

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

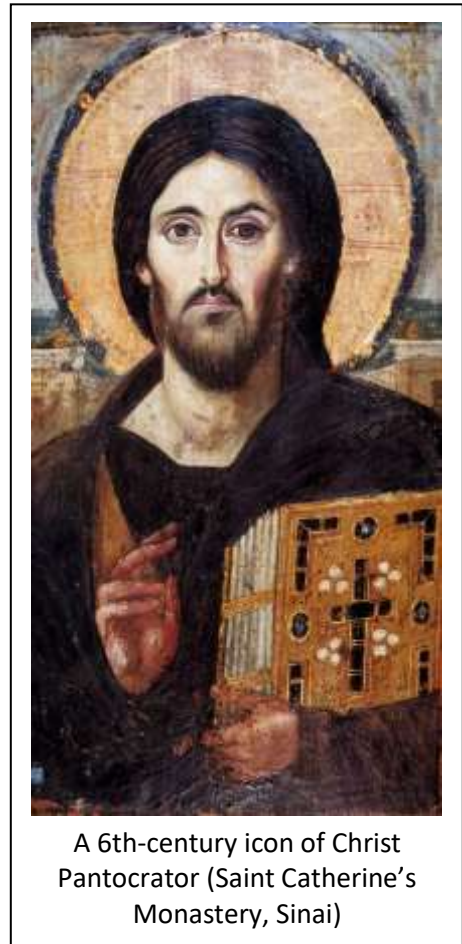
Jesus Christ in Gnosticism

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The Gnostics were in agreement with the “[proto-orthodox](#)” Christians of their time – the group of Christians that would eventually give rise to the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant churches – about many things concerning Jesus Christ. They saw him as an extension of God that had existed before the world was made, and who came to earth on a divine mission to bring salvation to humankind. That mission began in earnest with Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, involved delivering many oral teachings about the mysteries of the world and heaven, and culminated in a dramatic, meaning-soaked death by crucifixion and subsequent wondrous resurrection.

But the Gnostics and the proto-orthodox vehemently disagreed with each other on several other points about Christ that they considered indispensable for their theology and identity. These disagreements fell into four broad categories: the contents of Christ’s message, the nature of his being, the meaning of his death and resurrection, and the degree to which he was a unique being rather than a model for others to follow.



A 6th-century icon of Christ Pantocrator (Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai)

Christ's Teachings

The Gnostics placed considerably more weight on Jesus’s teachings than the proto-orthodox did. The proto-orthodox certainly didn’t dismiss or neglect their savior’s teachings – far from it – but the difference in emphasis is clear in the two groups’ writings about Jesus.

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The Gnostics' scriptures overwhelmingly consist of dialogue attributed to Jesus and commentaries on his words.¹ The extreme example is the [Gospel of Thomas](#), which consists almost entirely of sayings that Jesus allegedly spoke and contains almost no narrative at all.² (The *Gospel of Thomas* may or may not have been a truly Gnostic text, but at the very least, it was a proto-Gnostic text that the Gnostics cherished.) The narrative elements in the Gnostic texts tend to come in two forms: sparse "framing stories" that feature Jesus answering urgent questions from his disciples, or stories delivered by Jesus himself, usually concerning [the creation of the heavens and the earth](#) in a way that sheds light on the human condition.³ Of the four gospels that would later come to be included in the New Testament (which hadn't yet been established during Gnosticism's heyday in the second and third centuries AD), the Gnostics particularly cherished and drew inspiration from the Gospel of John, which, like their own gospels, largely consists of Jesus delivering long, eloquent, revelatory speeches.⁴

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The proto-orthodox thought of Christ's teachings as ends in themselves. The Son of God had told people what they should believe and how they should act; what more did anyone need to know? They thought of being a Christian – a follower of Christ – in terms of relatively simple and clear outward criteria. Does a person profess to be a Christian? Is he or she willing to undergo martyrdom? Has he or she been baptized? Does he or she submit to the (proto-orthodox) clergy in his or her beliefs and deeds? If so, then he or she is a Christian.⁵

The Gnostics passionately disagreed. They saw Jesus's teachings not primarily as ends in themselves, but rather as means to another end: the inner mystical transformation they called "[gnosis](#)," the root of the word "Gnostic." The whole purpose of Christ's coming to earth had been to impart gnosis to people by awakening them to their true, divine nature, which had been covered over by the material world and forgotten.⁶ In support of these views, they could point to passages such as Luke 17:20-21:

¹ This is borne out by the Gnostic texts contained in: Meyer, Marvin (ed.) (2008). *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. HarperOne.

² Meyer (2008). "The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas." In *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 133-156.

³ An excellent example of a Gnostic text that contains both is the [Secret Book of John](#), but a large proportion of the texts in the Nag Hammadi Library contain one or both. See: Meyer (2008). *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.

⁴ Pétremont, Simone (1990). *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*. Translated by Carol Harrison. Harper San Francisco, 1-213.

⁵ Pagels, Elaine (1989). *The Gnostic Gospels*. Vintage Books, 104-105.

⁶ Ehrman, Bart (2003). *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. Oxford University Press, 124.

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Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."⁷

And in Mark 4:10-11, Jesus says that his teachings have "secret" inner meanings that most of his listeners don't understand:

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve [disciples] asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables."⁸

Accordingly, the Gnostics thought that someone who perceived only the outer shell of Jesus's teachings and not their inner heart was at best an immature Christian. As the Gnostic [Gospel of Philip](#) puts it, many people "go down into the water [of baptism] and come up without having received anything."⁹ A mature Christian was someone who had gnosis, not just the ability to recite a creed taught to him or her by a clergyman.

Just as importantly, the Gnostics believed that the proto-orthodox didn't only overemphasize the outer shell of Christ's message; they even misunderstood and misinterpreted that outer shell itself – a charge which was, of course, hurled right back at the Gnostics by the proto-orthodox.

[Irenaeus of Lyons](#), a proto-orthodox polemicist who wrote extensively against the Gnostics, held that since Jesus's teachings as recorded in scripture are often ambiguous, a "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*) passed down by the church hierarchy provided the only sure means of obtaining the correct interpretation. The thinking went that the bishops and presbyters, having obtained their "rule of faith" from the apostles and ultimately from Jesus himself, were the true possessors of the pure doctrine of Christ.¹⁰ (Since only proto-orthodox clergy counted as legitimate, this reasoning was circular; it amounted to "our theology is correct because it's our theology.")

⁷ Luke 17:20-21 (NKJV).

⁸ Mark 4:10-11 (NRSV).

⁹ Pagels (1989), 104-105.

¹⁰ Brakke, David (2010). *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Harvard University Press, 122.

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While the “rule of faith” never achieved a precise formulation until the fourth-century Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed, there were several factors that remained constant from the second century onward. Bart Ehrman summarizes them:

Typically included in the various formulations of the *regula* was belief in only one God, the creator of the world, who created everything out of nothing; belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, predicted by the prophets and born of the Virgin Mary; belief in his miraculous life, death, resurrection, and ascension; and belief in the Holy Spirit, who is present on earth until the end, when there will be a final judgment in which the righteous will be rewarded and the unrighteous condemned to eternal torment.¹¹

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The Gnostics didn’t disagree with *all* of that, but they did disagree with parts of it, and they would have taken issue with its emphases and ultimately found it too superficial to do much good. In their own writings on Christ and his teachings, they countered that Christ had taught that [the true God who sent him to earth](#) didn’t create the earth. [Creation had instead been the work](#) of a lesser, foolish, and largely evil being. That being, the [demiurge](#), had inadvertently mixed some bits of divinity in with his otherwise absurd creation. God the Father had sent Christ the Son into the world to remedy the catastrophe that creation had caused. The world and its demonic rulers crucified Jesus, but the Son of God came back to life and thereby overcame the world. Christ’s work was carried forward whenever someone achieved gnosis, not whenever someone recited a list of merely verbal beliefs or performed a set of merely physical actions.

To justify their views, the Gnostics, like the proto-orthodox, insisted that their views were handed down to them from Jesus’s apostles and ultimately from Jesus himself.¹² Needless to say, the proto-orthodox found this as unconvincing as the Gnostics found the claims of the proto-orthodox.

What Kind of Being Was Jesus?

Proto-orthodox Christians believed that Jesus Christ had been both fully human and fully divine, and that these two natures were inseparably intertwined in him. As we’ll explore in more depth shortly, the proto-orthodox justified this view by arguing that it was necessary for Jesus to fully suffer as a human in order for his crucifixion and resurrection to be effective in bringing salvation to humanity.¹³

¹¹ Ehrman (2003), 194.

¹² Brakke (2010), 118.

¹³ Lewis, Nicola Denzey (2013). *Introduction to “Gnosticism:” Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds*. Oxford University Press, 227.

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The Gnostics – and some other early Christians as well – took issue with this view. It implied that Christ’s spirit was under the power of matter and that it suffered at the hands of matter, which seemed ridiculous and even blasphemous to them. How could a perfect spirit – the spirit of God, no less – suffer? For the Gnostics, the proto-orthodox view made a mockery of Christ’s perfection and power.¹⁴

How, then, the Gnostics asked, could Christ have come into the world for his mission without being compromised by the world?

For a minority of Gnostics, the answer to that question was the theological position that modern scholars call “docetism,” from the Greek *dokein*, “to seem.”¹⁵ Docetists took Paul literally when he said, in Romans 8:3, that Jesus came “in the *likeness* of sinful flesh.” Jesus only *seemed* to be a flesh-and-blood human, but in reality he was a spirit that had a merely phantasmal body.¹⁶

Such Gnostics would have agreed with the portrayal of Jesus in the (non-Gnostic) early Christian text called the *Acts of John*. Ehrman comments:

John indicates that Jesus appeared to different people in different guises at the same time (e.g., as an old man and as a youth, simultaneously to different people), that he never blinked his eyes, that sometimes his chest felt smooth and tender but sometimes hard as stone. As John later says, “Sometimes when I meant to touch him, I met a material and solid body; at other times again I felt him, the substance was immaterial and bodiless and as if it were not existing at all” (chap. 93). One time, John indicates, he noticed that Jesus never left any footprints—literally a God striding on the earth.¹⁷

But the majority Gnostic position¹⁸ was one that modern scholars call “separationism:” the idea that Jesus *did* have a material body, but that his body and his spirit were two separate entities, such that no matter how many pains were inflicted on his body, his spirit never suffered.¹⁹ This made perfect sense within the Gnostics’ [sharply dualistic worldview](#), wherein spirit and matter were categorically different, and even opposing, phenomena.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Brakke (2010), 68.

¹⁶ Ehrman (2003), 124-125.

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁹ Ibid., 223-224.

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In this view, the heavenly being Christ temporarily entered into and took over the body of the man Jesus. The Gnostic text *Three Forms of First Thought* declares that a divine power “put on Jesus” like a garment.²⁰ The *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* has Christ say, “I approached a bodily dwelling and evicted the previous occupant, and I went in.”²¹

This happened at Jesus’s baptism, when, according to Mark 1:10, “Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.”²² Luke 3:22 adds that at this same moment, “A voice came from heaven, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’”²³ The Gnostics saw it as little wonder that this event was universally said to herald the start of Jesus’s ministry, for when Jesus was thus taken over by God, he became able to perform miracles and deliver extraordinarily wise and insightful teachings.²⁴

Just as Christ had entered into Jesus at a particular moment, he also left him at a particular moment: Jesus’s crucifixion. Mark (15:34) and Matthew (27:46) have Jesus utter a strange cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”²⁵ The *Gospel of Philip* sums up the Gnostic interpretation of that cry of bewildered despair: “He spoke these words on the cross, for he had left that place.”²⁶ Christ had departed, leaving the merely human Jesus to suffer and die alone.²⁷ *Three Forms of First Thought* adds that a heavenly being “bore him [Christ] from the cursed wood and established him in the dwelling places of his father.”²⁸

The Gnostic Christ articulates his perspective on the Passion in the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*: “As for me, they saw me and punished me, but someone else... drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They were striking me with a scourge, but someone else... bore the cross on his shoulder. Someone else wore the crown of thorns. And I was on high, poking fun at all the excesses of the rulers [[archons](#), demonic beings who rule the world] and the fruit of their error and conceit. I was laughing at their ignorance.”²⁹ Even

²⁰ Turner, John D. (2008). “Three Forms of First Thought.” In Meyer (2008). *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 735.

²¹ Meyer, Marvin (2008). “The Second Discourse of Great Seth.” In Meyer (2008). *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 478.

²² Mark 1:10 (NRSV).

²³ Luke 3:22 (NRSV).

²⁴ Ehrman (2003), 125.

²⁵ Mark 15:34 (NRSV); Matthew 27:46 (NRSV).

²⁶ Scopello, Madeleine, and Marvin Meyer (2008). “The Gospel of Philip.” In Meyer (2008) *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 174.

²⁷ Ehrman (2003), 125.

²⁸ Turner (2008), 735.

²⁹ Meyer (2008). “The Second Discourse of Great Seth,” 480.

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though he is still within Jesus while these many tortures are being inflicted upon him, he recounts what happened as if he were watching it from afar as a spectator.

Thus, the author of the Gnostic *Letter of Peter to Philip* could affirm that the savior “suffered for us,”³⁰ yet also hold that Christ “is a stranger to this suffering.”³¹ The human Jesus truly did suffer almost unspeakable horrors just as any flesh-and-blood human would suffer them. But Christ, the invisible being who made Jesus into the savior, was by his very nature invulnerable to suffering, and so escaped the crucifixion unscathed.

Accordingly, while the proto-orthodox insisted that Jesus’s material body was resurrected following his crucifixion, the separationist Gnostics held that Jesus’s body rotted in the grave just like any other human body would. His *spirit* was what lived on and ascended to heaven. The resurrected Christ was therefore a purely spiritual being.³²

The Meaning of the Crucifixion and Resurrection

To make sense of the difference between the views of the Gnostics and the views of the proto-orthodox on Christ’s death and resurrection, it’s necessary to understand the differences between the two groups on the nature of evil. Both groups agreed that the crucifixion and resurrection had enabled people to be saved from evil, but they had conflicting perspectives on what exactly that meant.

For the proto-orthodox, evil (Greek *kakia*) referred to human moral failings. Evil belonged to the social sphere of life. It was something one *practiced* against one’s fellow man. To be human was to be responsible for evil.³³

While the Gnostics didn’t disagree with that outright – they, too, recognized that people clearly could and did perpetrate evil deeds on one another – they had a radically different and expanded view of what “evil” was. For them, *kakia* meant first and foremost “suffering.” They contrasted the countless sufferings to which the material world and all of its inhabitants are subject with the bliss and invulnerability of divinity. Humankind was, at bottom, innocent, and thrust into this world of suffering without having any say in the matter. While evil was in a minority of instances a matter of choice, wherein one could choose not to inflict evil on another, at a more fundamental level evil was simply

³⁰ Meyer (2008). “The Letter of Peter to Philip,” 592.

³¹ Ibid., 593.

³² Ehrman, Bart (2014). *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. HarperOne.

³³ Pagels, Elaine (1989). *The Gnostic Gospels*. Vintage Books, 146-147.

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part of nature. Making better choices was, by itself, woefully insufficient. To overcome evil, one had to transcend nature altogether.³⁴

The proto-orthodox view of the significance of Jesus's death is summed up in the words of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John (1:29): "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"³⁵ Jesus's death was a sacrifice to atone for all the sins committed by any and all people, to wipe the slate clean so that they could be blameless in the eyes of God and thereby win salvation for themselves.³⁶ In order to partake of this miraculous salvation, all one had to do is believe what the proto-orthodox said to believe, and act the way the proto-orthodox said to act.

This is why the proto-orthodox were so repelled by the Gnostics' insistence that *Christ* didn't really suffer or die – only the body he temporarily inhabited did – and that the resurrection happened only in the spirit and not in the flesh. If Christ, the Son of God, didn't bleed, then how could he have bought humankind's salvation with his blood?³⁷

The Gnostics answered that blood, and more broadly the material nature of which blood is a part, was precisely what the savior had come to earth to save us *from*. In the words of the *Gospel of Philip*, Christ "came to crucify the world."³⁸ And he succeeded, even though the archons, the demonic rulers of the world, tried and failed to crucify *him* to stop his mission.

By descending into the material world and overcoming it by surviving the death of his body, the Gnostic Christ enabled others to overcome it and achieve a spiritual resurrection (gnosis) as well.³⁹ As the Gnostic *Treatise on Resurrection* puts it, "The Savior swallowed death. ... When he laid aside the perishable world, he exchanged it for an incorruptible eternal realm. He arose and swallowed the visible through the invisible, and thus he granted us the way to our immortality."⁴⁰ [41]

So the doctrine of the salvation of the spirit apart from the body, which is now so mainstream in Christianity that it's taken for granted by most Christians, was the view of the Gnostics (even if some of the specifics differed). The proto-orthodox, by contrast, condemned that idea as heresy. (We may imagine that they would be aghast at its

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ John 1:29 (NRSV).

³⁶ Ehrman (2003), 15-16.

³⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁸ Scopello and Meyer (2008), 170.

³⁹ Thomassen, Einar (2008). *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians."* Brill, 83.

⁴⁰ Thomassen, Einar, and Marvin Meyer (2008). "The Treatise on Resurrection." In *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. Edited by Marvin Meyer. HarperOne, 53.

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prevalence in Christianity today.) The salvation the proto-orthodox believed in was instead *the salvation of the body*. They believed that when the last judgment came, the bodies of all the dead would be brought back to life. Those who merited eternal bliss would then dwell bodily with God forever. For the proto-orthodox, such *bodily* resurrection is what Jesus had made possible.⁴¹

The Gnostics had little but derision for the proto-orthodox view of resurrection. The *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* sneers that some people – and the text clearly has the proto-orthodox in mind – “proclaim the doctrine of a dead man.”⁴² The *Gospel of Thomas* concurs:

His [Jesus’s] disciples said to him, “Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel, and they all spoke of you.”

He said to them, “You have disregarded the living one who is in your presence and have spoken of the dead.”⁴³

A Unique Being or a Model for Others to Follow?

Both Gnostic Christians and proto-orthodox Christians saw Jesus as a unique being *and* a model for people to follow. But there was a huge difference in emphasis between the two groups on this point.

For the proto-orthodox, as we’ve seen, Jesus was the only being who had ever given up his life as a sacrifice to atone for all the sins of all humankind – and he was the only being who was capable of doing so, because he was the only being who had ever been or ever could be an incarnation of God himself. He subsequently became the first and (at least until the last judgment) the only being to be resurrected in the flesh. The proto-orthodox Jesus was therefore a wildly unique being, although the proto-orthodox did of course still see his life and words as a model for correct action and belief that they strove to follow in their own lives.

The Gnostics agreed that Jesus’s having incarnated God was something that had more or less never been done before Jesus did it. And they agreed that Christ was the agent of salvation for humankind. His life was a decisive break in history. Before Jesus, salvation hadn’t been possible, but after Jesus, it was.⁴⁴ As the Gnostic *Gospel of Truth* states, Jesus

⁴¹ Pétrement (1990), 168-169.

⁴² Meyer (2008). “The Second Discourse of Great Seth,” 482.

⁴³ Meyer (2008). “The Gospel of Thomas with the Greek Gospel of Thomas,” 146.

⁴⁴ Thomassen, Einar. 2008. *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians.”* Brill, 138-139.

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“knew that his death would be life for many.”⁴⁵ The [Valentinian](#) Gnostic teacher Theodotus adds that “just as the birth of the Saviour takes us away from birth and Fate, so his baptism removes us from the fire, and his passion from passion.”⁴⁶

But although, as we’ve seen, the Gnostic Jesus Christ was in an important sense more otherworldly and less human than the proto-orthodox Jesus Christ, in that the spiritual part of him never suffered human suffering, there was a different sense in which he was actually *more* human than his proto-orthodox counterpart. The Gnostic Jesus was, in Einar Thomassen’s felicitous phrase, a “saved savior.”⁴⁷ Jesus needed to be saved just like any other person.

He achieved salvation when he was baptized and the heavenly Christ entered into him. Theodotus asserts that “the redemption... that descended upon Jesus is the dove [as in Mark 1:10] and redeemed him. For redemption was necessary even for Jesus.”⁴⁸

Jesus thereby provided a model of the saved person that anyone who wanted to be saved could follow. Jesus was saved by becoming a manifestation of Christ, which, in the Gnostic perspective, was something that anyone could do if he or she achieved gnosis. That’s what gnosis was, after all: mystical union with God. In the words of the *Gospel of Truth*:

He [Jesus] was nailed to a tree, and he became fruit of the knowledge [gnosis] of the Father. This fruit of the tree, however, did not bring destruction when it was eaten, but rather it caused those who ate of it to come into being. They were joyful in this discovery, and he found them within himself and they found him within themselves.”⁴⁹

The *Gospel of Philip*, likewise, holds that someone who obtains gnosis “is no longer [just] a Christian but is Christ,”⁵⁰ and that the ideal Christian is one who “went down into the water [of baptism] and came up as lord of all.”⁵¹ The *Secret Book of James* concurs: Jesus proclaims to his followers that God can “make you my equal,” and he urges them to even “become better than I”⁵² (!).

⁴⁵ Thomassen and Meyer (2008). “The Gospel of Truth,” 38.

⁴⁶ Thomassen (2008). *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the “Valentinians,”* 136.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁹ Thomassen and Meyer (2008). “The Gospel of Truth,” 37.

⁵⁰ Scopello and Meyer (2008). “The Gospel of Philip,” 173.

⁵¹ Ibid., 178.

⁵² Scopello and Meyer (2008). “The Secret Book of James.” In *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. Edited by Marvin Meyer. HarperOne, 25.

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Conclusion

Both the Gnostics and the proto-orthodox could cite the same shared books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the letters of Paul, etc.) and invoke the authority of the same apostles when defending their views on Jesus. The differences in the two groups' outlooks weren't due to one having a firmer or fuller basis in "scripture" (a somewhat nebulous concept before the establishment of the New Testament canon, anyway) than the other.

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Nor did the views of either side particularly reflect what the historical Jesus actually taught or did; [that failed apocalyptic prophet](#) would have surely been surprised and perplexed by the views that his avowed followers – whether proto-orthodox, Gnostic, or otherwise – came to place on his lips.

The differences between the two groups' views were instead extensions of their different aims. The proto-orthodox desired harmony between the visible and invisible realms – between the body and the spirit, between earthly actions and the will of heaven, and between the laypeople and God as represented through the clergy. The Gnostics, on the other hand, desired to transcend the visible realm altogether in favor of absorption in the invisible realm through spiritual enlightenment.

These different desires led the two groups to develop different theologies, and, in turn, to interpret the shared materials of their religion through those different theologies. The Gnostic Jesus Christ was what he was because that's what the Gnostics wanted and needed him to be, just as the proto-orthodox Jesus Christ was for the proto-orthodox.

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