

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Gnosticism

THEOPEDIA

Gnosticism is a heresy which is made up of a diverse set of beliefs. It is the teaching based on the idea of *gnosis* (a Koine Greek word meaning "secret knowledge"), or knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of internal, intuitive means. While Gnosticism thus relies on personal religious experience as its primary authority, early "Christian" Gnostics did adopt their own versions of authoritative Scriptures, such as those found at *Nag Hammadi* in Egypt.

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What we know about Gnosticism comes from [Irenaeus](#) who studied twenty of the most influential Gnostic writers and defined and criticized their beliefs. Other [early church fathers](#), such as [Tertullian](#) and [Origen](#) also provide information regarding Gnostic beliefs. Lastly, many Gnostic writings were discovered at the [Nag Hammadi Library](#). Nag Hammadi is a town in Upper Egypt near ancient Chenoboskion and 13 codices were discovered about 1945.

General Beliefs

The following information is taken from Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, p. 37.

Matter or materiality

Gnostics believed that matter, whether it be the physical universe or the humanly body, is evil. It is obvious that there is a great tension between spirit and matter. This affects many of their beliefs and especially the way they perceive(d) the world and God's interactions with it.

God

God is wholly transcendent, that is, he is far removed from his creation. He did not create the material universe because it was instead created by an evil or lesser God, sometimes called a "demiurge". God is thus too perfect and pure to have much to do with the evilness of the material universe.

Humanity

Gnostics believed that human beings were "sparks" or "droplets" of the very same spiritual substance (or essence) that God is. Somehow we became trapped in our physical bodies from which we are to escape.

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The Fall

All Gnostics agreed that The Fall was identical to the fall into matter. In other words, creation and The Fall coincide. "As long as spirits are trapped in physical bodies and materiality, they will be subject to sin, which is caused by ignorance of their true nature and home."

Salvation

Gnosticism commonly held that "salvation is to escape from the bondage of the material existence and travel back to the home from which souls/spirits have fallen." God initiates salvation because he wants to draw back the stray bits and pieces of himself, and so he sends forth an emanation of himself - "a spiritual redeemer" - who comes down from heaven and gives an attempt to teach some of the "divine sparks of Spirit" what their true identity is and where their real home lies. Once they are awakened by this redeemer they can then begin their journey back home. "Salvation is by knowledge - self-knowledge."

Jesus

Lastly, as far as most scholars know, Gnostics considered themselves Christians and saw Jesus as a heavenly messenger. However, they rejected the idea of God becoming incarnate (God becoming a man), dying and rising bodily. "These beliefs were considered unspiritual and against true wisdom because they entangled spirit with matter." Most Gnostics believe that whoever entered Jesus at his baptism left him before he died on the cross.

Gnosticism's present existence

This heretical view is still in existence today, both in various secretive cults and in such pop religious movements as astrology or alchemy.

The Masonic movement has been referred to as a Gnostic movement. The popular book [The Da Vinci Code](#) (2003, Doubleday) by Dan Brown promotes Gnostic ideas as it attempts to undermine orthodox Christianity.

References

- Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*. (IVP, 1999). ISBN 0830815058.
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See also

- [Nag Hammadi Library](#)
- [The Da Vinci Code](#)

External Links

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- [Nick Needham - audio message on Gnosticism Past & Present](#)
- [Gnosticism](#) from Elwell Evangelical Dictionary
- [The Heresy that Wouldn't Die](#), by Philip Jenkins (*Christian History & Biography*)
- [Directory of Online Gnostic Studies Resources](#)
- [The Gnostic Society Library](#)
- [Gnosticism](#) (newadvent.org)
- [Gnosticism](#) (The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
- [Pre-Christian Gnosticism, the New Testament and Nag Hammadi in recent debate](#), by Edwin M. Yamauchi
- [Gnosis.org](#)

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