

# Gnosticism

Gnosticism (“having knowledge”) was a prominent heretical movement of the third-century Christian Church. Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser and cruel divinity, the demiurge. Also, the Pleroma (“light”), the true God force, sent the spiritual Christ with esoteric gnosis (“knowledge”) to liberate the human spirit from the material realm.

## History

**Simon Magus of Syria (about 50s AD)** claimed he was an incarnation of the God force come to rescue the divine thought of God (which was female) imprisoned in the material realm. He practiced magic and divination.

He became a Christian to gain power (Acts 8:9-24) and mixed mystery religion ideas with Christianity.

He was an Antinomian (anti-law).

Gnostics consider him a founding father.

**Marcion of Sinope (85–160 AD)** believed that the teachings of Jesus Christ were incompatible with Yahweh, the belligerent God of the Old Testament.

Taught that God of the Old Testament (Demiurge) is evil and inferior to the God of the New Testament (the Father), which is good.

He believed that the Old Testament had to be set aside and so put together his own list of accepted New Testament books.

He created his own New Testament church.

He denied Jesus’ human body.

**Valentinus of Alexandria (100–160 AD)** developed Gnostic theology fully and founded his own school in Rome.

He connected Gnostic ideas with the mystery religions and Plato.

He taught that there were three kinds of people:

- **Spiritual** (his own followers) received the gnosis (“knowledge”) that allowed them to return to the divine Pleroma (“light”).
- **Psychical** (ordinary Christians) would attain a lesser form of salvation.
- **Material** (pagans and Jews) were doomed to perish.

## Writings

The Gnostic writings were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945.

These writings were created in the second to fourth centuries AD.

They were all written under false names. They do not contain narratives and are not rooted in history.

## **Beliefs About God**

God is known as the Depth, the Fullness of Being, the Not-Being God, the Pleroma (“light”).

The Pleroma is an impersonal, unknowable, and spiritual force.

The Pleroma is separate from and has nothing to do with the material.

The Pleroma self-emanated 30 spiritual Æons. They were 15 sexually complementary pairs.

## **Beliefs About the Material Realm**

The Æon Sophia (“wisdom”) sought to know the unknowable Pleroma.

In a state of confusion, Sophia emanated a selfish, corrupt being called the Demiurge, Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.

This Demiurge created the material realm in order to dominate it. The Demiurge is a foolish, egotistical, and cruel megalomaniac.

Therefore, the material realm is evil and corrupt.

## **Beliefs About Humanity**

Spiritual man is a part of the Pleroma.

The material body is real but evil and a prison for the soul.

The Gnostics have only a spiritual spark of Pleroma imprisoned in the material body. Therefore, the spirit and body are dualistic in nature.

Women are inferior and ignorant in relation to men.

## **Beliefs About the Problem with the World and Humanity**

Drops of the Pleroma are trapped in the fleshly tombs of the body.

Humanity is ignorant of this fact and is enslaved to Yahweh and the material realm.

The problem is not an issue of sin or morality but of ignorance.

One is continually reincarnated until he can escape the prison of the material realm.

There are three different accounts in the gnostic writings of how human became trapped in the material realm.

### **The First Account**

The Æon Anthrôpos or Adamas (pure Mind) was emanated by the Pleroma to combat the darkness (material realm). Adamas was overcome by the darkness and became trapped in a material body. The Demiurge cruelly ripped Adamas into male (Adam) and female (Eve).

### **The Second Account**

Sophia put drops of the Pleroma in the first humans in an attempt to overcome the darkness. But the darkness was greater than the drops of Pleroma and encased the light in material bodies.

## **The Third Account**

After creating the material realm, Yahweh (Demiurge) trapped drops of the Pleroma in his creation. He did this to give life to his creation, which he could not do.

## **Beliefs About the Solution to the Problem**

Esoteric gnosis (knowledge) is salvation.

The goal is to discover virtue through ritual and magic in order to escape the material realm.

The serpent was the first liberator of Adamas by bringing wisdom into the garden.

The Æon Christ is the second liberator, who brought secret gnosis to free the trapped drops of Pleroma in the material realm.

One must escape the material prison of the body and be reabsorbed into Pleroma.

“These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke... And He said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’” (Gospel of Thomas 1-2)

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” (Gospel of Thomas 70)

## **Beliefs About Jesus**

Jesus and Christ are two separate beings. Jesus is a material being only.

The Pleroma and the Æons produced Christ or Logos or Jesus-Soter.

Christ united himself with Jesus the son of Mary at his baptism and left before Jesus’ death.

Christ brought secret teachings from the Pleroma.

Christ did not come in the flesh and did not die on the cross.

“...sometimes when I meant to touch him I encountered a material, solid body; but at other times again when I felt him, his substance was immaterial and incorporeal...as if it did not exist at all.” (Acts of John, 93)

“Jesus said, ‘It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the All. From Me did the All come forth, and unto Me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find Me there.’” (Gospel of Thomas 77)

“It was another...who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with a reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height...over their error...And I was laughing at their ignorance.” (The Second Treatise of the Great Seth 56:6-19)

## **Gnosticism Versus Christianity**

The Gnostic teachers describe the orthodox Christians as “empty channels...And they will cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. But they will become greatly defiled and they will fall into a name of error.” (Apocalypse of Peter 79:30)

“...they do not know that they will destroy themselves. If the Father were to desire a human sacrifice, he would become vainglorious... They are blind guides, like the disciples... They do not have the Word which gives life.” (Testimony of Truth 34:26)

The early orthodox Christians refuted the Gnostics as false teachers.

“Let none of us say that this flesh is not judged and does not rise again. Understand this: in what state were you saved, in what state did you recover your sight, if it is not while you were in this flesh? We must therefore guard the flesh as a temple of God. For just as you were called in the flesh, so you will come in the flesh. If Christ, the Lord who saved us, became flesh, even though he was originally spirit, and in that state called us, so also we shall receive our reward in this flesh.” (2 Clement 9:1-5)

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. The Word was with God in the beginning. All things were created by him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created... Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us.” (John 1:1-3, 14)

“This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and our hands have touched...”  
(1 John 1:1)

“For I passed on to you as of first importance what I also received – that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures...” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

“Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge (gnosis), which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith.” (1 Timothy 6:20-21)

## Bibliography

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