



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 14 Number 19
May 15, 2019

Non-Christian Beliefs Mentioned in the Bible: Part 9

Gnosticism

By Freddy Davis

Introduction

The word "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means "knowledge." Gnosticism was a belief system that blended elements of both Animism and Theism. Throughout time there have been many Gnostic groups, and each has its own specific version of the basic Gnostic doctrines. The form of Gnosticism John spoke against in his first epistle took elements from Christianity, Judaism, generic Animism, a little bit of Greek philosophy, and Zoroastrianism. In general, though, Gnosticism taught that the material world is evil and that salvation comes through secret knowledge that is known by the Gnostic teachers. The basic concepts of Gnosticism existed before the appearance of Christianity, but later forms taught that certain Christian teachings were the vehicle God used to reveal the special knowledge necessary for salvation.

Gnostics taught that reality exists in layers. At the top is an unknowable God who is absolutely pure and perfect. The bottom layer is the material universe that is considered evil. Gnostics believe that between the absolutely good God and the utterly evil material universe, there exists a series of lesser deities. The basic belief is that, at some point, one of these lesser gods aspired to know the unknowable God. Based on its evil desire, this wicked deity created the material universe and mankind. Some of the Gnostic teachers actually identified this deity as the God of the Old Testament. To the Gnostics, since the material universe was created by an evil God, the universe, and physical human bodies as well, are considered evil.

In spite of their belief that all of material reality is evil, Gnostics hold that somehow a spark of the divine pure spirit from the good and true God fell into the material universe and became trapped in the bodies of human beings. This put in humanity a longing to reunite with the true God. However, they believe that the evil God, along with some of the other lesser gods, is working to prevent the pure spirit souls within human beings from ascending back to God after the physical body dies.

For Gnostics, deliverance from our material form can only be gained through special knowledge that is revealed by enlightened Gnostic teachers. Christ plays a special part in this process because he was considered to be the divine redeemer who descended from the spiritual realm to reveal the special knowledge necessary for redemption to take place.

As a result, Gnostics do not see Christ as the incarnation of God, so he could not have atoned for the sins of mankind. The true God would never sully himself by actually coming into the evil material universe. Christ is simply understood to be God's messenger who came to transmit special saving knowledge to humanity.

There are two basic forms of Gnosticism, and both of them see the material world as evil. That said, they have entirely different teachings about how human beings should live life. One group became ascetics, and the other very licentious. The ascetics taught that severe abstinence was necessary to free the soul from the slavery of the material world. The other group taught that any attempt to purify the corrupt body was useless and that it didn't matter what you did with the body.

Permission to Reprint

If you wish to reprint this article in your own print or electronic newsletter, please include the following text:

*Reprinted from **Worldview Made Practical**; a free e-zine produced by **MarketFaith Ministries** featuring practical teaching and life tools to help Christians become more effective in their faith life. Discover **MarketFaith Ministries** at www.marketfaith.org.*

Speaking Schedule

If you are interested in having Freddy Davis or Tal Davis present one of our **Worldview Seminars** or to share about worldview and its practical implications at your church or organization, please contact **MarketFaith Ministries** to schedule your event. All contact information is at the bottom of this e-zine.

Worldview Resources

It is one of the primary purposes of **MarketFaith Ministries** to provide resources to help Christians understand the practical implications of worldview. You can find many free resources that will help you in your quest at <http://www.marketfaith.org>.

Gnostic writers claim to have received their doctrine from the early apostles, and some even from the New Testament writings themselves. In order to support their beliefs, however, they had to spiritualize the writings and interpret them allegorically.

Gnosticism was the first heresy to be officially rejected by the early church. While there never was an acceptance of Gnostic teachings in the early church, the early church fathers did formally reject Gnosticism in the second century. Even with that rejection, however, this heresy was an ongoing problem as late as the 400s A.D. during the time of Constantine.

History

There is a great deal of uncertainty about the origins of the Gnosticism that was present during the early period of the Christian church. There was definitely an incipient Gnosticism evident in the early Christian era that is addressed in several books of the New Testament. This Gnosticism became even more prominent over the next few centuries. While we don't know its origins specifically, there are a couple of different theories that have become prominent.

Some believe that Gnosticism's earliest origins go back before New Testament times. What seem to be incipient Gnostic beliefs are seen in the writings of certain fringe Jewish groups prior to that period. That said, no actual Gnostic texts have been discovered that came before the Christian era.

There have been others, though, who believe the starting point of Gnosticism emerged out of the teachings of Paul and John. Their emphasis on the conflict between flesh and spirit, the value of spiritual gifts, and freedom from the Jewish

law in Christ are seen by some to have created an environment where Gnostic beliefs could emerge.

Authority

The ultimate authority source for Gnosticism is nothing more than the assertions of the teachers who invented the philosophy. Some of these teachers produced doctrinal writings to try and explain their teachings. Virtually all of these were written after the first century. They often claimed that their beliefs were taught by the Apostles of Jesus. In some cases these teachers also tried to interpret New Testament writings in ways that would advance their beliefs.

Evidence for their Authority

There is no evidence that Gnostic teachings are true. The only evidence that exists is the assertions of the individuals who advocated for that belief system. There is no objective evidence whatsoever that Jesus shared special Gnostic teaching with his apostles, or that they passed along anything of the sort. Quite the contrary, Jesus taught, and the Bible affirms, that Jesus was, himself, God, and that he came to earth for the very purpose of atoning for the sins of mankind by his sacrificial death on the cross.

In the case of those who tried to use New Testament writings as a source authority, it was necessary for them to resort to interpreting the text allegorically in order to support their beliefs. There has never been any objective justification for this unusual method of interpretation.

Worldview Analysis of Gnosticism God

Cosmology (Origin of the Universe)
The Syrian–Egyptian Gnostic traditions taught that there was a supreme God called the Monad. Lower divine beings, known as Aeons, then emanated from this highest divinity. One of those Aeons, called The Demiurge, was the one

Subscription Information SUBSCRIPTION NOTICE:

A subscription to **Worldview Made Practical** is complementary for anyone interested in receiving it. If you received this email as a forward from a family member or a friend and wish to subscribe for yourself, you may do so at www.marketfaith.org. If you wish to unsubscribe from this newsletter, simply follow the instructions found at the bottom of each edition.

Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

info@marketfaith.org

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

You can order our products and examine our services at <http://www.marketfaith.org>.

This issue of **Worldview Made Practical** is a production of **MarketFaith Ministries**, © 2019. All rights reserved.

who created the physical world. Somehow, in a process that is not specifically explained, divine elements from the Monad fell into the material world and became locked within human beings. The Gnostics believed that this divine material could return to the divine realm where the Monad lived when individuals obtained the special Gnostic knowledge of the divine element within.

Between the Monad and the Earth existed the Pleroma. This was a region of light "above" the material world that was occupied by spiritual beings such as aeons, and sometimes archons. It was considered to be the center of divine life.

The aeons were understood to be the various emanations of the Monad. The belief was that there was an original aeon that emanated from the Monad that then begat other emanations and so on to create the various levels between the Monad and the material universe. Different Gnostic texts had different numbers of aeons, so there was not a single authoritative belief about this. The aeons in their totality constituted the pleroma. The further from the Monad they existed, the closer they were to the physical world.

Sophia

Based on Gnostic theology, the term Sophia (the Greek word for wisdom) refers to the final and lowest emanation of the Monad. The story goes that Sophia had a desire to know the unknowable Monad, and in her effort to do this, gave birth to the Demiurge. (The Demiurge was the emanation that actually created the material universe.) Many of the emanations that were derived from the Monad's lineage did so with a partner. Sophia, however, in birthing the Demiurge, did so without a partner.

Demiurge

The word *demiurge* is also from the Greek and means public worker. As

the emanation of Sophia, the Demiurge existed outside of the pleroma. Feeling the isolation of that situation, it created the material realm along with some other creatures called archons. It then created mankind.

When the Demiurge created mankind, it stole elements of the pleroma from Sophia and placed them inside of the human bodies. This was considered by the aeons to be an evil act. The Demiurge, along with his archons, placed humanity in bondage and attempted to keep their pure spirit souls from returning to the Monad when they died physically.

In response, the aeons emanated two savior aeons – Christ and the Holy Spirit. In order to teach man how to achieve *gnosis* (gain the necessary knowledge) so that they could return to the pleroma, Christ embodied himself in the man Jesus.

Since, according to the Gnostics, matter is evil, deliverance from the material form was attainable only through special knowledge revealed by Gnostic teachers. Christ was considered to be the divine redeemer who descended from the spiritual realm to reveal the knowledge necessary for this redemption.

Archons

Some forms of Gnosticism considered archons to be servants of the Demiurge that he created. They were thought of somewhat like angels and demons.

Man

Human beings, in Gnosticism, were created as material creatures by the evil Demiurge. However, Gnostics believe there is a divine spark from the Monad trapped within the evil material human body. This "good soul" gives humans a desire to escape the evil material universe and reunite with the Monad.

Salvation

The ultimate goal in Gnostic philosophy is for individuals to escape the material universe and reunite with the Monad. This is accomplished by special knowledge (*gnosis*) that is taught by Gnostic teachers.

Gnostics assert that they received this special knowledge from Christ when he descended to the material world to reveal this knowledge. The spirits of those who learn this special knowledge will, at death, escape the material world and return to the Monad. Those who do not will simply continue to be trapped in material reality.

To the Gnostics, knowledge of salvation derives from the revelation Jesus gave certain of his followers, and this knowledge is the special means by which mankind is able to escape the evil physical world. Knowledge of right and wrong are also related to the ability to acquire this special knowledge in order to free the spirit.

Other Beliefs and Practices

When looking at the teachings of Gnosticism, it is apparent that these ideas cannot be reconciled with either the Old Testament nor the writings of the apostles. That is why early Christians rejected them. Below is an explanation of some of the basic concepts related to Gnosticism.

Dualism

Dualism is the belief that reality is divided into two parts that oppose and contrast with one another. In particular, Gnosticism sees these opposing elements as good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and body. The material world is understood to be bad while the spirit world is good. Also, the material world is believed to be under the control of evil, ignorance, and nothingness.

A Focus on Enlightenment

Gnostic doctrine teaches that a divine spark has somehow been trapped in the bodies of human beings, and that if it can be released, individuals can receive redemption from the evil world. The way people can get this redemption is to gain special secret knowledge that will allow them to pass from earth up through the ringed heavens. Gnosticism teaches that this enlightenment is not available in Scripture alone, but that Jesus gave special knowledge to certain individuals who could then share it with those who wanted to be enlightened. This allows people to gain knowledge of themselves, their origin, and their destiny. (Note: The fact that the apostle John was one of Jesus' inner circle and that he completely refuted this teaching is a very powerful refutation of the validity of Gnosticism.)

A Non-Biblical Beliefs about Christ

The Gnostics believed Jesus to be an intermediary aeon who was sent from the pleroma in order to help humanity discover the lost knowledge of the divine origins of humanity. In Gnostic doctrine, the aeons took mercy on humans and sent a redeemer (Jesus) to share a way for them to escape the evil material world. But since Gnostics believe matter is evil, they had a problem when it came to identifying Christ as the redeemer. After all, if the human body is corrupt, Jesus would have also had to be corrupt. Since "Christian" Gnostics saw Christ as the redeemer, they had to have some way of explaining how he was not tainted by the evil of the material world. There were two different ways they sought to handle this problem.

Some Gnostics taught that Christ only "appeared" to have a man's body. In this scenario, the body people saw when they were in the presence of Jesus was actually an illusion.

Other Gnostics allowed that Christ used a real material body while doing his ministry on earth, but was not essentially tied to it. They believed that the man Jesus was an ordinary human, but that the Christ spirit entered his body at some point (for instance at his baptism) and departed before the crucifixion.

In order to be philosophically consistent, Gnostics also had explain away the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Some simply ignored the topic altogether, while others spiritualized the event in a way that allowed them to interpret its meaning in accordance with Gnostic teachings.

John's Attack Against Gnosticism

The apostle John's words in 1 John were most likely directed against the teachings of a particular Gnostic teacher named Cerinthus. It is believed that he was a former Jew from Egypt who was a contemporary of John and lived in Ephesus. In his Gnostic teachings, Cerinthus combined Jewish beliefs, like circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath Day, with his own Gnostic ideas. At the same time, he rejected the teachings found in the gospels and the letters of Paul. Specifically, he denied the deity of Christ and believed Jesus was purely the human son of Mary and Joseph.

Cerinthus taught that Christ entered the man Jesus at his baptism and occupied his body during the years of his public ministry. During that time, Christ shared special divine teachings and knowledge to certain followers. Then, prior to the crucifixion, Christ left Jesus' body. By this, Cerinthus was able to deny that Christ was the Son of God and that he died to redeem mankind from sin. For him, the most important thing was not Christ's sacrificial death, but the knowledge he left behind regarding how human beings could have a fulfilling life.

As we read the writings of John in the New Testament, we see that the teachings he gave in his first epistle completely contradict what Cerinthus was advocating. John taught that Christ became an actual human being who was born of a human woman. Additionally, he emphasized the seriousness of sin as an offense against God, and stressed the need for individuals to live a holy life in order to share fellowship with God.

Would You Consider Supporting Us?

Would you consider financial support for **MarketFaith Ministries**? I feel confident that what we are doing is consistent with your beliefs about spreading the gospel and equipping the saints for ministry. Would you let us be one element of your hands and feet in this process? **MarketFaith Ministries** is a 501 (c) (3) not for profit corporation, so your contributions are tax deductible. If you would consider this we would be very grateful. Also, if you would like to know more about the ministry, it would be my pleasure to share with you personally what we are working on and how you can plug in. I can be reached at 850-383-9756 or by e-mail at Freddy@marketfaith.org. As for any donations, they may be sent directly to **MarketFaith Ministries** at 321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312, or you can contribute through our secure website at www.marketfaith.org. Simply click on the "Donate" button at the bottom of the homepage. We are deeply grateful for your support of this ministry.

And, as always, if you have any thoughts, opinions or suggestions about how **MarketFaith Ministries** can help you, please feel free, at any time, to call (850-383-9756) or e-mail (info@marketfaith.org). We are here to serve you.