Lyons’ (ca. 140–198) main work, *Adversus haereses* (“Against Heresies”), is dedicated to refuting Gnosticism.
- Hippolytus of Rome’s (ca. 170–235) work *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (“Refutation of All Heresies”) argues against 33 gnostic groups, as well as against some non-gnostic groups.
- Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–340) devotes a chapter of his *Ecclesiastical History* to gnostic groups, whom he rejects as false teachers (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.7). For the most part, he does not describe or specifically refute their teachings in this section; however, he states that the gnostic teacher Basilides invented prophets who had never existed, and that the

Living Scripture
Gnosticism - 1 Corinthians 3
<http://www.realchurch.org/wednesdaynight/>

gnostic followers of Carpocrates required those who wanted to become full participants of their mysteries to practice various forms of wickedness in order escape what they called the cosmic powers.

- Epiphanius of Salamis' (ca. 310–403) work *Panarion* ("Medicine Chest") contained arguments against various heresies, including gnostics.

In addition, Origen and Tertullian wrote against gnosticism; however, they themselves held some beliefs rejected by other church fathers.

Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, early Christian writings against Gnosticism were our main source of information about gnostic belief. The overall picture of Gnosticism provided by these polemical texts has been largely confirmed by the gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi.

Common Gnostic Beliefs

The second-century church fathers identified a set of common characteristics of gnostics. These characteristics differ by region or school of thought but provide a general picture of gnostic belief (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 8–10). Our understanding of Gnosticism has grown exponentially through a close study of the Nag Hammadi Library of gnostic texts, discovered in 1945 (see Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*). Acknowledging the multiplicity of gnostic beliefs represented in the Nag Hammadi Library, the following examples are merely representative of a prominent strand of gnostic belief.

God

Gnostic texts often describe God as incomprehensible, unknowable, and transcendent. For example, one text describes God as: "God and father of the all, the holy, the invisible ... existing as pure light into which it is not possible for any light of the eye to gaze" (*Apocryphon of John*, 22:17–19 [King, 4:2]). The *Apocryphon of John* demonstrates the gnostic view of the nature of God when it states that it is not "fitting to think of [God] as divine or as something of the sort, for [God] is superior to deity" (*Apocryphon*, 33–36 [Layton, 1:29]). Thus, Gnosticism holds that God cannot be observed with our senses nor easily grasped with our understanding. Gnostic texts commonly speak of God only in negative terms, such as "the unknown God," "the unknown Father," "ineffable," "unspeakable"; God is even described as "nonexistent" because he is viewed by gnostics as not existing in the usual manner of being (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 4). Additionally, gnostic texts commonly address God as the "Ultimate Ground of Being" (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 4).

Dualism and Dichotomy

For gnostics, the world was divided into the physical and spiritual realms. Gnostics held that the world was not created by the "Ultimate Ground of Being" (God), but by a lesser deity resulting from the fall of the divine personification of Wisdom (Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 15). This lesser deity or demiurge created the material world, which is entirely isolated from the divine realm in which the "Ultimate Ground of Being" exists (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 16).

Likewise, gnostics believed that humans are split between the physical and spiritual world: "the true human self is as alien to the world as is the transcendent God" (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 13). They asserted that the true human self or soul is naturally divine, belonging to the same realm as the Ultimate Ground of Being, but is trapped and imprisoned by the material world. They viewed the physical body as a prison which malevolently trapped the "divine spark" within humanity (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 12–14). Because of this imprisonment, Gnosticism incorporates an active hatred of the physical body, similar to Docetism. This dualistic split between the body and the soul means that the divine spark of the human soul must be freed from the material constraints of the world in order to attain salvation and unity with the Ultimate Ground of Being.

Gnosis and Salvation

Gnostics advocated *gnosis*, or "revealed knowledge," as the basis for salvation (Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism*, 7). Rather than being a philosophy, *gnosis* is a single revelation of the true nature of human and divine selves (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 1). The gnostics' goal is to attain salvation from the fallen physical world in which they are trapped through obtaining the secret knowledge, or *gnosis* (Logan, *The Gnostics*, 63). Gnostics believed that *gnosis* frees the divine spark within humans, allowing it to return to the divine realm of light (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 13). Gnostics likewise believed that when all elect gnostics have been restored through *gnosis*, the physical world will be destroyed, and the chosen humans will return to their divine state (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 13–14). Salvation is thus initially brought about by *gnosis*, but ultimately constitutes a return of the human soul to the divine realm in which it belongs.

The *gnosis* which brings about salvation varies greatly within the different gnostic schools, as each group of gnostics claimed to exclusively possess the necessary knowledge (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 8). However, the *gnosis* generally took the form of a special revelation of the divine, transcendent realm to a mediatory figure who was required to spread the true knowledge of God among humanity (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 12). Thus, *gnosis* was both a revealed knowledge of the transcendent God as the Ultimate Ground of Being and a revealed knowledge that the human soul ultimately belongs to the divine transcendent realm.

Living Scripture
Gnosticism - 1 Corinthians 3
<http://www.realchurch.org/wednesdaynight/>

This revealed knowledge frequently took the highly complex and spiritualized form of mythopoeic revelation in which *gnosis* involves understanding the true nature of God and the human soul as immanently divine.

Myth

The elaborate gnostic myths function, for Gnosticism, to reveal *gnosis* through a complex series of cosmological, anthropological, and soteriological developments. While features of gnostic mythology vary among sects, the gnostic *Apocryphon of John* is typical of the elaborate mythopoeic formulation. It indicates that the divine mother, Pronoia-Barbelo (“Thought” or “Foreknowledge”), was the first of the transcendent God’s created beings (*Apocryphon of John* 4:26–5:6 [Layton]). From the divine mother, the self-generated Christ appeared and produced four great Lights with three pairs of Aeons who embody abstract esoteric principles—Life, Grace, and Wisdom (Sophia) (King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 3; *Apocryphon of John*, 5:10–10:4 [Layton]). Sophia wished to create a being with her own likeness, but instead produced an evil being known as the “Chief Ruler.” According to gnostic belief, the evil “Chief Ruler” was the creator God of Genesis, whose true name was Yaldabaoth (King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 3–4). Yaldabaoth then stole some of the Spirit from Sophia, which he used to create Adam. The mythological system in the *Apocryphon* develops further in what Pearson describes as “extended commentary” on several texts from the book of Genesis to account for sin, sexual lust, and human ignorance of their divine spirit (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 66). Finally, the “Spirit of Life” descends to earth to teach humans of the power of *gnosis* to save humanity through recognition of the divine spirit humans unknowingly possess (King, *Secret Revelation of John*, 4–6; *Apocryphon of John*, 27:31–28:29 [Layton]).

The New Testament and Gnosticism

Simon Magus

According to Irenaeus, Simon Magus was the one “from whom all the heresies take their origin” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.2 [Foerster]). Simon Magus, a sorcerer found in Samaria by Phillip, worked wonders among the people before Phillip converted him to Christianity (Acts 8:13). Following his conversion, Simon attempted to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter before being rebuked (Acts 8:9–24). Perhaps because the New Testament claims that Simon assumed the divine title of “the Great Power of God” (Acts 8:10, NAS), Irenaeus records that Simon actually believed himself to be God (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.2 [Foerster]). In Irenaeus’ account, Simon preached himself as the god who first created “Thought, the mother of all”—his female companion (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.2 [Foerster]). Irenaeus further records that Simon claimed that from thought, the angels and human beings were created, but because “the angels were governing the world badly,” Simon descended into human form “to bring things to order” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.3 [Foerster]). Irenaeus goes on: Simon promised that when “order” came, his followers would be saved, and “the world will be dissolved” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.3 [Foerster]). Although the account of Simon’s religious beliefs includes no reference to a saving *gnosis*, Irenaeus concludes that Simon gave the “falsely so-called *gnosis*” its beginnings (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.4 [Foerster]).

Hymenaeus and Philetus (1 Tim 1:20; 6:20)

Discussion of false teachers like Hymenaeus and Philetus provide the framework for the beginning and conclusion of 1 Timothy; both Hymenaeus and Philetus have traditionally been identified as gnostic teachers. First Timothy begins with an admonition to keep “certain men” from teaching “strange doctrines” centering on “fruitless discussion” (1 Tim 4). First Timothy then warns that teachers of the strange doctrines, including “Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim 1:20). First Timothy concludes with an exhortation to avoid “worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’ ” (τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσις, *tēs pseudōnymou gnōsis*; 1 Tim 6:20). Irenaeus picked up the concept of “falsely called knowledge” when he undertook his heresiology (or catalog of heresies). This work by Irenaeus, although generally known as *Against Heresies*, is formally titled, *On the Detection and Overthrow of the Falsely Called Knowledge*.

Johnson argues that the use of *gnosis* in 1 Timothy should be interpreted broadly, asserting, “there is no need to take [*gnosis*] as referring to a second century Christian elitist movement” (Johnson, *First and Second Letters*, 312). By contrast, Wisse argues that the author of 1 Timothy deliberately placed Hymenaeus and Philetus “in the context of the despised gnostics” (Wisse, “Prolegomena”, 143).

The Nicolaitans (Acts 6:5; Revelation 2:6, 15, 18–29)

The Nicolaitans of Rev 2 were identified as an early gnostic-like heresy. According to Irenaeus, the Nicolaitans originated from Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch who was given church leadership in Act 6:5 (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.26.3). Although Irenaeus did not initially identify Nicolaus as gnostic, he later referred to the Nicolaitans as an offset of the “falsely called knowledge” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.11.1). However, Pearson argues that there is no explicit reason other than the

Living Scripture
Gnosticism - 1 Corinthians 3
<http://www.realchurch.org/wednesdaynight/>

testimony of Irenaeus to relate either Nicolaus or the Nicolaitans to Gnosticism (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 36–37). Likewise, Fitzmyer points out that no substantial evidence has been found associating the Nicolaitans with Gnosticism since the second century AD (Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 350).

1–3 John

Individuals such as Smalley have examined potential gnostic-like thoughts in the Gospel and letters of John (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 44). Although the noun *gnosis* is entirely absent from the Johannine literature, the verb “to know” (γινώσκειν, *ginōskein*) appears over 80 times. Additionally, the idea of the knowledge of God is an important motif throughout John’s works (e.g., John 17:3; 1 John 2:13; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 44). Smalley contends, however, that this knowledge of God is markedly different than the *gnosis* of the gnostic sects, for it is, “not intellectual and speculative, but experimental and dynamic” (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 45).

Both Bultmann and Marshall have argued that the secessionist opponents of 1 John were themselves gnostics (Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, 11; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 14–18). In this reading, 1 John may be seen as a deliberate polemic against Gnosticism (or an early belief very similar to Gnosticism); 1 John would then especially be opposed to Gnosticism that appropriates its beliefs into the Christian faith. Bultmann contended that the author of 1 John used specific verbs of knowing and sense perception in order to counter the “Gnosticizing Christians against whom the letter is directed” (Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, 11). Marshall believed that the Johannine opponents were “forerunners” of the later gnostic sects (Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 15).

In recent years, however, the idea that the Johannine letters were written against any strand of Gnosticism has been largely abandoned. Thompson notes that, “While the secessionists may have held beliefs that lent themselves to Gnostic interpretation, it is doubtful that they ought to be called Gnostic” (Thompson, *1–3 John*, 17; see also Perkins, “Gnostic Revelation”). This viewpoint has only emerged during scholarship of the latter half of the 20th century, as Gnosticism has begun to be understood as a belief system that exists in its own right.

This viewpoint has led scholars such as Brown to also suggest parallels between the beliefs seen in 1–3 John and early gnostic belief (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 59–65), including the nature of knowledge of God and the dualism between light and darkness (e.g., 1 John 1:6–7; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 60–62). However, Brown cautioned that “at most, similarity is suggested,” (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 60). Likewise, commentator Yarbrough relegated discussion of any gnostic parallels in 1–3 John primarily to footnotes (Yarbrough, *1–3 John*). Thus, in commentaries such as Yarbrough’s, the parallels between gnostic belief and the Johannine letters are primarily seen in terms of their unique differences, which seem to triumph over any thematic similarities.

Problems for Further Study of the New Testament and Gnosticism

A major problem with connecting the New Testament and Gnosticism is the prominent use of the word “*gnosis*” throughout the Gospels and the Pauline letters. Johnson maintained that the use of the word was “non-technical” and referred only to a generalized knowledge throughout the New Testament (Johnson, *First and Second Letters*, 311–12). Perkins, though, demonstrates that a closer correlation between the New Testament and Gnosticism is plausible—particularly in light of the absence of an early fixed canon (Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 29–38). Smith advocated extreme caution: “Although it must be admitted that Paul addressed issues similar to those of Gnosticism, it also must be emphasized that he came to radically different conclusions regarding them” (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 157). Further study of Gnosticism must be careful to recognize both the similarities and the differences between gnostic writings and the New Testament.

Related Articles

For examples of texts from some of the strands of Gnosticism, see this article: Nag Hammadi Codices. For further details on the criticisms of Gnosticism by early church fathers, see this article: Irenaeus. For information on the process of canonization, see this article: Canon, New Testament.

Bibliography

- Barnstone, Willis, and Marvin Meyer, eds. *The Gnostic Bible*. Boston: New Seeds Books, 2003.
- Brown, Raymond E. *The Epistles of John*. Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982.
- Burkitt, Francis C. *Church and Gnosis: A Study of Christian Thought and Speculation in the Second Century*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1932.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973.
- Bauer, W. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Edited by Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.
- De Conick, April D. *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth*. New York: T&T Clark, 2005.
- Ferreiro, Alberto. *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval, and Early Modern Traditions*. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 125. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

Living Scripture
Gnosticism - 1 Corinthians 3
<http://www.realchurch.org/wednesdaynight/>

- Foerster, Werner, ed. *Gnosis*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972–1974.
- Grant, Robert M. *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2001.
- Jonas, Hans. *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon, 1958.
- King, Karen L. *What is Gnosticism?* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- . *The Secret Revelation of John*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Klauck, Hans-Josef. *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction*. Translated by Brian McNeil. New York: T&T Clark, 2003.
- Layton, Bentley. *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1978–81.
- . *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987.
- Logan, Alastair H. B. *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult*. New York: T&T Clark, 2006.
- Marjanen, A., and P. Luomanen, eds. *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics."* Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *The Epistles of John*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Edited by F. F. Bruce. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Pearson, Birger A. *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.
- . "Gnosticism as a Religion." Pages 81–101 in *Was There a Gnostic Religion?*. Edited by Antti Marjanen. Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 87. Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005.
- . *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.
- Perkins, Pheme. *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism*. New York: Paulist Press, 1980.
- . *Gnosticism and the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.
- . "Gnostic Revelation and Johannine Sectarianism: Reading 1 John from the Perspective of Nag Hammadi." Pages 245–76 in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar*. Edited by G. Van Belle, J. G. Van Der Watt, and P. Maritz. Leuven: University Press, 2005.
- Robinson, James M., ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Rudolph, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Edited and translated by Robert McL. Wilson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983.
- Segal, A.F. *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*. Leiden: Brill, 1977.
- Smalley, Stephen S. *1, 2, 3 John*. Word Biblical Commentary 51. Waco, Tex.: Word, 1984.
- Smith, Carl B., II. *No Longer Jews: The Search for Gnostic Origins*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004.
- Thompson, Marianne Meye. *1–3 John*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Edited by Grant R. Osborne. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- Williams, M. A. *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Wilson, Robert McLachlan. *Gnosis and the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968.
- Wisse, Frederick. "Prolegomena to the Study of the New Testament and Gnosis." Pages 138–45 in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McLachlan Wilson*. Edited by A. H. B. Logan and J. M. Wedderburn. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983.
- Yamauchi, Edwin M. *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.
- Yarbrough, Robert W., and Robert H. Stein, eds. *1–3 John*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

ZACHARY G. SMITH¹

¹ Smith, Z. G. (2016). [Gnosticism](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.