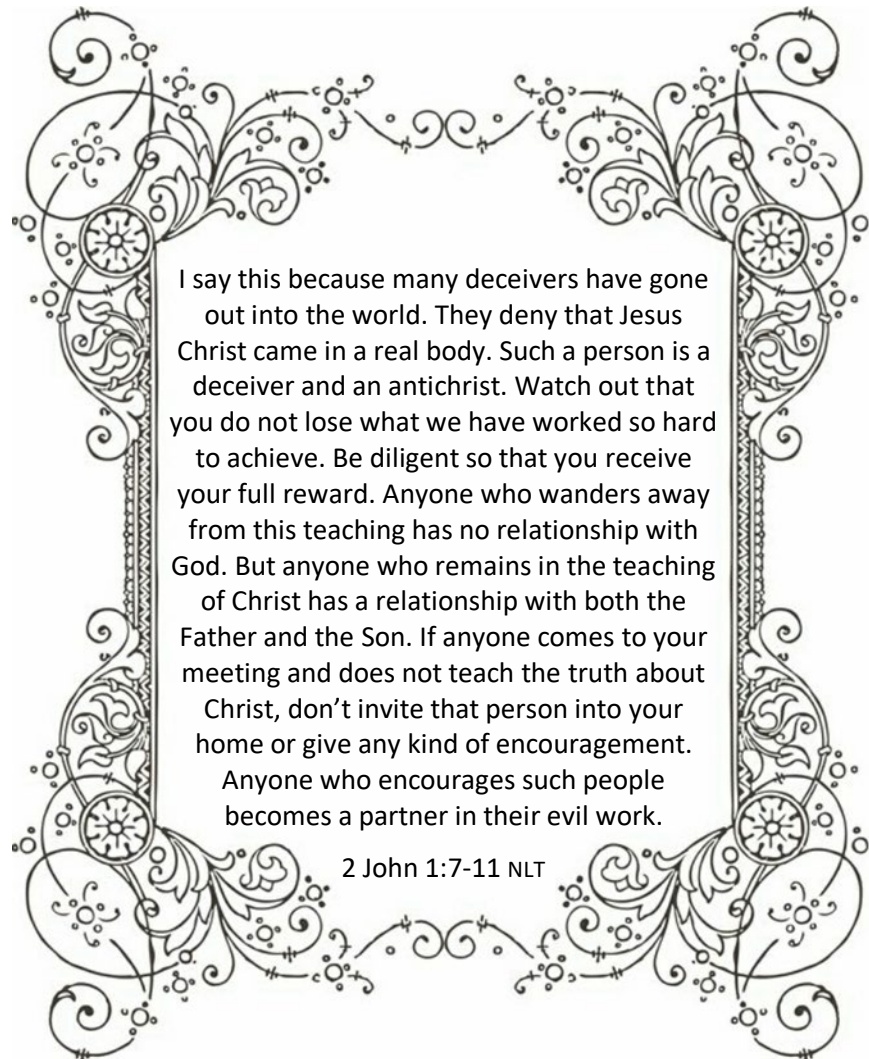


## Chapter 2

# Gnosticism: The Heresy that Will Not Die

DENNIS A. WRIGHT, DMIN

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I say this because many deceivers have gone out into the world. They deny that Jesus Christ came in a real body. Such a person is a deceiver and an antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked so hard to achieve. Be diligent so that you receive your full reward. Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to your meeting and does not teach the truth about Christ, don't invite that person into your home or give any kind of encouragement. Anyone who encourages such people becomes a partner in their evil work.

2 John 1:7-11 NLT

## **GNOSTICISM: THE HERESY THAT WILL NOT DIE**

Did Jesus have an identical twin? Was he married to Mary Magdalene? Were gospels destroyed that should have been in the Bible? Did Jesus talk to the cross on which he died, and did the cross of Christ walk out of the tomb while speaking? Was Judas a hero who, alone of the disciples, understood Jesus and, in betraying Him, was carrying out Christ's secret instructions?

Writings from the second through fourth centuries either make these claims outright or suggest them to modern readers. Produced by individuals whom we now identify as "Gnostic," these texts have been put forward in recent years as reasonable alternative forms of Christianity, as branches that were unjustly suppressed, as teachings that should be allowed to modify the dogma that came down to us or as books that should have been incorporated into the Bible. Naturally, this concerns those orthodox Christians who understand what the texts actually contain. Dan Graves concludes, "There is a danger that those who do not may be confused or misled by the popular claims."<sup>1</sup>

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.

Gnosticism was a notable heretical movement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Christian Church, partially of pre-Christian origin. The gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser divinity, the demiurge, and that Christ represented the remote supreme divine being. Also, that esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) enabled the redemption of the human spirit.

Gnostics did not call themselves by that name, and there were many variations of what we now call Gnosticism. While some forms were utterly unrelated to Christianity, others considered themselves a higher type of Christian. But although Gnostic beliefs varied a good deal, we can sum up a few essential points on which all agreed:

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<sup>1</sup> © Dan Graves, Christianity.com, December 22, 2022. Retrieved December 11, 2023.

<https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/gnosticism-11629621.html>

## KEY BELIEFS OF GNOSTICISM

- \* The material world is bad, and the spirit world is good. The material world is under the control of evil, ignorance, or nothingness.
- \* A divine spark is somehow trapped in some (but not all) humans, and it alone, of all that exists in this material world, is capable of redemption.
- \* Salvation is through a secret knowledge by which individuals come to know themselves, their origin, and their destiny.
- \* Since a good God could not have created an evil world, it must have been created by an inferior, ignorant or evil god. Usually, the explanation is that the true, good God created or emanated beings (Archons) who either emanated other Archons or conjugated to produce them until a mishap by Sophia (Wisdom) led to the creation of the evil Archon who created our world and pretends to be God. He hides the truth from humans, but sparks of Sophia in some humans fill them with an urge to return to the Pleroma (divine realm) where they belong.

These ideas had implications that could not be squared with either the Old Testament or apostolic writings, which is why early Christians rejected them.<sup>2</sup>

It should be realized that Archons<sup>3</sup> (ἄρχων, *archōn*), in Gnosticism and religions closely related to it, are the builders of the physical universe. Among the Archontics, Ophites, Sethians and in the writings of Nag Hammadi library, the archons are rulers, each related to one of seven planets; they prevent souls from leaving the material realm. The political connotation of their name reflects rejection of the governmental system, as flawed without chance of true salvation.<sup>4</sup>

In Manichaeism, the archons are the rulers of a realm within the "Kingdom of Darkness", who together make up the Prince of Darkness. In *The Hypostasis of the Archons*,<sup>5</sup> the physical appearance of Archons is described as hermaphroditic, with their faces being those of beasts.

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<sup>2</sup> Graves (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel McCoy. <https://gnosticismexplained.org/archons/> [Note: McCoy is sympathetic to Gnosticism]. Retrieved October 18, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Fallon, F.T. (1978). *The Enthronement of Sabaoth*. Leiden: Brill Archive, 80.

<sup>5</sup> The Nag Hammadi Library: The Hypostasis of the Archons [Posted by the Gnostic Society Library]. Retrieved October 18, 2024.

## *Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism*

Much of 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.<sup>6</sup>

Roger Olson recognizes that “Irenaeus’s assault on Gnosticism was anything but the kind of cool, rational approach modern people might expect of a bishop or theologian. He clearly considered it foolish and sinister and wished to expose it once and for all as a complete corruption of the gospel in the guise of ‘higher wisdom for spiritual people.’ In order to expose Gnosticism, Irenaeus spent months and years studying at least twenty distinct Gnostic teachers and their schools. He found that the most influential one was the Valentinian Gnosticism that had taken hold among Christians in Rome through the teachings of a Gnostic leader named Ptolemaeus. Therefore, he focused on exposing that one as ridiculous and false with the hope that all the others would be crushed by the weight of its fall.”<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus’s approach to the critique of Gnosticism<sup>8</sup> in *Against Heresies* was threefold. First, he attempted to reduce the Gnostic worldview to absurdity by showing that much of it was invented mythology with no foundation on anything other than imagination. This first strategy included exposing Gnosticism’s inner contradictions and fundamental incoherence. Its truth claims conflicted with one another. Second, he attempted to show that the Gnostic claim to authority going back to Jesus and the apostles was simply false. Finally, he engaged Gnostic interpretation

n of Scripture in debate and showed it to be unreasonable and even impossible.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> © Theopedia. Retrieved July 31, 2024. <https://www.theopedia.com/gnosticism>.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, R.E. (1999). *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 71.

<sup>8</sup> Olson points out that “in the background of Irenaeus’s polemical exposé of Gnosticism lie several assumptions. He clearly assumed that he had a special role and position as one tutored in Christianity by Polycarp, who in turn was mentored by John. Many of the Gnostics claimed that John was part of an inner group of Jesus’ disciples who received from the Savior a ‘secret teaching’ not available to most Christians because they were not spiritually fit to understand it. While they could find hints of their own worldview and gospel in apostolic writings, they had to rely on a secret oral tradition as the main source of their authority. Irenaeus assumed that if such a teaching existed, Polycarp would have known of it and would have told him about it. That none of the bishops of the Christians recognized or acknowledged it seriously undermined the Gnostics’ claim.” Olson (1999), 71.

<sup>9</sup> Olson (1999), 71.



Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

1 John 4:1-3



## EXACTLY WHAT IS GNOSTICISM?

F.F. Bruce explains that “Gnosticism is a mode of thought which we meet in a developed form in the second century. It reinterpreted Christianity for an intellectual elite by representing it as a form of higher ‘knowledge’ (*gnosis*) by means of which the soul might be liberated from the shackles of the material order and mount to the upper realm of truth and light. In many gnostic systems the disparagement of the material order manifested itself in severity to the human body. Bodily asceticism and spiritual enrichment went together.”<sup>10</sup>

Philip Jenkins adds, “From a Gnostic perspective, the material world is not just fallen but an utterly flawed creation, beyond redemption. God—or at least, the good, true God—certainly does not work in history. Escape is only available to the small minority who know, who recognize the need for liberation, which lies within. Wisdom, *Sophia*, is for the spiritual, the elite, and distinguishes them from the gullible herd of humans mired in the material, the victims of cosmic deception. They will remain asleep, while the true Gnostic is awakened.”<sup>11</sup>

“Gnosticism,” says Henry Gwatkin, “may be provisionally described as a number of schools of philosophy, oriental in general character, but taking in the idea of a redemption through Christ, and further modified in different sects by a third element, which may be Judaism, Hellenism, or Christianity ... the Gnostics took over only the idea of a redemption through Christ, not the full Christian doctrine, for they made it rather a redemption of the philosophers from matter, than a redemption of mankind from sin”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, F.F. (2017). *Defending First-Century Faith: Christian Witness in the New Testament*. Kingsley Books.

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, P. (2007). “The Heresy that Wouldn’t Die.” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge*.

<sup>12</sup> Gwatkin, H.M. (1912). *Early Church History to AD 313*, London: MacMillan, II, 20.

James Orr writes, “Gnosticism may be described generally as the fantastic product of the blending of certain Christian ideas—particularly that of redemption through Christ—with speculations and imaginings derived from a medley of sources (Gr, Jewish, Parsic; philosophies, religions, theosophies, mysteries) in a period when the human mind was in a kind of ferment, and when opinions of every sort were jumbled together in an unimaginable welter. It involves, as the name denotes, a claim to ‘*knowledge*,’ knowledge of a kind of which the ordinary believer was incapable, and in the possession of which ‘*salvation*’ in the full sense consisted. This knowledge of which the Gnostic boasted, related to the subjects ordinarily treated of in religious philosophy; Gnosticism was a species of *religious philosophy*.”<sup>13</sup>

August Neander has described Gnosticism as “the first notable attempt to introduce into Christianity the existing elements of mental culture, and to render it more complete on the hitherto rather neglected side of theoretical knowledge; it was an attempt of the mind of the ancient world in its yearning after knowledge, and in its dissatisfaction with the present, to bring within its grasp and to appropriate the treasures of this kind which Christianity presented” (*Antignostikus*, Intro, 199).<sup>14</sup>

### **DISTINCTIVE GNOSTIC BELIEFS**

Kenneth Samples explains that “Gnosticism was never a systematically defined religion with a single set of official beliefs that all Gnostics had to affirm.<sup>15</sup> In fact, there is debate about whether these Gnostic tendencies emerged initially from interacting with Christianity or whether this movement was a reaction to Judaism or paganism.<sup>16</sup> Gnosticism consisted of a loose connection of mash-up ideas that came from the ancient philosophical and religious world. Thus, we might think of the beliefs described below as an amalgam of Gnostic trends or impulses rather than exact beliefs.”

The label “Gnosticism” is a fuzzy one, describing diverse sects and ideas in the ancient world. This chart summarizes those elements within various Gnostic groups that the majority of Christians found especially troublesome. A particular Gnostic sect would not necessarily have held all of the following beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Orr, J. (1913). *The History And Literature of The Early Church*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Rutherford, J. (1915). “Gnosticism.” In J. Orr, J.L. Nuelsen, E.Y. Mullins, & M.O. Evans (Eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Vols. 1–5, p. 1240). The Howard-Severance Company.

<sup>15</sup> Samples notes that this article is influenced by D. Jeffrey Bingham’s online article, “Gnosticism Unmasked,” *Christianity Today* (2007), accessed February 3, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> See Justin S. Holcolmb (2014). *Know the Heretics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Gnosticism Unmasked. (2007). *Christian History Magazine-Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge*.

*Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism*

<b>DOCTRINE</b>	<b>GNOSTIC VIEW</b>	<b>ORTHODOX VIEW</b> (as expressed by Irenaeus of Lyons)
<b>GOD</b>	There are two opposing Gods: the supreme, spiritual, unknown Father who is distant from the world and revealed only by Christ; and the subordinate, ignorant, and evil creator of the world (Demiurge).	There is only one true God who is the Creator of the world and the Father of Jesus Christ.
<b>WORLD</b>	The material world crafted by the Demiurge is evil and keeps the spiritual ones from perfection. It must perish and be escaped.	The material world was created good by God. It will someday be renewed and made into a fit home for the redeemed.
<b>HUMANITY</b>	The Gnostics are by nature the elite, spiritual ones, for they have the “seed” of the spiritual realm inside them. This divine spark (the spirit) is trapped within the material, fleshly body and yearns for release from this evil dungeon.	God created all human beings as a union of body and spirit. We are not spiritual by nature—this is a gift available to all by faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
<b>SALVATION</b>	Only the immortal spirit of the Gnostic is saved as it gains release from material captivity and returns to the Father’s spiritual realm. Salvation is by knowledge ( <i>gnosis</i> )—by knowing that the true God is the Father, not the Demiurge, and that the true home of the spirit is its place of origin, the Father’s realm, not the material world with its bodies of flesh.	Both the immaterial and material aspects of God’s creation are saved. By faith in Jesus Christ, a person receives the Holy Spirit who provides spiritual life, resurrects their flesh to eternal life, and redeems the created world.
<b>CHRIST</b>	Christ is a spiritual, divine being from the Father’s realm who comes to the world to reveal the Father and the true identity of the spiritual ones, the Gnostics. Christ did not become incarnate or suffer on the cross. Instead, he either merely seemed to be human or temporarily inhabited a human being named “Jesus.”	Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior, the eternal Son of God made flesh, who truly suffered for the sins of humanity and was truly raised in immortal, incorruptible flesh for their resurrection to eternal life.

<p><b>CANON and HISTORY</b></p>	<p>There are gospels and testimonies of the apostles that convey the perfect revelation of Christ in addition to (and in some ways superior to) the church’s four gospels. This revelation brought by Christ manifests the true knowledge of the Father and the Gnostics, while the Law and the Prophets manifest the Demiurge.</p>	<p>The church recognizes only four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and believes that these four, along with the rest of the New Testament, are in harmony with the Law and the Prophets. All witness to the one true Creator and Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.</p>
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- ✱ **Secret Knowledge and Community:** Gnosticism was especially prominent during the late second and third century AD and takes its name from the Greek word *gnosis* or *gnostikos*, which for the ancient Gnostics meant a secret or esoteric intuitive *knowledge*. This knowledge was believed to be hidden from most people. So the Gnostics viewed themselves as the spiritual or enlightened elites who received Christ’s true message through reflection and self-denial. This “discovery” of *gnosis* had uncovered the truth of salvation via intuition rather than through the normal Christian practice of preaching the gospel of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.
- ✱ **Cosmos:** Gnostics embraced a dualism that considered matter—including both the physical cosmos and human bodies—to be less real and even evil. Spirit, in contrast, was considered to be good. Thus, the material world was to be shunned and ultimately escaped, which defines salvation in a Gnostic context. Gnostics even reasoned that the bad and capricious God had created the material cosmos.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>
- ✱ **God:** There are a number of major and minor deities within Gnosticism. First, the true and supreme God (the Monad: the Father) is a purely spiritual being who is completely transcendent and has no connection to the evil creation. Second, there is an inferior, unenlightened, and evil creator of the world called the Demiurge, who is

<sup>18</sup> © Reasons to Believe, February 14, 2023. Retrieved July 31, 2024.

<https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/reflections/heresies-never-die-gnosticism>

<sup>19</sup> Olson (1999), 37.

sometimes referred to as Jehovah.<sup>20</sup> God is thus too perfect and pure to have much to do with the evilness of the material universe.<sup>21</sup>

- ✧ **Human Beings:** Gnostics as the spiritual elites reflect “sparks of spirit” or “droplets” of the very same spiritual substance (or essence) as the supreme God. Yet these spirits—through the fall of humanity—have somehow become trapped in physical bodies, which subjected them to sin and disorientation and from which they long for release.<sup>22</sup> Gnostics believe that we became trapped in our physical bodies from which we are to escape.<sup>23</sup>
- ✧ **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.”<sup>24</sup>
- ✧ **Salvation:** Salvation is attained through gaining spiritual secret knowledge and the spiritual essence by which the immortal soul is released from the dungeon of a material body and rejoins the true spiritual God the Father.<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup>
- ✧ **Christ:** The Christ was a heavenly messenger sent from the Father to enlighten only the spiritual ones. As a purely spiritual being, he did not possess a body and thus did not suffer crucifixion nor experience bodily resurrection.<sup>27</sup> 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

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<sup>20</sup> Reasons to Believe (2023).

<sup>21</sup> Olson (1999), 37.

<sup>22</sup> Reasons to Believe (2023).

<sup>23</sup> Olson (1999), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Olson (1999), 37.

<sup>25</sup> Reasons to Believe (2023).

<sup>26</sup> Olson (1999), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Reasons to Believe (2023).

Gnostics believe that whoever entered Jesus at his baptism left him before he died on the cross.<sup>28</sup>

- \* **Gospels:** There were many Gnostic gospels (Gospels of Judas, Philip, Mary, Thomas, etc.) that revealed spiritual truth and were seen as superior to the four canonical Christian Gospels. The discovery of the Gnostic writings of the *Nag Hammadi* library in Egypt in 1945, which contained forty new Gnostic documents from the late fourth century, led to a revival of Gnosticism within both scholarly and popular circles in the modern world.<sup>29</sup>

## BEGINNINGS OF ANCIENT GNOSTICISM

Henry Mansel (in his work on *The Gnostic Heresies*, 32)<sup>30</sup> sums up the principal sources of Gnosticism in these three, Platonism, Zoroastrianism,<sup>31</sup> and the Buddhism of India. To Platonism it owed much of its philosophical form and tendencies. From the Dualism of Zoroastrianism, it derived its speculations regarding the origin of evil, and much of what it taught about emanations. To Buddhism, he thinks, it owed the doctrine of the antagonism between matter and spirit, and the unreality of derived existence—the germ of Docetism. Mansel also holds that there is the possibility that Gnosticism derived certain of its features from the Kabbala (*kabbālāh*), or secret teaching of the Jews in the two books, the *Šēpher yēçīrāh*, or Book of Creation, and the *Zōhar*, or Book of Light. An influence of Buddhism on Gnosticism, however, may safely be doubted, as there is no reason to believe that the knowledge of Buddhist doctrine had so early penetrated into the West. The Jewish works named by Mansel are really products of the Middle Ages (Westcott, *Intro to the Study of the Gospels*, 144–45). The other sources named were really influential. We notice two—the Alexandrian philosophy and the Zoroastrian dualism.<sup>32</sup>

However, the questions of when and from what source Gnosticism arose have been hotly debated. Everett Ferguson asks, “Did Gnosticism originate as a Christian heresy, or did it originate as a non-Christian movement, whether pagan or Jewish?” Even though the Nag Hammadi documents give new evidence, each position still has adherents. “The new Gnostic texts do not solve the chronology of Gnosticism—none is demonstrably earlier

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<sup>28</sup> Olson (1999), 37.

<sup>29</sup> Reasons to Believe (2023).

<sup>30</sup> Mansel, H.L. (1875). *The Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries*. London: John Murray, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Zoroastrianism is one of the world’s oldest monotheistic religions, having originated in ancient Persia. It contains both monotheistic and dualistic elements, and many scholars believe Zoroastrianism influenced the belief systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zoroastrianism>. Retrieved October 18, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Rutherford, J. (1915). “Gnosticism.” In J. Orr, J. L. Nuelsen, E. Y. Mullins, & M. O. Evans (Eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Vols. 1–5, p. 1241). The Howard-Severance Company.

than the New Testament. On the other hand, the collection witnesses to non-Christian expressions of Gnosticism and so reopens the question of the possibility that Christians in the formative period drew on external Gnostic concepts, imagery, and terminology to express their faith, even though at a later stage they found it necessary to combat extreme developments of Gnostic thinking.”<sup>33</sup>

## SIMON MAGUS: THE FATHER OF GNOSTICISM?



Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Acts 8:4-13



The name of Simon Magus figures largely in later tradition. Justin Martyr, for instance, describes him thus: “After the Ascension of our Lord certain men suborned by demons said that they were gods.... Simon, a certain Samaritan, was one of the number who in the reign of Claudius Cæsar performed many magic rites by the aid of demons.” Other writers regard Simon as the father of heresy and the arch-opponent of Christian truth. The present passage proves (1) that Simon was a sorcerer (hence his name “Magus”), (2) that he claimed Divine powers.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, E. (2003). *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Third Edition). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 307.

<sup>34</sup> Andrews, H.T. (1908). *The Acts of the Apostles*. London: Andrew Melrose, 113-114.

Luke clearly depicted Simon as a worker of magic, a charlatan who made money from his bag of tricks.<sup>35</sup> Had we only the account in Acts, there would never have been any question about whether he ever was anything more. The early church fathers, however, tell of a heretical Gnostic sect of Simonians in the second and third centuries who traced their beliefs back to the Simon of Acts. The earliest account is that of Justin Martyr from the middle of the second century.<sup>36</sup> Justin was himself a Samaritan and wrote that Simon, a Samaritan from the village of Gitto, was worshiped by “almost all” of the Samaritans of his day as “the first god.” Dating his rise to acclaim in the reign of Claudius, he spoke of Simon’s journey to Rome, where he was worshiped as a god and had a statue erected to him with the inscription “to the holy god Simon.” Justin also noted that he was accompanied by a female named Helen, who had been a former prostitute, whom his followers claimed to be “the first idea generated by him.” Writing toward the end of the second century, Irenaeus attributed a much more elaborate system to the Simonians.<sup>37</sup> It is quite possible that the Simon of Acts had virtually no connection with Justin’s

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<sup>35</sup> The term “magician” (μάγος) is not used of Simon in the Acts narrative. Instead he is said to have “practiced magic” (μαγεύω) and to have performed “magic acts” (μαγεία). The terminology of μάγος/μαγεία is ambiguous in Hellenistic Greek. Originally meaning a Persian priest, it could be used in a quite positive sense, as it is of the magi-astrologers of Matt 2. It was also used in a pejorative sense of a mere trickster, as seems to be the case with Simon and Elymas (13:6) in Acts. See *Beginnings* 5:164–88; G. Delling, μάγος, μαγεία, μαγεύω, *TDNT* 4:356–59.

<sup>36</sup> Justin, *I Apology* 26:3. The statue was dredged from the Tiber in the sixteenth century and is inscribed “*Semoni deo sancto*” (“to the holy god Semon”). Semon was a native Sabine divinity. The Simonians (or Justin) evidently mistook “Semoni” for “Simoni” and attributed the statue of the Italian god to Simon.

<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.23.1–3. Helen becomes Ennoia or wisdom, an emanation from the godhead who is imprisoned by jealous earthly powers in successive female embodiments, including Helen of Troy, and finally as Helen, a prostitute of Tyre, who is rescued by Simon. Simon is himself the great god in person, the originator of all things. He only appeared to be human but was fully divine. His rescue of Helen represents the liberation of all human spirits from their bondage to the earthly powers. Irenaeus describes the Simonians as thoroughly libertine and sees their licentious behavior as evidence of being liberated from the confining earthly powers. Obviously, the Simonian system developed considerably during the fifty or so years between Justin and Irenaeus. The major question is how it developed from the Simon of Acts to the Simon of Justin Martyr. Later sources which speak of Simon include Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and the Clementines. For a full treatment see *Beginnings* 5:151–63.

Simonians but was “co-opted” by the later Gnostic group to give a New Testament rootage for their movement.<sup>38 39</sup>

Luke makes an interesting observation: They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great” (Acts 8:10). The idea that lies at the back of this expression is as follows:—God possessed many attributes and powers: one of these powers was singled out as “the power *par excellence*,” and Simon was supposed to be the Incarnation of this power of God. The Samaritans regarded Simon Magus somewhat in the same way as the Fourth Gospel regards Christ. Simon Magus is described as the Incarnation of the Power of God—Jesus as the Incarnation of His Word.<sup>40</sup>



Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” And Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

Acts 8:14-24



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<sup>38</sup> The whole Simon question has become a major subject for debate among current NT scholars. Some would see the Simon of Acts as being a genuine pre-Christian teacher of Gnosticism: e.g., E. Haenchen, “Gab es eine vorchristliche Gnosis?” *ZTK* 49 (1952): 316–49; G. Ludemann, “The Acts of the Apostles and the Beginnings of Simonian Gnosis,” *NTS* 33 (1987): 420–26. For those who deny that the Simon of Acts was Gnostic and who question whether there is even a connection with the later Simonians, see W. A. Meeks, “Simon Magus in Recent Research,” *RelSRev* 3 (1977): 137–42; R. Bergmeier, “Die Gestalt des Simon Magus in Act 8 und in der Simonianischen Gnosis,” *ZNW* 77 (1986): 267–75; K. Beyschlag, “Zur Simon-Magus-Frage,” *ZTK* 68 (1971): 395–426. For a mediating view that sees the Simon of Acts as representative of Samaritan heterodoxy and perhaps a Gnostic precursor, see R. McL. Wilson, “Simon, Dositheus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *ZRGG* 9 (1957): 21–30; L. Cerfaux, “La Gnose Simonienne,” *RSR* 15 (1925): 489–511. A useful research-summary for the whole debate is found in K. Rudolph, “Simon-Magus oder Gnosticus? Zum Stand der Debatte,” *TRu* 42 (1977): 279–359.

<sup>39</sup> Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 26:215-216.

<sup>40</sup> Andrews (1908). *The Acts of the Apostles*, 114.

Polhill explains that “Just as Philip’s miracles caught Simon’s attention, so the visible outpouring of the Spirit was absolutely irresistible to the magician.” Just what he “saw,” the text does not say (Acts 8:18). Luke was not interested in the concrete mode of the Spirit’s appearance, only in the fact that the Spirit came to the Samaritans in an objective, verifiable fashion.<sup>41</sup> Whether Simon himself received the Spirit is also not related. One would assume he did not from the drift of the text. He appears as more the onlooker than the participant, and his behavior scarcely betrays any spiritual enlightenment on his part. As a professional, Simon was impressed with the commercial possibilities of the phenomenon he had just witnessed. He therefore offered Peter and John money for the trade secret of how to dispense the Spirit through the laying on of one’s hands.<sup>42</sup>

Though a complete misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit, Simon’s behavior was completely in character for a professional magician.<sup>43</sup> Tricks of the trade were often exchanged among them in financial transactions (Acts 8:19). They were viewed almost as commercial commodities (cf. the enormous “market value” of the magical scrolls Paul persuaded the Ephesians to burn—Acts 19:19).<sup>44</sup>

In his characteristic role as spokesman, Peter responded for himself and John: “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!” (Acts 8:20)

Note that Peter’s words could be viewed as a prediction as much as a condemnation. Simon’s greed was leading him down the path toward eternal destruction.<sup>45</sup> Polhill reminds us that “throughout Acts human greed is always depicted as a most destructive force. It certainly was so for Judas (1:18) and for Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11). It would continue to be so in many subsequent episodes in Acts. Simon was in severe danger that his avarice would destroy him as well. Simon was explicitly depicted as wanting the right to dispense the Spirit, but he probably desired the ability to manipulate the Spirit at his own will, to be able to work miracles and the like (cf. v. 13).<sup>46</sup> But one can never

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<sup>41</sup> Many would see the visible phenomenon as glossolalia, but Luke’s stress was more on its visibility than its audibility. See O. C. Edwards, Jr., “The Exegesis of Acts 8:4–25 and Its Implications for Confirmation and Glossolalia,” *ATRSup* 2 (1973): 100–112.

<sup>42</sup> Polhill (1992). *Acts*, 26:219.

<sup>43</sup> For a picture of Simon as a professional Near Eastern exorcist, see J. D. M. Derrett, “Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24),” *ZNW* 73 (1982): 52–68.

<sup>44</sup> Polhill (1992). *Acts*, 26:219.

<sup>45</sup> The phrase εἰς ἀπώλειαν could be rendered in the sense of “leading to destruction.”

<sup>46</sup> H. Conzelmann, *The Acts of the Apostles*, trans. J. Limburg, A. Kraabel, and D. Juel, *Her* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 66.

manipulate the Spirit; he is always God's "gift" (v. 20) and never subject to the human will.<sup>47</sup> Even in this instance, the Spirit came as God's response to the apostles' prayer. Polhill correctly observes that "Simon completely misunderstood when he saw the Spirit as coming through the human gesture of the apostles' laying their hands on the Samaritans. He was viewing the whole matter through a magician's eyes. But Christianity has nothing to do with magic, and God's Spirit is not subject to a charlatan's manipulation—not in Simon's day or for any profit-making Christian charlatan of our own day. The term "simony" has come into our vocabulary from this incident; however, it is too restrictive, referring primarily to the attempt to secure ecclesiastical office or privilege through monetary means. Were the term fully based on Simon's behavior, it would be extended to cover any attempt to manipulate God for personal gain."<sup>48</sup>

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### EXCURSUS ON SIMON THE MAGICIAN

Simon Magus (Σίμων ὁ μάγος), also known as Simon the Sorcerer or Simon the Magician, was a religious figure whose confrontation with Peter is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 8:9-24. The act of simony, or paying for position, is named after Simon, who tried to buy his way into the power of the Apostles.

According to Acts, Simon was a Samaritan magus<sup>49</sup> or religious figure of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD and a convert to Christianity, baptized by Philip the Evangelist. Simon later clashed with Peter. Accounts of Simon by writers of the second century exist, but are not considered verifiable.<sup>50</sup> Surviving traditions about Simon appear in orthodox texts, such as those of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius, where he is often described as the founder of Gnosticism,<sup>51</sup> which has been accepted by some modern

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<sup>47</sup> That Simon wanted to purchase the Spirit for himself and not just the right to dispense the Spirit may be implied from Peter's reference to his wanting to procure the "gift" of the Spirit. See D. A. Koch, "Geistbesitz, Geistverleihung und Wundermacht: Erwägungen zur Tradition und zur lukanischen Redaktion in Act 8:5-25," *ZNW* 77 (1986): 64-82.

<sup>48</sup> Polhill (1992). *Acts*, 26:219-220.

<sup>49</sup> Magus (singular) or Magi (plural) is the term for priests in Zoroastrianism and earlier Persian religions. The earliest known use of the word *magi* is in the trilingual inscription written by Darius the Great, known as the Behistun Inscription. Old Persian texts, predating the Hellenistic period, refer to a magus as a Zurvanic, and presumably Zoroastrian, priest.

<sup>50</sup> Knight, Kevin (2012). "Simon Magus". [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Retrieved October 19, 2024. It is difficult or rather impossible to extract from them any historical fact the details of which are established with certainty.; "Simon Magus | Samaritan magician". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved October 19, 2024.

<sup>51</sup> St. Irenaeus of Lyons. (1992-2012). *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, (3 volumes). New York: The Newman Press; Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (1833). *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Caesarea, in Palestine*. New York: Swords, Stanford & Company; Hippolytus: *Refutation of All Heresies*

scholars,<sup>52</sup> while others reject claims that he was a Gnostic, maintaining that he was merely considered to be one by the Church Fathers.<sup>53</sup>

Justin, who was himself a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century native of Samaria, wrote that nearly all the Samaritans in his time were adherents of a certain Simon of Gitta, a village not far from Flavia Neapolis. Irenaeus believed him to have been the founder of the sect of the Simonians.<sup>54</sup> Hippolytus quotes from a work he attributes to Simon or his followers the Simonians, *Apophysis Megale*, or *Great Declaration*. According to the early church heresiologists,<sup>55</sup> Simon is also supposed to have written several lost treatises, two of which bear the titles *The Four Quarters of the World* and *The Sermons of the Refuter*.

In apocryphal works including the *Acts of Peter*, *Pseudo-Clementines*, and the *Epistle of the Apostles*, Simon also appears as a formidable sorcerer with the ability to levitate and fly at will. He is sometimes referred to as “the Bad Samaritan” due to his malevolent character.<sup>56</sup> The *Apostolic Constitutions* also accuses him of “lawlessness” (antinomianism<sup>57</sup>).<sup>58</sup>

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, which date from Antioch about the year 400, give the legend of Simon Magus in what we may call its complete form (vi. 7–9): “The source of all heresy is Simon of Gitta. First of all, the story in the Acts is given. Then comes an account of all

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can be found in Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1919; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 5:74–81, for the part we need about Simon; Ferreiro, Alberto (5 May 2018). *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval And Early Modern Traditions*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>52</sup> Rudolph, Kurt (1977), *Die Gnosis: Wesen u. Geschichte e. spätantiken Religion*, Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 312ff.; Haar, Stephen Charles (2003), *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 306.

<sup>53</sup> Antonia Tripolitis (2002). *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 125; Ferreiro (2018), 53.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, William & Wace, Henry, eds. (1887). *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, London: John Murray, 4:682; Hastings, James (1918). *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2:496

<sup>55</sup> In theology or the history of religion, heresiology is the study of heresy, and heresiographies are writings about the topic. Heresiographical works were common in both medieval Christianity and Islam. Heresiology developed as a part of the emerging definition of Christian orthodoxy. Church scholars studied and documented the teachings of various Christian sects in order to clearly distinguish between those they accepted as orthodox and those they rejected as heretical. [Royalty, Robert M. (2013). “Policing the Boundaries: The Politics of Heresiology”. *The Origin of Heresy: A History of Discourse in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*. Milton Park, England: Routledge, 119–146.]

<sup>56</sup> Mark J. Edwards, Mark J. (1997). *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 69.

<sup>57</sup> Antinomianism (ἀντί [anti] “against” + νόμος [nomos] “law”) is any view which rejects laws or legalism and argues against moral, religious or social norms, or is at least considered to do so.

<sup>58</sup> Clement of Rome, translated by Philip Schaff, et al. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*/Volume VII/Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, vi. § 4, 16.

the false teachers who went forth into the world. Then of the contest between Simon and Peter at Cæsarea, where the companions of Peter were Zacchæus the publican, and Barnabas, and Nicetas and Aquila, brothers of Clement, 'bishop and citizen of Rome, who had been the disciple of Paul and co-apostle and helper in the gospel.' They discoursed for three days concerning prophecy and the unity of the Godhead. Then Simon, being defeated, fled into Italy. Then comes an account of the contest at Rome of the same character as we shall come across shortly in the Apocryphal *Acts*.<sup>59</sup>

## HISTORICAL REFERENCES TO SIMON THE MAGICIAN

### *The New Testament*

The canonical Acts of the Apostles (8:9-24) features a short narrative about Simon Magus; this is his only appearance in the New Testament.

MacArthur explains that "Simon had an egotistical view of himself. Practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria led him to claim to be someone great. He saw in Philip's teaching a means to gain more greatness for himself. Magic referred originally to the lore of the Magi—the priests of the Medo-Persians. It was a mix of science and superstition, combining astrology, divination, and occultic practices with history, mathematics, and agriculture. It could be trickery or demonic.

"Simon's hold on the people of Samaria was complete. All of them, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him. Impressed by his occult powers, they exclaimed, This man is what is called the Great Power of God. That title shows that Simon claimed deity for himself (cf. Mark 14:62). That Simon viewed himself as God betrays the most heretical view of self imaginable. The early church Fathers reported that Simon was one of the founders of Gnosticism and that he viewed himself as God incarnate:

The first two teachers to propagate gnostic ideas within Christian circles were Simon and his successor Menander. Unlike later and more famous representatives of Gnosticism, both Simon and Menander claimed divinity for themselves. According to Acts 8:9–11, Simon called himself the "great power of God." The Greek term he used, *dunamis*, was used by later, more orthodox theologians in reference to both the Son and the Holy Spirit.... Justin Martyr also reports Simon's messianic claim.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Headlam, A. C. (1911–1912). "Simon Magus." In J. Hastings, J. A. Selbie, A. B. Davidson, S. R. Driver, & H. B. Swete (Eds.), *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature, and Contents Including the Biblical Theology* (Vol. 4, p. 522). Charles Scribner's Sons; T. & T. Clark. Public Domain.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, Harold O. J. (1984). *Heresies*. [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 50.

“Simon’s perverted view of himself gave Satan an opening to use him to spread false doctrine through the church. His false teaching, later elaborated into full-blown Gnosticism, was to threaten and embattle the church from Paul onward for centuries.”<sup>61</sup>

### *Josephus*

Josephus mentions a magician named Atomus (Simon in Latin manuscripts) as being involved with the Roman procurator Felix, King Agrippa II and his sister Drusilla, where Felix has Simon convince Drusilla to marry him instead of the man she was engaged to. Some scholars have considered the two to be identical,<sup>62</sup> although this is not generally accepted, as the Simon of Josephus is a Jew rather than a Samaritan. Robert McNair Price has spoken on the speculation by academics Ferdinand Christian Baur and Hermann Detering that Simon may be identified with Paul the Apostle.<sup>63</sup>

## **SIMON MAGUS ACCORDING TO THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS**

The writings of the church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, discuss Simon Magus extensively and present him as a dangerous heretic.<sup>64</sup>

### *Justin Martyr*

The earliest attestation of Simon Magus in the post-New Testament era is from Justin Martyr (*ca.* AD 150) in his *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*. In these texts, Justin Martyr associates Simon with demonic activity (*First Apology* 1:26; compare Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*, 3). Justin also provides details about a woman named Helena who was an influential advocate of Simon’s teachings.

Justin identifies Simon’s birthplace as Gitta, a city in Samaria. This detail, coupled with the fact that Samaria at the time was an emerging center of Gnosticism and other heretical sects, prompted later church fathers like Irenaeus to allege that Simon was the founder of Gnosticism. However, evidence for this claim is lacking and was likely embellished by Irenaeus; it’s also possible to interpret Irenaeus’ comments as him indicating that the ideas of Gnosticism emerge with Simon.<sup>65</sup> According to Haar, Justin’s works demonstrate

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<sup>61</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). Chicago: Moody Press, 1:240-241.

<sup>62</sup> Hilgenfeld, *Ketzergeschichte*, p. 170; Albert, *Die Ersten Fünfzehn Jahre der Christlichen Kirche*, p. 114, Münster, 1900; Waitz, in *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, v. 128; Price 2012.

<sup>63</sup> “Dr. Robert Price: The True Identity of St. Paul”. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfsu1xXa\\_VI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfsu1xXa_VI). <https://creatingchristdoc.com/>. Excerpt from the interview with Dr. Robert Price for the documentary “Creating Christ”. Module 6 of 9. Retrieved October 19, 2024.

<sup>64</sup> For a summary of Simon Magus accounts in Christian writers prior to AD 400, see Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 83–131.

<sup>65</sup> Compare Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*, 38; Yamauchi, *Gnosticism*, 56–68

that Simon “performed mighty acts of magic in the city of Rome, through the agency of demons at work within him.”<sup>66</sup>

Justin Martyr (in his *Apologies*, and in a lost work against heresies, which Irenaeus used as his main source) and Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses*) record that after being cast out by the Apostles, Simon Magus came to Rome where, having joined to himself a profligate woman of the name of Helen, he gave out that it was he who appeared among the Jews as the Son, in Samaria as the Father and among other nations as the Holy Spirit. He performed such signs by magic acts during the reign of Claudius that he was regarded as a god and honored with a statue on the island in the Tiber which the two bridges cross, with the inscription *Simoni Deo Sancto*,<sup>67</sup> “To Simon the Holy God” (*First Apology, XXVI*). However, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, a statue was unearthed on the island in question, inscribed to Semo Sancus,<sup>68</sup> a Sabine<sup>69</sup> deity,<sup>70</sup> leading some scholars to conclude that Justin Martyr confused *Semoni Sancus* with Simon.

### *Irenaeus*

Church father Irenaeus borrows extensively from Justin. Irenaeus’ primary work addressing Simon, *Against Heresies*, may have been composed ca. AD 180–185. Irenaeus condemns Simon as “the father of all heresies” and as an enthusiast of magic who did not possess genuine faith in God.<sup>71</sup>

Irenaeus expands on the identity and influence of Helena and offers a detailed explanation of Simon’s teachings. For instance, he writes that those whom he oppose believe that “Simon is the first god called ‘great’ power, and Helena his ‘Ennoia’ (first thought) is the mother of all, who created the angels and in turn they created the world.”<sup>72</sup> Irenaeus depicts Simon’s teaching and followers as not in accord with the gospel and in

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<sup>66</sup> Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 85

<sup>67</sup> Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). “Simon Magus.” In *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>68</sup> In ancient Roman religion, Sancus (also known as Sangus or Semo Sancus) was a god of trust (*fides*), honesty, and oaths. His cult, one of the most ancient amongst the Romans, probably derived from Umbrian influences. Cato and Silius Italicus wrote that Sancus was a Sabine god and father of the eponymous Sabine hero Sabus. He is thus sometimes considered a founder-deity.

<sup>69</sup> The Sabines were an Italic people who lived in the central Apennine Mountains of the ancient Italian Peninsula, also inhabiting Latium north of the Anio before the founding of Rome.

<sup>70</sup> *Semoni Sanco Deo*. Gruter, Janus (1707). *Inscriptiones antiquae totius orbis romani, in absolutissimum corpus redactae*. Amsterdam: Franciscus Halma, 1:95 n. 5.

<sup>71</sup> *Adversus Haereses* 1.23:2; Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 93.

<sup>72</sup> *Adversus Haereses* 1.23.1–4.

need of refutation. Harr observes, “Clearly Irenaeus not only presents Simon as the author of a rival message, and a false ‘gnosis,’ but as a dangerous divine pretender.”<sup>73</sup>

### *Hippolytus*

Irenaeus’ disciple Hippolytus also understood Simon Magus as an apostate. Similar to the church fathers before him, he recounts Simon’s confrontations with the apostles in Rome, where he met opposition from Peter in particular for his teachings.<sup>74</sup> Hippolytus goes beyond Irenaeus by providing further information about Simon’s background. For instance, Hippolytus notes that a sorcerer named Thrasymedes mentored Simon and taught him how to deify himself.<sup>75</sup> Hippolytus denounces such teaching by stressing that it was perpetrated by demons and fully repudiated by the apostles.

Hippolytus provides a lengthy discourse comparing Simon to another well-known sorcerer, Apsethus from Libya. He recounts how Apsethus, who also believed himself to be divine, trained a flock of parrots to repeat the phrase “Apsethus is a god” and then sent them out to spread that message. The parrots failed to convince the area’s residents, who in turn trained the parrots to repeat that Apsethus had tricked them and that he really was not a god. When the Libyans heard this, they came together and burned Apsethus.<sup>76</sup> In giving this extra background information, Hippolytus apparently sought to remind his readers that Simon was a worthless magician and a fraud.<sup>77</sup>

In *Philosophumena*,<sup>78</sup> Hippolytus retells the narrative on Simon written by Irenaeus (who in his turn based it on the lost *Syntagma* of Justin). Upon the story of “the lost sheep”, Hippolytus comments as follows:

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<sup>73</sup> Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 94.

<sup>74</sup> *Adversus Haereses* 6.15.

<sup>75</sup> Hippolytus (1971). *Refutation* 6.2.

<sup>76</sup> Hippolytus (1971). *Refutation* 6.3.

<sup>77</sup> Hippolytus (1971). *Refutation* 2.3.

<sup>78</sup> The *Refutation of All Heresies* (Φιλοσοφούμενα ἢ κατὰ πασῶν αἱρέσεων ἔλεγχος, *Philosophoumena hē kata pasōn haireseōn elenchos*; Latin: *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*), also called the *Elenchus* or *Philosophumena*, is a compendious Christian polemical work of the early third century, whose attribution to Hippolytus of Rome or an unknown “Pseudo-Hippolytus” is disputed. It catalogues both pagan beliefs and 33 Gnostic systems deemed heretical by the author/s and/or compiler/s, making it a major source of information on contemporary opponents of Christian orthodoxy as understood today.

The first book, a synopsis of Greek philosophy, circulated separately in several manuscripts and was known as the *Philosophoumena* (Φιλοσοφούμενα “philosophical teachings”), a title which some extend to the whole work. Books IV-X were recovered in 1842 in a manuscript at Mount Athos, while books II and III remain lost. The work was long attributed incorrectly to the early Christian theologian Origen.

But the liar was enamoured of this wench, whose name was Helen, and had bought her and had her to wife, and it was out of respect for his disciples that he invented this fairy-tale.<sup>79</sup>

Also, Hippolytus demonstrates acquaintance with the folk tradition on Simon which depicts him rather as a magician than Gnostic, and in constant conflict with Peter (also present in the apocrypha and Pseudo-Clementine literature). Reduced to despair by the curse laid upon him by Peter in the Acts, Simon soon abjured the faith and embarked on the career of a sorcerer:<sup>80</sup>

Until he came to Rome also and fell foul of the Apostles. Peter withstood him on many occasions. At last he came ... and began to teach sitting under a plane tree. When he was on the point of being shown up, he said, in order to gain time, that if he were buried alive he would rise again on the third day. So he bade that a tomb should be dug by his disciples and that he should be buried in it. Now they did what they were ordered, but he remained there until now: for he was not the Christ.<sup>81</sup>

### *Later Works*

Simon also appears in the writings of others from the early church period, such as Tertullian, Epiphanius, and even in the so-called pseudo-Clementine literature, which depicts Simon as a deceiver.<sup>82</sup> Throughout the post-New Testament literature, Simon Magus is viewed as a counterfeit believer and antagonist of the Christian faith. These disparaging portrayals continued through the medieval era and into early modern traditions in both literary and artistic renditions. As a result, it is likely that Simon Magus will forever be identified as the quintessential heretic.<sup>83</sup>

### *Myth of Simon and Helen*

Justin and Irenaeus are the first to recount the myth of Simon and Helen, which became the center of Simonian doctrine. Epiphanius of Salamis also makes Simon speak in the

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<sup>79</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, 6, 19.

<sup>80</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>81</sup> Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, 6, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 118–131.

<sup>83</sup> (For a detailed discussion of Simon throughout the centuries, see Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*); Aernie, M. D. (2016). "Simon Magus." In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

first person in several places in his *Panarion*,<sup>84</sup> and the implication is that he is quoting from a version of it, though perhaps not verbatim.<sup>85</sup>

As described by Epiphanius, in the beginning God had his first thought, his *Ennoia*, which was female, and that thought was to create the angels. The First Thought then descended into the lower regions and created the angels. But the angels rebelled against her out of jealousy and created the world as her prison, imprisoning her in a female body. Thereafter, she was reincarnated many times, each time being shamed. Her many reincarnations included Helen of Troy, among others, and she finally was reincarnated as Helen, a slave and prostitute in the Phoenician city of Tyre. God then descended in the form of Simon Magus, to rescue his *Ennoia*, and to confer salvation upon men through knowledge of himself.<sup>86</sup>

“And on her account”, he says, “did I come down; for this is that which is written in the Gospel ‘the lost sheep’.”

— Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 21.3.5<sup>87</sup>

For as the angels were mismanaging the world, owing to their individual lust for rule, he had come to set things straight, and had descended under a changed form, likening himself to the Principalities and Powers through whom he passed, so that among men he appeared as a man, though he was not a man, and was thought to have suffered in Judaea, though he had not suffered.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> In early Christian heresiology, the *Panarion* (Koinē Greek: Πανάριον, derived from Latin *panarium*, meaning “bread basket”), to which 16<sup>th</sup> Century Latin translations gave the name *Adversus Haereses* (Latin: “Against Heresies”), is the most important of the works of Epiphanius of Salamis. It was written in Koine Greek beginning in 374 or 375, and issued about three years later, as a treatise on heresies, with its title referring to the text as a “stock of remedies to offset the poisons of heresy.” It treats 80 religious sects, either organized groups or philosophies, from the time of Adam to the latter part of the fourth century, detailing their histories, and rebutting their beliefs. The *Panarion* is an important source of information on the Jewish–Christian gospels, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.

The treatise can be considered a sequel to the *Ancoratus* (374), which takes the form of a letter to the church of Syedra in Pamphylia, describing how the “barque” of the church can counteract the contrary winds of heretical thought, and become “anchored” (ἀγκυρωτός); hence the title of the work; the *Ancoratus* even outlines the content of the *Panarion* within its text. [Williams, Frank; translator (1987). “Introduction”. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, Book I, Sections 1-46.]

<sup>85</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>86</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, Frank (1987). *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (2 volumes). Leiden; New York; København; Köln: E.J. Brill, 1:60.

<sup>88</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

“But in each heaven I changed my form,” says he, “in accordance with the form of those who were in each heaven, that I might escape the notice of my angelic powers and come down to the Thought, who is none other than her who is also called Prunikos and Holy Ghost, through whom I created the angels, while the angels created the world and men.”

— Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 21.2.4<sup>89</sup>

But the prophets had delivered their prophecies under the inspiration of the world-creating angels: wherefore those who had their hope in him and in Helen minded them no more, and, as being free, did what they pleased; for men were saved according to his grace, but not according to just works. For works were not just by nature, but only by convention, in accordance with the enactments of the world-creating angels, who by precepts of this kind sought to bring men into slavery. Wherefore he promised that the world should be dissolved, and that those who were his should be freed from the dominion of the world-creators.<sup>90</sup>

In this account of Simon there is a large portion common to almost all forms of Gnostic myths, together with something special to this form. They have in common the place in the work of creation assigned to the female principle, the conception of the Deity; the ignorance of the rulers of this lower world with regard to the Supreme Power; the descent of the female (Sophia)<sup>91</sup> into the lower regions, and her inability to return. Special to the Simonian tale is the identification of Simon himself with the Supreme, and of his consort Helena with the female principle.<sup>92</sup>

### *Simonians*

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<sup>89</sup> Williams (1987). 1:58.

<sup>90</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>91</sup> Sophia (Koinē Greek: Σοφία "Wisdom", Coptic: τσοφια "the Sophia"Ⲫ) is a major theme, along with Knowledge (γνώσις *gnosis*, Coptic: τσωον τsōwn), among many of the early Christian knowledge theologies grouped by the heresiologist Irenaeus as *gnostikoi* (γνωστικοί), "knowing" or "men that claimed to have deeper wisdom". Gnosticism is a 17<sup>th</sup> century term expanding the definition of Irenaeus' groups to include other syncretic faiths and the Greco-Roman mysteries.

In Gnosticism, Sophia is a feminine figure, analogous to the human soul but also simultaneously one of the feminine aspects of God. Gnostics held that she was the *syzygy*, or female twin, of Jesus, i.e. the Bride of Christ, and the Holy Spirit of the Trinity. She is occasionally referred to by the term *Achamōth* (Ἀχαμώθ, Hebrew: חכמה *chokmah*) and as *Prunikos* (Προύνικος). In the Nag Hammadi texts, Sophia is the lowest aeon or anthropic emanation of the godhead. She would be the daughter of Elohim.

<sup>92</sup> One or more of the preceding sentences incorporates text from a publication now in the public domain: Salmon, George (1911). "Simon Magus." In Wace, Henry; Piercy, William C. (eds.). *Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century* (3rd ed.). London: John Murray.

Heresiologists attribute the origin of the sect of the Simonians to Simon Magus, which did not possess heavily gnostic traits. The most salient points of the teachings were as follows: Simon was considered to be the chief God and Helen, a prostitute whom he had rescued from a brothel in Tyre, was the Thought (Ennoia) that had emerged from his mind. Helen had created the intermediary powers (angels and archangels), which in turn had created the world. Envious and jealous, these created beings had enclosed Helen within a human body, forcing her to transmigrate from one body to another. To deliver Helen and all humankind from the power of the intermediary powers, Simon descended to earth, granting people the ability to know God, as the Son in Judea, as the Father in Samaria and as the Holy Spirit in other regions. Salvation was obtained through faith in Simon's liberating power.

These teachings do not appear very much in line with gnostic systems, and the most difficult problems that arise coincide with the individuation of their primitive and central nucleus, because traits and analogies with a certain type of preaching in Samaria can be considered either as primordial or later additions. The following have a gnostic stamp: the hostility of the intermediary powers toward God and human beings, the view that the human body is a prison of the divine element and disregard for the Old Testament. Other traits are indefinable or at least without justification as a gnostic theme: the deification of Simon and Helen, their claimed immortality, the failure to link a specific fault that justifies Simon's descent, the lack of connection between redemption and the knowledge of Simon's nature. One has the impression that this movement had moved toward Jewish-Christian gnosticism but had not yet entered gnosticism properly speaking.<sup>93</sup>

Hippolytus gives a much more doctrinally detailed account of Simonianism, including a system of divine emanations and interpretations of the Old Testament, with extensive quotations from the *Apophysis Megale*. Some believe that Hippolytus' account is of a later, more developed form of Simonianism, and that the original doctrines of the group were simpler, close to the account given by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus (this account however is also included in Hippolytus' work).

Hippolytus says the free love doctrine was held by them in its purest form, and speaks in language similar to that of Irenaeus about the variety of magic arts practiced by the Simonians, and also of their having images of Simon and Helen under the forms of Zeus and Athena. But he also adds, "if any one, on seeing the images either of Simon

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<sup>93</sup> Peretto, E., & Starowieyski, M. (2014). "Simon Magus—Simonians." In A. Di Berardino & J. Hoover (Eds.), & J. T. Papa, E. A. Koenke, & E. E. Hewett (Trans.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (3:588–589). IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press.

or Helen, shall call them by those names, he is cast out, as showing ignorance of the mysteries.”<sup>94</sup>

### ***Epiphanius***

Epiphanius writes that there were some Simonians still in existence in his day (c. AD 367), but he speaks of them as almost extinct. Gitta, he says, had sunk from a town into a village. Epiphanius further charges Simon with having tried to wrest the words of Paul about the armor of God<sup>95</sup> into agreement with his own identification of the *Ennoia* with Athena. He tells us also that he gave barbaric names to the “principalities and powers”, and that he was the beginning of the Gnostics. The Law, according to him, was not of God, but of “the sinister power”. The same was the case with the prophets, and it was death to believe in the Old Testament.<sup>96</sup>

### **Cyril of Jerusalem**

Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 346) in the sixth of his Catechetical Lectures prefaces his history of the Manichaeans by a brief account of earlier heresies: Simon Magus, he says, had given out that he was going to be translated to heaven, and was actually careening through the air in a chariot drawn by demons when Peter and Paul knelt down and prayed, and their prayers brought him to earth a mangled corpse.<sup>97</sup>

## **SIMON THE MAGICIAN IN THE APOCRYPHA**

### ***Acts of Peter***

Simon Magus plays a prominent role in the noncanonical works *Acts of Peter* and *Acts of Peter and Paul*, both of which portray him as an agent of Satan. In both texts Simon is ultimately defeated by the power of God working through the apostles. This may be compared to the traditions of the early church fathers, although these works certainly did not agree with their viewpoints in their entirety.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>95</sup> Ephesians 6:14-16.

<sup>96</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>97</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem. (1894). “The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem.” In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), & R. W. Church & E. H. Gifford (Trans.), *S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen* (7:44–47). Christian Literature Company; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>98</sup> Aernie, M. D. (2016). “Simon Magus.” In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

The apocryphal *Acts of Peter* gives a more elaborate tale of Simon Magus' death. Simon is performing magic in the Forum, and, in order to prove himself to be a god, he levitates into the air above the Forum. The apostle Peter prays to God to stop his flying, and he stops mid-air and falls into a place called "the *Sacra Via*" (meaning "Holy Way" in Latin), breaking his legs "in three parts". The previously non-hostile crowd then stones him. Now gravely injured, he has some people carry him on a bed at night from Rome to Ariccia, and is brought from there to Terracina to a person named Castor, who has been banished from Rome, on account of accusations of sorcery levelled against him. The Acts then continue to say that he died "while being sorely cut by two physicians."<sup>99</sup>

### *Acts of Peter and Paul*

Another apocryphal document, the *Acts of Peter and Paul* gives a slightly different version of the above incident, which was shown in the context of a debate in front of the Emperor Nero. In this version, Paul the Apostle is present along with Peter, Simon levitates from a high wooden tower made upon his request, and dies "divided into four parts" due to the fall. Peter and Paul are then imprisoned by Nero, who further orders that Simon's body be kept carefully for three days, in case, Christ-like, the magician should rise again.<sup>100</sup>

### *Pseudo-Clementine literature*

The Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and *Homilies* give an account of Simon Magus and some of his teachings in regards to the Simonians. They are of uncertain date and authorship, and seem to have been worked over by several hands in the interest of diverse forms of belief.<sup>101</sup>

Simon was a Samaritan, and a native of Gitta. The name of his father was Antonius, that of his mother Rachel.<sup>102</sup> He studied Greek literature in Alexandria, and, having in addition to this great power in magic, became so ambitious that he wished to be considered a highest power, higher even than the God who created the world. And sometimes he "darkly hinted" that he himself was Christ, calling himself the Standing One. Which name he used to indicate that he would stand for ever, and had no cause in him for bodily decay. He did not believe that the God who created the world was the highest, nor that the dead would rise. He denied Jerusalem, and introduced Mount Gerizim in its stead. In place of the Christ of the Christians he proclaimed himself; and

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<sup>99</sup> "The Acts of Peter." [www.earlychristianwritings.com](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com)

<sup>100</sup> *Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*.

<sup>101</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>102</sup> Clementine. *Recognitions*, Book 2.

the Law he allegorized in accordance with his own preconceptions. He did indeed preach righteousness and judgment to come.<sup>103</sup>

There was one John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus in accordance with the law of parity; and as Jesus had twelve Apostles, bearing the number of the twelve solar months, so had he thirty leading men, making up the monthly tale of the moon. One of these thirty leading men was a woman called Helen, and the first and most esteemed by John was Simon. But on the death of John he was away in Egypt for the practice of magic, and one Dositheus, by spreading a false report of Simon's death, succeeded in installing himself as head of the sect. Simon on coming back thought it better to dissemble, and, pretending friendship for Dositheus, accepted the second place. Soon, however, he began to hint to the thirty that Dositheus was not as well acquainted as he might be with the doctrines of the school.<sup>104</sup>

Dositheus, when he perceived that Simon was depreciating him, fearing lest his reputation among men might be obscured (for he himself was supposed to be the Standing One), moved with rage, when they met as usual at the school, seized a rod, and began to beat Simon; but suddenly the rod seemed to pass through his body, as if it had been smoke. On which Dositheus, being astonished, says to him, "Tell me if thou art the Standing One, that I may adore thee." And when Simon answered that he was, then Dositheus, perceiving that he himself was not the Standing One, fell down and worshipped him, and gave up his own place as chief to Simon, ordering all the rank of thirty men to obey him; himself taking the inferior place which Simon formerly occupied. Not long after this he died.<sup>105</sup>

The encounter between Dositheus and Simon Magus was the beginnings of the sect of Simonians. The narrative goes on to say that Simon, having fallen in love with Helen, took her about with him, saying that she had come down into the world from the highest heavens, and was his mistress, inasmuch as she was Sophia, the Mother of All. It was for her sake, he said, that the Greeks and Barbarians fought the Trojan War, deluding themselves with an image of truth, for the real being was then present with the First God.<sup>106</sup> By such allegories Simon deceived many, while at the same time he astounded

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<sup>103</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>104</sup> Clementine *Homilies*, ii. 23; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>105</sup> Clementine *Recognitions*, ii. 11.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* II, 9, 10: "They first maintain that the Soul and a certain 'Wisdom' [Sophia] declined and entered this lower sphere . . . Yet in the same breath, that very Soul which was the occasion of descent to the others is declared not to have descended. 'It knew no decline,' but merely illuminated the darkness in such a way that an image of it was formed upon the Matter. Then, they shape an image of that image somewhere below — through the medium of Matter or of Materiality . . . and so they bring into being what they call the Creator or Demiurge, then this lower is severed from his Mother [Sophia]

them by his magic. A description is given of how he made a familiar spirit for himself by conjuring the soul out of a boy and keeping his image in his bedroom, and many instances of his feats of magic are given.<sup>107</sup>

### ANTI-PAULINISM WRITINGS

The Pseudo-Clementine writings were used in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by members of the Ebionite sect, one characteristic of which was hostility to Paul, whom they refused to recognize as an apostle.<sup>108</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), founder of the Tübingen School, drew attention to the anti-Pauline characteristic in the Pseudo-Clementines, and pointed out that in the disputations between Simon and Peter, some of the claims Simon is represented as making (e.g. that of having seen the Lord, though not in his lifetime, yet subsequently in vision) were really the claims of Paul; and urged that Peter's refutation of Simon was in some places intended as a polemic against Paul.<sup>109</sup> The enmity between Peter and Simon is clearly shown. Simon's magical powers are juxtaposed with Peter's powers in order to express Peter's authority over Simon through the power of prayer, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> Homily, the identification of Paul with Simon Magus is effected. Simon is there made to maintain that he has a better knowledge of the mind of Jesus than the disciples, who had seen and conversed with Jesus in person. His reason for this strange assertion is that visions are superior to waking reality, as divine is superior to human.<sup>110</sup> Peter has much to say in reply to this, but the passage which mainly concerns us is as follows:<sup>111</sup>

But can any one be educated for teaching by vision? And if you shall say, "It is possible," why did the Teacher remain and converse with waking men for a whole year? And how can we believe you even as to the fact that he appeared to you? And how can he have appeared to you seeing that your sentiments are opposed to his teaching? But if you were seen and taught by him for a single hour, and so became an apostle, then preach his words, expound his meaning, love his apostles, fight not with me who had converse with him. For it is against a solid rock, the foundation-stone of the Church, that you have opposed yourself in opposing me. If you were not an adversary, you would not be slandering me and reviling the

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and becomes the author of the Cosmos down to the latest of the succession of images constituting it." MacKenna trans., 230; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>107</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>108</sup> As the *Peregrinations of Peter*. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 30.15.1; Williams (1987), 1:131; Salmon (1911). "Simon Magus."

<sup>109</sup> Salmon (1911). "Simon Magus."

<sup>110</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain. Clementine *Homilies*, xvii. 5; 14.

<sup>111</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

preaching that is given through me, in order that, as I heard myself in person from the Lord, when I speak I may not be believed, as though forsooth it were I who was condemned and I who was reprobate. Or, if you call me condemned, you are accusing God who revealed the Christ to me, and are inveighing against Him who called me blessed on the ground of the revelation. But if indeed you truly wish to work along with the truth, learn first from us what we learnt from Him, and when you have become a disciple of truth, become our fellow-workman.<sup>112</sup>

The anti-Pauline context of the Pseudo-Clementines is recognised, but the association with Simon Magus is surprising, according to Jozef Verheyden, since they have little in common.<sup>113</sup> However the majority of scholars accept Baur's identification,<sup>114</sup> though others, including Lightfoot, argued extensively that the "Simon Magus" of the Pseudo-Clementines was not meant to stand for Paul.<sup>115</sup> More recently, Berlin pastor Hermann Detering (1995) has made the case that the veiled anti-Pauline stance of the Pseudo-Clementines has historical roots, that the Acts 8 encounter between Simon the magician and Peter is itself based on the conflict between Peter and Paul.<sup>116</sup> Detering's belief has not found general support among scholars, but Robert M. Price argues much the same case in *The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul* (2012).<sup>117</sup>

### ***Identification of Simon as the Apostle Paul***

Since Ferdinand Christian Baur in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, scholars including Hermann Detering and Margaret Barket have concluded that the attacks on "Simon Magus" in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Pseudo-Clementines may be attacks on Paul. Detering takes the attacks of the Pseudo-Clementines as literal and historical, and suggests that the attacks of the Pseudo-Clementines are correct in identifying "Simon Magus" as a proxy for Paul of Tarsus,<sup>118</sup> with Simon-Paul originally having been detested by the church, and the name changed

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<sup>112</sup> Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>113</sup> "The decision [in the Pseudo-Clementines] to associate Paul with Simon Magus is surprising since they have little in common. It is generally accepted that this association represents a later stage in the development of Ps.-Clem. and was an attempt to do away with or adapt some of the criticisms that had been aimed at Paul." Verheyden, Jozef (2004), "Demonization of the Opponent." In Hetteema, Theo L.; van der Kooij, Arie (eds.), *Religious Polemics in Context*, 333.

<sup>114</sup> "Baur's view that Simon is Paul has occasionally been questioned ..." Bockmuehl, Markus (2010). *The Remembered Peter: In Ancient Reception and Modern Debate*. Mohr Siebeck, 102.

<sup>115</sup> "... letters (beginning of the second century AD, which give no evidence of strife between Peter and Paul) were spurious and late ... The idea of a revival of Baur's thesis appears to be quite self-conscious and explicit." Pate, C. Marvin (2000). *The Reverse of the Curse: Paul, Wisdom, and the Law*, 439.

<sup>116</sup> Hermann Detering, *The Dutch Radical Approach to the Pauline Epistles*.

<sup>117</sup> Price, Robert M. (2012), *The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul*, Signature Books.

<sup>118</sup> Hermann Detering, *The Dutch Radical Approach to the Pauline Epistles*.

to Paul when he was rehabilitated by virtue of forged Epistles *correcting* the genuine ones.<sup>119</sup> Robert Price has stated his agreement with this assertion.

### *Anti-Marcionism*

There are other features in the portrait which are reminiscent of Marcion. The first thing mentioned in the *Homilies* about Simon's opinions is that he denied that God was just.<sup>120</sup> By "God" he meant the creator god. But he undertakes to prove from the Jewish scriptures that there is a higher god, who really possesses the perfections which are falsely ascribed to the lower god.<sup>121</sup> On these grounds Peter complains that, when he was setting out for the gentiles to convert them from their worship of *many gods upon earth*, Satan had sent Simon before him to make them believe that there were *many gods in heaven*.<sup>122</sup>

### **Druidism**

In Irish legend Simon Magus came to be associated with Druidism. He is said to have come to the aid of the Druid Mog Ruith.<sup>123</sup> The fierce denunciation of Christianity by Irish

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<sup>119</sup> See also: F C Baur; A. Hilgenfeld; Hermann Detering (1995, translated into English in 2003). *The Falsified Paul: Early Christianity in the Twilight*; and J.R. Porter, *The Lost Bible*, 230.

<sup>120</sup> Clementine *Homilies*, ii. 14.

<sup>121</sup> Clementine *Homilies*, iii. 10; 38.

<sup>122</sup> E.g. Clementine *Homilies*, iii. 3; 9; 59; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

<sup>123</sup> Mug Ruith (or Mogh Roith, "slave of the wheel") is a figure in Irish mythology, a powerful blind druid of Munster who lived on Valentia Island, County Kerry. He could grow to enormous size, and his breath caused storms and turned men to stone. He wore a hornless bull-hide and a bird mask, and flew in a ship called the *roth rámach*, the "oared wheel". He had a fiery ox-driven chariot with blazing jewels that made night seem as bright as day, a star-speckled black shield with a silver rim, and a stone which could turn into a poisonous eel when thrown in water.

**Legend:** Stories about Mug Ruith are set in various periods of Irish history. Some say he lived during the reign of 3<sup>rd</sup> century High King Cormac mac Airt, while others put him in Jerusalem during the time of Christ. In *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* he is said to have died in the reign of Conmael, nearly two thousand years before Cormac's time. Perhaps due to this array of times and settings, poets attributed the druid with extraordinary longevity (he lived through the reign of nineteen kings according to one story). His powers and long lifespan have led some to conclude he was a euhemerized sun or storm god.

The various medieval legends about his adventures in the Holy Land at the dawn of Christendom paint him as an interesting and mysterious character, a defender of paganism and an enemy of Christianity. He is said to have been a student of Simon Magus, who taught him his magic skills and helped him build *roth rámach*. *Roth rámach* is described as a flying machine with great destructive power. It blinded those who looked at it, deafens whoever hears it, and kills whoever it strikes. A prophecy attributed to Saint Columba describes the ship as laying waste to Europe before the Last Judgement. Another vehicle attributed to him is a chariot. This description leads scholar Aideen M. O'Leary to speculate he may have been an euhemerized sun god.

Druids appears to have resulted in Simon Magus being associated with Druidism. The word Druid was sometimes translated into Latin as *magus*, and Simon Magus was also known in Ireland as “Simon the Druid.”<sup>124</sup>

## MEDIEVAL LEGENDS, LATER INTERPRETATIONS

The church of Santa Francesca Romana, Rome, is claimed to have been built on the spot where Simon fell. Within the Church is a dented slab of marble that purports to bear the imprints of the knees of Peter and Paul during their prayer. The fantastic stories of Simon the Sorcerer persisted into the later Middle Ages,<sup>125</sup> becoming a possible inspiration for the *Faustbuch* and Goethe’s *Faust*.<sup>126</sup>

The opening story in Danilo Kiš’s 1983 collection *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, “Simon Magus”, retells the confrontation between Simon and Peter agreeing with the account in the *Acts of Peter*, and provides an additional alternative ending in which Simon asks to be buried alive in order to be resurrected three days later (after which his body is found putrefied).<sup>127</sup>

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## GNOSTICISM: A SUMMARY ANALYSIS

David Sholer clarifies that “Gnosticism is the modern term used for a religious and philosophical movement that originated in the first or second century AD, and was especially strong in the second and third centuries AD. It was considered heretical by both

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In at least two other poems Mug Ruith is identified as the executioner who beheaded John the Baptist, bringing a curse to the Irish people. He cuts an equally impressive figure in *The Siege of Knocklong*, set in Cormac mac Airt’s time. Here he defeats Cormac’s druids in an elaborate magical battle in exchange for land from King Fiachu Muillethan of southern Munster, from whom Cormac had been trying to levy taxes. Mug Ruith’s daughter was Tlachtga, a powerful druidess, who gave her name to a hill in County Meath and a festival celebrated there. Tlachtga, who was raped by Simon Magus while her father was learning magic, gave birth to three sons Dorb, Cuma, and Muach.

<sup>124</sup> Spence, Lewis (1999). *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain*. Courier Corporation, 36.

<sup>125</sup> Sometimes with Mug Ruith. MacKillop, James (2004) [1998]. *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 337.

<sup>126</sup> “Surely few admirers of Marlowe’s and Goethe’s plays have an inkling that their hero is the descendant of a gnostic sectary, and that the beautiful Helen called up by his art was once the fallen Thought of God through whose raising mankind was to be saved.” Jonas, Hans (2001) [1958]. *The Gnostic Religion* (3rd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press, 111.

<sup>127</sup> Power, Chris (2 August 2012). “A brief survey of the short story part 42: Danilo Kiš”. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 16 December 2013; Taylor, Benjamin (1995). *Into the Open: Reflections on Genius and Modernity*. NYU Press, 107 n.1.

the majority of Christians at that time (proto-orthodox)<sup>128</sup> as well as the majority of the pagan representatives of the Platonic philosophical traditions. The movement, though not a single, monolithic social-theological reality, emphasized a claim to special *gnosis* (“knowledge”); thus, the terms *Gnostics* and *Gnosticism*.”

Scholer presents the following analyses of Gnosticism:

### **1. Definitions and Characteristics**

“The church fathers sometimes referred to the Gnostics by the names of their leaders (e.g., Basilides; Valentinus) and by group designations based on names (e.g., Nicolaitans) or concepts (e.g., Ophites, based on the Greek term for serpent). The surviving primary Gnostic texts show no evidence of the term *Gnostics* as a self-designation; rather they use as identity markers terms and phrases drawn from their theological self-understandings (e.g., offspring of Seth; elect; enlightened ones; immovable race; the perfect).

“The foundational conviction of the Gnostics is a radical anti-cosmic dualism in which all that is material—the world and the body—is seen as evil and as the creation of a lesser, inferior god. The inferior god arose through some mysterious tragic split within the ultimate realm (usually the Pleroma) of the ultimate, true God (often called Father-Mother or Father of All). In Christian Gnostic texts from

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<sup>128</sup> This is a term coined by Bart Ehrman, who incorrectly contends that “orthodoxy” is not a first-century phenomenon but only a later concept that allowed the Roman church to squelch alternate versions of Christianity. Walter Bauer [the co-author of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis which teaches this] virtually ignores the New Testament evidence while believing to find evidence for early heresy and late orthodoxy in various urban centers of the second century. Ehrman, likewise, makes much of second-century diversity and assigns the notion of orthodoxy to later church councils. The precursors of the orthodox, Ehrman calls “proto-orthodox,” even though it must, of course, be remembered that at the time this group was not the only legitimate representative of Christianity according to Ehrman, which renders the expression anachronistic.

What are we to say about this way of presenting things? In essence, the argument is circular. Once “orthodoxy” is defined in fourth-century terms as ecclesiastical doctrine hammered out by the various ecumenical councils, any doctrinal core preceding the fourth century can be considered “proto-orthodox” at best. Thus, the validation of the Bauer-Ehrman thesis becomes in effect a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bauer, Ehrman, and others have cleverly recast the terminological landscape of the debate, most importantly by narrowing the term “orthodoxy” to a degree of doctrinal sophistication only reached in subsequent centuries, so that everything else falls short by comparison. Then they put “diversity” in the place of what was conventionally understood as orthodoxy. [Köstenberger, A. J., & Kruger, M. J. (2010). *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity*. Wheaton: Crossway, 70.]

the second century the inferior god is usually identified with the creator god of Genesis, who then clearly is not the ultimate, true God.

“In addition, most Gnostic texts and systems reflect a belief in a proliferated array of intermediary beings who inhabit the cosmos between the Pleroma and the earthly realm of humanity. Though the Gnostics understood humanity to be trapped within the physical body, the human spirit is understood to be part of the ultimate spiritual reality (the Pleroma and/or the ultimate God). This entrapment is usually understood as ignorance or sleep, but not as sin. In order for the human spirit to find salvation, it needs to be awakened and delivered from its ignorance by recovering the knowledge (*gnōsis*) of its true self as part of the Pleroma or ultimate God. Thus, the ultimate God sent a redeemer from the Pleroma to bring knowledge to imprisoned human spirits. Although this redeemer figure can be variously described in Gnostic texts (e.g., as Seth), the majority of the Christian Gnostic texts, of course, identify the redeemer figure with the Christ. Christ then taught the Gnostic “elect” through “revelation discourses” the truth about reality and salvation. Since the body is evil, Gnostics believed Christ’s human form was docetic (i.e., only *appearing* human), and thus did not actually die on the cross—a substitute died at the hands of the inferior god and its intermediary powers.

“The Gnostics, according to their own writings, tended very strongly to an ascetic lifestyle. The denial of the reality and importance of the human body is the appropriate response for those who know the true character of salvation and the Pleroma. This motif may be the single most common denominator of all primary Gnostic texts. The church fathers often contended that Gnostics were libertines; this may well have described a social reality for some Gnostics, for it is logically possible for an ideology that believes that the body is fundamentally evil to lead not only to asceticism but also to indulgence of the body, since it is of no value.”

## **2. Origins and History**

“The church fathers regarded the Gnostic movement a second-century heresy within the Christian church that had its ultimate roots in Simon Magus (see Acts 8:9–24)—a view still widely held. The modern debate, fueled by the Nag Hammadi discoveries in 1945, has reopened the issue of origins. Some scholars argue that the Gnostic movement began in the first century as a non-Christian (and pre-Christian) movement.

“In favor of the traditional view is the fact that all extant primary Gnostic texts were written in the second or third centuries AD; there are no known Gnostic texts from the first century. In addition, no known first-century texts (pagan, Jewish or

Christian) refer clearly to what can be established as a Gnostic movement, text or system of ideas. On the other hand, there is indirect evidence that the Gnostic movement was actually formulated in the first century as an amalgam of a deviant Hellenistic Judaism and certain forms of the Platonic tradition and that this movement eventually attached itself to and found its truest home within the Christian church. This view takes with some seriousness the first-century Simon Magus tradition. Further, this view argues that the Gnostic movements described by the church fathers could not spring suddenly into existence; they betray evidence of a much longer period of development.

“On this view, sometime early in the first century AD, probably within some sophisticated circle of Hellenistic Jewish scholars likely located in Alexandria, Egypt, Gnostic speculations about the nature of reality, the problem of evil, the character of God and the possibility of salvation emerged. According to the church fathers, the first-century AD figure of Simon Magus became a focal point for the development of the Gnostic movement. According to patristic sources, Simon’s prime disciple was Menander, who in turn influenced Saturninus and Basilides.

“Basilides, a teacher in Alexandria before AD 150, taught a series of deities emanating from the ultimate God and creating the material world. Basilides had a docetic Christology; it was Simon of Cyrene, not Jesus, who died on the cross. The other major Gnostic teacher, Valentinus, also emerged in Alexandria (going to Rome about AD 140), and was considered a brilliant thinker and candidate for Bishop of Rome. According to patristic sources, Valentinus’s construction of reality involved a series of thirty aeons emanating from the Pleroma, the last of which was Sophia, who in error produced the Demiurge who is equated with the creator god of Genesis.

“Virtually nothing is known about the community organization of Gnostic churches. One Nag Hammadi text, *Apocalypse of Peter* (VII,3), refers to “those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God.... Those people are dry canals.” Whether this indicates anything about structures within the Gnostic communities is not at all clear, but it is evident that the Gnostics and their opponents were deeply involved in competing claims of authority.

“At least some Gnostic communities apparently practiced certain liturgical rituals, including baptism and the Eucharist. The Nag Hammadi text *The Gospel of Philip* (II,3) refers to five mysteries: baptism, chrism, Eucharist, redemption and the bridal chamber. Due to the great number of female figures in their structures of deity and the prominent role of women—particularly Mary Magdalene—in many

Gnostic texts, it has often been assumed that the Gnostics were more open to the participation of women in their religious life than in the majority of the church. This assumption, however, is very difficult to establish with any certainty.”

### 3. Sources and Literature

“Prior to the 1945 discovery of the Gnostic writings near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, most of what was known about the ancient Gnostics came from attacks on them by church fathers (especially Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* [2<sup>nd</sup> century AD] and Epiphanius in *Panarion* [4<sup>th</sup> century AD]) and Neoplatonic philosophers (especially Plotinus in *Enneads* 2.9 [3<sup>rd</sup> century AD]).

“The Nag Hammadi texts, discovered in 1945, are one of the most important finds of the twentieth century. We are now able to read directly Gnostic writings and attempt to understand them on their own terms. These contained 52 texts, yielding 40 new texts for study. These texts may have been a collection of orthodox monks who hid them when reading such texts was forbidden.

“About one-half of the texts are apocalypses and/or revelation discourses that reveal the special knowledge (*gnōsis*) that belongs to the Gnostic elect. Other texts are Gospels, acts, epistles and various forms of wisdom literature. Some of the texts are not Gnostic at all; some reflect the pagan Hermetic tradition; some reflect the Thomas tradition in the early church.

“The Nag Hammadi texts are extraordinarily important for the study of second-century AD Christian traditions and the growing divide between the proto-orthodox traditions (based largely on the New Testament texts and the earliest fathers) and the Gnostic traditions, which introduced their own literature and rejected the continuity of God from the Old Testament to the New Testament and the understanding of the incarnation, life and death of Jesus presented in the New Testament texts.

“More recently another Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Judas*, has surfaced and been published. It was known to both Irenaeus and Epiphanius, and it exemplifies the classic Gnostic tradition (though it reveals nothing of historical value about Judas or Jesus).”

### 4. Later Manifestations of Gnostic Phenomena

“In antiquity other manifestations of Gnosticism were the Mandaeans and the Manichaeans (against which Augustine wrote considerably). In the Middle Ages, the primary manifestations of the Gnostic phenomenon were the Paulicans (9<sup>th</sup>

century), the Bogomils (10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the Cathars (11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries). These movements are not genetically related to ancient Gnosticism but were influenced by Manichaeism. Some of the medieval mystical traditions in both Judaism and Islam also reflected some of the so-called gnostic ideas about the nature of reality.

“No modern movements are genetically related to ancient Gnosticism or technically qualify as Gnosticism per se. But there are movements which express certain gnostic proclivities, such as the radical separation of matter and spirit. Further, some manifestations only draw on selected gnostic ideas for spiritual enrichment.

“The philosopher-psychologist Carl G. Jung used gnostic ideas in his reflections on reality. It is sometimes suggested that authors such as Jacob Boehme (c. 1600) and William Blake (1757–1827) engaged in gnostic ideas. Movements such as Rosicrucianism and the Theosophical Society are also indebted to features of gnostic ideology. There are contemporary gnostic churches. Some contemporary Gnostic scholars, who are not in any way gnostics, nevertheless promote the spiritual values derived from reflection on ancient Gnostic texts.”

## **5. Theological Assessment and Conclusion**

“It should be understood that the Gnostics were struggling with genuine theological issues within the context of the second-century church: What is the relationship between God and the world? Why is there evil in the world? How should the Scriptures (= the Old Testament) be read? What is the role of the Christ in salvation, and what constitutes salvation? The proto-orthodox church was also seeking answers to these questions, and gave various answers.

“What made Gnosticism unacceptable to the proto-orthodox was its belief that the God of the Bible was not the true and ultimate God. The orthodox conviction was that God did create the material world, giving value to life in the flesh. Thus, the incarnation of the human Christ was essential to salvation, which was a gift of the grace of God, appropriated through faith; salvation was not found in esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*) available only to the Gnostic elect.”

Scholer concludes his thoughts: “In our own day, Gnostic tendencies still have an appeal. They seem to obviate the problem of evil and resonate with denials of the value of this earthly life. Such ideas and movements should be resisted in favor of the classical

orthodox, scriptural approaches to the theological issues humanity and the church face.”<sup>129</sup>



GNOSTICISM: THE HERESY THAT WILL NOT DIE

Though Gnostic sects faded in the early church,  
Gnostic ideas have had a long shelf life.



Writing in *Christian History Magazine* in 2007, Philip Jenkins presents the following assessment regarding Gnosticism—an assessment still very much accurate today:

**“This world is not my home.** As it stands, that statement reflects the views of a great many orthodox Christians, but a Gnostic would take it much further. From a Gnostic perspective, the material world is not just fallen but an utterly flawed creation, beyond redemption. God—or at least, the good, true God—certainly does not work in history. Escape is only available to the small minority who know, who recognize the need for liberation, which lies within. Wisdom, *Sophia*, is for the spiritual, the elite, and distinguishes them from the gullible herd of humans mired in the material, the victims of cosmic deception. They will remain asleep, while the true Gnostic is awakened.

“Gnosticism has never gone away, however much some modern scholars lament the suppression of its hidden gospels in the late Roman Empire. The main themes survived, for instance, in the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, which explains how the world was created through the fracturing of the vessels into which the divine goodness was poured. In addition to seeking their own mystic ascent to God, believers also pledge themselves to achieving *tikkun olam*, the restoration of the broken world.

“Within Christendom too, the fact that Christian states officially suppressed heresy just drove these ideas beyond the frontiers, into regions like Mesopotamia and Armenia. Gnostic and dualist ideas thrived across large parts of Asia in movements like the Paulicians and the Manichaeans, who taught the children of light how to liberate themselves from the evil god of this world.

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<sup>129</sup> Scholer, D. M. (2008). “Gnosticism.” In W. A. Dyrness & V.-M. Kärkkäinen (Eds.), *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*. IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 345-348.

“Occasionally, these ideas were reimported into Europe, most famously in the Cathar or Albigensian movement, which was suppressed by a near-genocidal crusade in 13th-century France. The Cathars followed the old Gnostic ideas faithfully, offering full salvation to the “perfect” who absolutely renounced the world. These old-new movements relied chiefly on the Christian gospels, interpreting the parables in their own distinctive way. Like the early Gnostics, though, they also wrote their own scriptures, such as the *Book of John the Evangelist*. (“Then did the Contriver of Evil devise in his mind to make Paradise, and he brought the man and woman into it.”)

“Living in a Christian-ruled society, later Gnostics defined themselves against the church and its doctrines, which provided a foil for the truly spiritual. The Cathars rejected the Roman Catholic Church as, literally, the synagogue of Satan. Catholics followed the deluded God who had created the abomination of the world in which we live and whose bloody misdeeds are chronicled in the Old Testament. Ordinary Catholic believers were the sheep, in the sense of being docile, ignorant, and uncomprehending.

### OLD NOBODADDY AND WOMEN’S LIB

“As Europe moved forward into the intimidating world of urbanization and industrialization, the identification between the church, the old God, and the evil society became ever more obvious to the spiritual children of Light. The Romantic English poet William Blake saw a world enslaved by a false God, Old Nobodaddy, the father of jealousy, who was a deceptive projection of society’s own lusts and ignorance. Blake presented a full-blown Gnostic mythology, in which the spirit of the giant Albion has become lost and divided. The world is dominated by the rational intellectual force of Urizen, who is challenged by the revolutionary imagination in the form of Los. Only Los remembers the divinity that Albion has forfeited, and only he can awaken him. In the 19th century, the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire took the logic of revolt to its natural conclusion. If a church allied to a frightful and unjust society preached about God, then the only decent course was to praise the maligned rebel liberator, Satan.

“From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, original Gnostic texts became available once more. From 1896, any literate person could read the translation of the third-century *Pistis Sophia*, which offered a complete overview of Gnostic mythology. All the more striking in an age of women’s empowerment, this scripture represents an extended exchange between Jesus and a number of female disciples, including Mary. The work had an impact in its day quite as powerful as the Nag

Hammadi texts and the *Gospel of Thomas* would in later decades. Never believe any writer who claims that the world was ignorant of these radical insights until the 1970s!

*“Pistis Sophia* and other texts had a huge appeal at a time when progressives and feminists were seeking to construct a new Christianity freed from the shackles of the hierarchical church. The best way to do this was to claim that, far from building something new, they were restoring the lost truths of the earliest followers of Jesus, doctrines suppressed by a sinister ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Writing in 1909, Frances Swiney claimed that the ancient Gnostics had been educated women, “early pioneers of the liberation movement of their sex, dialectical daughters questioning the truth and authority of received opinions, earnest intellectual women.... The Gnostics kept true to the original pristine faith in the Femininity of the Holy Spirit. A truth universally suppressed in the fourth century AD by the male priesthood of the Christian Church.”

### THE (SLEEPING) CHILD WITHIN

“Many of the reasons that gave Gnosticism such a cachet in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still sound familiar today. Gnosticism offered a Christianity freed from elements that many thinkers found troubling, especially the Old Testament, which was being subjected to such devastating historical criticism. Nor were believers expected to accept New Testament gospels that higher critics argued were later, theologically inspired fictions. Through a Gnostic lens, Christianity was transformed from a religion rooted in history to a form of inner psychological enlightenment.

“Once Christianity was understood as inner truth, educated observers no longer had to accept the unique claims of that religion, but could see the many commonalities that existed with other world religions. Buddhism in particular also taught enlightenment and waking from the sleep of illusion. Reconstructions of the “real” early Christianity reached a mass public through hugely best-selling novels like George Moore’s *The Brook Kerith* (1916), in which a Jesus who survives the crucifixion ends his life by joining a party of missionary Buddhist monks.

“Twentieth-century Gnosticism took many forms, both inside and outside the churches. Overtly Gnostic ideas inspired many esoteric groups and new religious movements, especially those derived from the Theosophical movement. To take one example of a modern esoteric religion, Scientology offers an unabashedly Gnostic mythology of sleep, forgetting, and reawakening. Believers are taught to return to the vastly powerful spiritual state they once enjoyed, but lost when that

original being was trapped in the deceptions of MEST (Matter, Energy, Space, Time). No less explicitly Gnostic are the later works of that latter-day prophet Philip K. Dick, in books such as *VALIS* (1981).

“Psychology was also a major vehicle for Gnostic thought. Carl-Gustav Jung, as much a mystic as a therapist, drew extensively on ancient Gnostic thinkers and mythology in works like *Seven Sermons to the Dead* (1916). Fundamental Gnostic assumptions underlie many forms of contemporary therapy, which lead patients to recognize the Fall through which they became entrapped in the world of illusion and dependency. Patients must above all recover their memories, through which they can overcome the states of sleep, amnesia, and illusion that blight their lives. As for ancient Gnostics, troubled souls are lost in an alien material world, trying to find their way home, to remember their true identity. The Gnostic idea of salvation became the psychologist’s integration or individuation.

“These parallels became particularly evident with the child abuse recovery movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Treatment of incest survivors implied such archaic themes as the loss of primal innocence through sexual sins inflicted on the patient, and the recovery of an untarnished child-like state: Memory is the gate through which we return to Eden.

### **A MORE AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY?**

“But Gnosticism has also returned in an explicitly religious form, with the scholarly rediscovery of the ancient religious movements themselves. The best-known name is Elaine Pagels, whose pivotal 1979 book *The Gnostic Gospels* offered a religious synthesis very similar to that offered in Frances Swiney’s day. Pagels likewise presented an ideal Christianity that was dehistoricized, psychological, thoroughly woman-friendly, and had many points of resemblance to Buddhism. For Pagels, moreover, as for later writers like Karen King, these ideas were not just an alternative fringe package labeled “Gnosticism,” but the authentic core of the ancient Jesus movement. The ancient Gnostic gospels received a fresh advertisement in 2003 when Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* again argued that such movements were at the center, not the margins, of Christianity. Brown’s heroine, who proves to be a descendant of Jesus, even bears the Gnostic-inspired name of Sophie.

“Such ideas are intoxicating for the millions of people who have grown up in a Christian culture, who love the figure of Jesus, but who feel that there must be something more to the story than what is offered in the Bible or the churches. Gnosticism, as selectively repackaged by its modern advocates, amply fills this

need and is buttressed by “authentic” ancient scriptures. Gnosticism, they feel, represents the pristine faith in a form that could never be appreciated by the vulgar herd of ordinary believers, who remain asleep. Surely God would never deign to make his truth available in a form equally available to everyone, however humble, and from all nations?”<sup>130</sup>

## AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Samples suggests that we should consider “a brief historic Christian response to this challenging alternative belief system. Some of these points were made by the second-century church father Irenaeus, who studied various Gnostic teachers and offered a biblical and theological critique in his work *Against Heresies*.

**“A Public Universal Community:** Historic Christianity isn’t made up of spiritual elites with secret knowledge. Rather, the public Christian message is open to all people who are sinners by nature and need God’s gracious gift of salvation. The church is a public community of people living throughout the world (it’s *catholic*, meaning universal or whole).

**“Cosmos:** God created the universe *good* and there is no moral duality between matter and spirit. Human bodies, though affected by sin, are nevertheless real and good and the essence of a person is found in the unity of body and soul.

**“God:** There is only one true God. The Triune God is one in essence but three in personhood. God has revealed himself in the created order, the human conscience, in the history of Israel, and in the historic material-physical incarnation of Jesus Christ.

**“Human Beings:** Humanity is uniquely made in the image of God and possesses inherent dignity and moral worth. Yet, human beings are fallen and they need redemption.

**“Salvation:** Salvation is found by believing that Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection saves a person from their sins.

**“Christ:** Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior, the God-man, who suffered for the sins of humanity and was raised in immortal, incorruptible flesh. His resurrection assures believers of their own resurrection to eternal life.

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<sup>130</sup> Jenkins, P. (2007). “The Heresy that Wouldn’t Die.” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge*.

**“Gospels:** The four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) were written by apostles or close associates of apostles. But orthodox Christianity rejected the Gnostic gospels for four basic reasons:<sup>131</sup>

- (1) They couldn’t be connected to the apostles.
- (2) They didn’t emerge from the apostolic era.
- (3) They contradicted apostolic doctrine (denying creation and the Incarnation).
- (4) They didn’t gain church acceptance (because of reasons 1–3).<sup>132</sup>

### A FINAL THOUGHT

Gnosticism wreaked havoc upon and within the early Church. It is no wonder that the Church Fathers and the Church Councils correctly condemned it as rank heresy. But it did not die! It just hid itself in the dark recesses of the human mind waiting for an opportunity to rear its ugly head once again. That time has now come, and if the heresy of Gnosticism is adopted wholesale, it will change the very nature of Christianity! If matter is evil then such doctrines as creation, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection would be nullified.

We now turn to a rather lengthy section on “The Seven Deadly Sins: Heresies that Nearly Destroyed Christianity.” Following an introductory chapter, we devote one chapter each on these seven deadly heresies—which are literally the “worst of the worst.” Gnosticism certainly qualifies as being part of this malignant group. However, because it is in reality the granddaddy of all heresy and has never died out, I have chosen to separate it from this next group of heresies. As you read about these next seven deadly heresies you will see how each of them in various ways build their teachings upon the original foundation of Gnosticism.

### SEVEN SIGNIFICANT SUMMARY STATEMENTS

1. **Gnosticism’s Core Beliefs:** Gnosticism is characterized by a dualistic worldview where the material world is considered evil, and salvation is achieved through secret

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<sup>131</sup> See Christian philosopher Douglas Groothuis’s critique of the Gnostic Gospels in “The Gnostic Gospels: Are They Authentic?”, *Christian Research Journal* online, updated September 23, 2022. Part One: <https://www.equip.org/PDF/DG040-1.pdf>. Part Two: <https://www.equip.org/PDF/DG040-2.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> Samples, *Reasons to Believe* (2023).

## *Ravenous Wolves: From Gnosticism to Narcissism*

knowledge (gnosis). It rejects the idea of a good Creator God and denies the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

2. **Historical Roots and Development:** Gnosticism emerged in the Second Century, influenced by Platonism, Zoroastrianism, and Hellenistic Judaism. Early Christian leaders like Irenaeus and Tertullian condemned it as heretical, and its teachings were seen as a corruption of the gospel.
3. **Simon Magus and Gnosticism:** Simon Magus, a figure mentioned in Acts 8, is often considered the father of Gnosticism. Early church fathers accused him of heresy and linked him to the development of Gnostic ideas, though his exact role remains debated.
4. **Gnostic Texts and Canonical Rejection:** Gnostic writings, such as those found in the Nag Hammadi Library, were rejected by the early church for their lack of apostolic origin, contradiction of orthodox doctrine, and failure to gain widespread acceptance.
5. **Modern Resurgence of Gnostic Ideas:** Gnosticism has influenced modern movements, including psychology, esoteric religions, and popular culture. Figures like Carl Jung and Elaine Pagels have drawn on Gnostic themes, and works like *The Da Vinci Code* have popularized its ideas.
6. **Orthodox Christian Response:** The early church countered Gnosticism by affirming the goodness of creation, the unity of body and spirit, and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. The canonical gospels were upheld as authoritative.
7. **Enduring Impact of Gnosticism:** Despite being condemned as heresy, Gnosticism has persisted through history, influencing medieval sects like the Cathars and modern spiritual movements. Its rejection of materiality and emphasis on secret knowledge continue to challenge orthodox Christianity.



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