

Gnosticism: Overview

(This study material – especially any statements about Gnostic beliefs – is based primarily on an article by a Gnostic Bishop at <http://www.gnosis.org/gnintro.htm>. Additional quotes and historical and comparative information was gleaned from an article by a Roman Catholic at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06592a.htm>, both downloaded 8/03/08. The organization, comments and interspersed questions are mine. -- InkMan)

Gnosticism is a system of beliefs that has been around **since before the time of Christ**. (Note, though, that Judaism is much older, with writings dating back to the time of Moses, about 1,500 B.C..) The **five factors detailed below** make Gnostic beliefs very **difficult to pin down**. This result actually fits well with one of its basic tenets, namely, that only certain people can attain to the understanding of the special knowledge that will help them reunite with their god. (The Greek word, “Gnosis” means “knowledge.”)

Syncretistic

It is said that Gnosticism “unites and reconciles the recognitions of Monotheism and Polytheism, as well as of Theism, Deism and Pantheism.” Any efforts to combine such drastically different (diametrically opposed!) beliefs will naturally be artificial and forced and will vary among the people attempting the task.

The Bible’s View: Rather than imagine that conceptually opposite religious beliefs can somehow be reconciled, the belief system of the Bible is exclusive of certain ideas. (For example, read John 14:6; Matthew 7:21-23; 2 Corinthians 10:4-5.)

Mysterious

Simply stated, its rites and ceremonies are not public information. Gnostics apparently do some activities which are reminiscent of other religions’ worship services, but their unique theology gives these practices a whole other meaning.

“Gnosticism expresses a specific religious experience, an experience that does not lend itself to the language of theology or philosophy, but which is instead closely affinitized to, and expresses itself through, the medium of myth. Indeed, one finds that most Gnostic scriptures take the forms of myths. The term “myth” should not here be taken to mean “stories that are not true”, but rather, that the truths embodied in these myths are of a different order from the dogmas of theology or the statements of philosophy.”

Gnosticism purposefully couches itself in language from which it is difficult to derive meaning. Perhaps better stated, Gnosticism – which “Gnostic myths express in their distinctively poetic and imaginative language” – would prefer not be put into words at all!

The Bible’s View: Rather than shroud itself in mysteries intended only for the initiated, the Bible is an explicit attempt to reveal and publicize truth to everyone. Especially the New Testament contained in the Bible heavily emphasizes these stated goals in such passages as 1 John 1:2-5; Ephesians 3:5; Matthew 28:18-20; and Romans 1:16-17.

Subjective

Gnosticism rests on a personal religious experience. Its beliefs are intended to be “interior” and “intuitive.” To a certain extent, this makes any effort to study it objectively... futile, and any attempt to teach it to others... fairly pointless, as well! A critic will likely be told that s/he is misinterpreting one of the “myths.” Of course, one huge irony here is that in a subjective religion, who’s to say that *you* are the enlightened one and that *your* idea is better than mine? And one logical outcome of taking a subjective approach is that each adherent’s experience will look potentially very different.

The Bible’s View: Bible truth is objective, flowing from God Himself who is divine, and thus superior to mankind. Thus, the religious experiences of all Bible believers are the same. See, for example, Proverbs 3:5-6; the 10 examples of Christian conversion in Acts; Romans 6:17; and 1 Corinthians 4:17; 7:17.

Without a Standard

While it has many writings from its proponents, it has **no written standard** setting forth its beliefs. For that matter, it has no *oral* standard, either. (In other words, it is *not* a determined, well defined teaching that is simply trying to be passed down orally from generation to generation.) Gnosticism is represented in a large library of writings, which was greatly augmented by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi (a city in upper Egypt) “library” in 1945 (about a dozen scrolls in glass jars which were dug up in a field). Their writings include various “gospels” (“Of the Twelve,” “Of Peter,” “Of Philip,” “Of Matthias,” “Of Thomas,” “Of Mary,” “According to the Egyptians”) and several books of “Acts” (“Of Peter,” “Of Andrew,” “Of John,” “Of Thomas”) as well as several oriental writings (including one large collection) of gnostic writings unrelated to Christianity.

Because Gnosticism is **subjective** and **has no written standard**, it is also **flexible**, adapting its approach to the prevailing culture. Regarding guidance given to help the follower know how to conduct himself/herself, we find this: “The present period of Western culture perhaps resembles in more ways that of second and third century Alexandria. It seems therefore appropriate that Gnostics in our age adopt the attitudes of classical Alexandrian Gnosticism, wherein matters of conduct were largely left to the insight of the individual.”

The Bible’s View: Truth is based on a fixed and written doctrine. See Ephesians 2:19-20; Ephesians 3:3b-4; and 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Open to Interpretation

Gnosticism is not the only religious system that has been taught in many **schools of thoughts** down through the centuries. Other religions, though, typically have a written standard from the various schools start, so a new-comer to the religion can at least choose a school of thought which seems most consistent with his or her understanding of the standard. Remember, though, that Gnosticism is by definition intuitive and subjective, so we again come up against the problem that there is no basis for claiming that one way of thinking is better than another.

There seem to have been four primary gnostic schools of thought: *Syrian* (or *Semitic*), *Hellenistic* (or *Alexandrian*), *Dualistic*, and *Antinomian* schools) The schools taught/teach contradictory lessons on basically all points, from cosmology to “salvation” to individual

behavior. In order to give a flavor of the different teachings, here is simply one example from two of the schools regarding personal conduct:

Syrian: “We obey the Supreme Deity by abstaining from flesh meat and marriage, and by leading an ascetic life.”

Antinomian: “As a moral law was given by the God of the Jews, and opposition to the God of the Jews was a duty, the breaking of the moral law to spite its give [giver – GC] was considered a solemn obligation. Such a sect, called the Nicolaites, existed in Apostolic times... One could only escape the cosmic powers through discharging one's obligations to them by infamous conduct. To disregard all law and sink oneself into the Monad by remembering one's pre-existence in the Cosmic Unit – such was the Gnosis of Carpocrates. His son Epiphanes followed his father's doctrine so closely that he died in consequence of his sins at the age of seventeen.”

Following these two schools of thought will lead to opposite ways of life, either asceticism on the one hand (which the Bible teaches against in such passages as Colossians 2:20-23; Ecclesiastes 2:24-25; and 1 Timothy 4:1-5), or hedonism on the other (which the Bible also condemns, in such passages as 1 Corinthians 9:27; 1 Peter 2:11-12; and Galatians 5:19-21).

The Bible's View: In the Bible, because truth is objective and based on a fixed, written standard, deviations constitute apostasy. (For example, Galatians 1:6-8; 2 John 1:9)

Gnosticism: Major Beliefs

As you read this article from a Gnostic Bishop, answer the questions to form a biblical response. The key concepts being questioned are underlined simply to help you find the Gnostic statements. Omitted statements are marked by “...”. (For the full article, see the reference under Part I.) Because Gnosticism has generated much of its own vocabulary which is unfamiliar to Bible students, a dictionary may also help.

The Cosmos

All religious traditions acknowledge that the world is imperfect. Where they differ is in the explanations which they offer to account for this imperfection and in what they suggest might be done about it. Gnostics have their own – perhaps quite startling – view of these matters: they hold that the world is flawed because it was created in a flawed manner.

Like Buddhism, Gnosticism begins with the fundamental recognition that earthly life is filled with suffering. In order to nourish themselves, all forms of life consume each other, thereby visiting pain, fear, and death upon one another (even herbivorous animals live by destroying the life of plants)....

Many religions advocate that humans are to be blamed for the imperfections of the world. Supporting this view, they interpret the Genesis myth as declaring that transgressions committed by the first human pair brought about a “fall” of creation resulting in the present corrupt state of the world. Gnostics respond that this interpretation of the myth is false. The blame for the world's failings lies not with humans, but with the creator. ...

The Bible's View: The Creator of the universe pronounced His creation as “good” and even “very good.” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.)

Ways of evading the recognition of the flawed creation and its flawed creator have been devised over and over, but none of these arguments have impressed Gnostics. ...

Once the initial shock of the “unusual” or “blasphemous” nature of the Gnostic explanation for suffering and imperfection of the world wears off, one may begin to recognize that it is in fact the most sensible of all explanations. To appreciate it fully, however, a familiarity with the Gnostic conception of the Godhead is required, both in its original essence as the True God and in its debased manifestation as the false or creator God.

Deity

... In the Gnostic view, there is a true, ultimate and transcendent God, who is beyond all created universes and who never created anything in the sense in which the word “create” is ordinarily understood. While this True God did not fashion or create anything, He (or, It) “emanated” or brought forth from within Himself the substance of all there is in all the worlds, visible and invisible. In a certain sense, it may therefore be true to say that all is God, for all consists of the substance of God. By the same token, it must also be recognized that many portions of the original divine essence have been projected so far from their source that they underwent unwholesome changes in the process. ...

The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness (Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully. The Fullness stands in contrast to our existential state, which in comparison may be called emptiness.

The Bible's View: The Bible uses the Greek word, <pleroma> (“fulness”), also. The book of Colossians pictures Jesus Christ as the eternal Creator and says that all “fulness” dwells in Him (Colossians 1:19) “bodily.”(Colossians 2:9) The book of John says that “we all” may partake of His “fulness.” (John 1:16)

One of the aeonial beings who bears the name Sophia (“Wisdom”) is of great importance to the Gnostic world view. In the course of her journeyings, Sophia came to emanate from her own being a flawed consciousness, a being who became the creator of the material and psychic cosmos, all of which he created in the image of his own flaw. This being, unaware of his origins, imagined himself to be the ultimate and absolute God. Since he took the already existing divine essence and fashioned it into various forms, he is also called the Demiurgos or “half-maker” There is an authentic half, a true deific component within creation, but it is not recognized by the half-maker and by his cosmic minions, the Archons or “rulers”.

The Bible's View: The very name of Jehovah God – “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14) – makes Him eternal (that is, without beginning and without end), and does not allow for Him to have emanated from anyone else.

Passages such as 1 John 1:5 (“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”), James 1:13-17 (“God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ... Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is

from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”), and Isaiah 6:3 (“Holy, holy, holy...”) do not allow for the existence of any “flaw” in Jehovah, the God of the Bible.

The Human Being

Human nature mirrors the duality found in the world: in part it was made by the false creator God and in part it consists of the light of the True God. Humankind contains a perishable physical and psychic component, as well as a spiritual component which is a fragment of the divine essence. This latter part is often symbolically referred to as the “divine spark”. ...

The Bible’s View: The human soul is not part of God. Rather, it constitutes a separate being. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:35-49, etc..)

Humans are generally ignorant of the divine spark resident within them. This ignorance is fostered in human nature by the influence of the false creator and his Archons, who together are intent upon keeping men and women ignorant of their true nature and destiny. Anything that causes us to remain attached to earthly things serves to keep us in enslavement to these lower cosmic rulers. Death releases the divine spark from its lowly prison, but if there has not been a substantial work of Gnosis undertaken by the soul prior to death, it becomes likely that the divine spark will be hurled back into, and then re-embodied within, the pangs and slavery of the physical world.

The Bible’s View: In the very beginning of time, Satan – the tempter, the deceiver – accused God of trying to prevent humans from attaining higher knowledge. He flatly contradicted God and then lied about why God had prohibited a certain action: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Isn’t it ironic that centuries later, Gnostics are recycling that old argument?

Not all humans are spiritual (pneumatics) and thus ready for Gnosis and liberation. Some are earthbound and materialistic beings (hyletics), who recognize only the physical reality. Others live largely in their psyche (psychics). Such people usually mistake the Demiurge for the True God and have little or no awareness of the spiritual world beyond matter and mind.

In the course of history, humans progress from materialistic sensate slavery, by way of ethical religiosity, to spiritual freedom and liberating Gnosis. As the scholar G. Quispel wrote: “The world-spirit in exile must go through the Inferno of matter and the Purgatory of morals to arrive at the spiritual Paradise.” This kind of evolution of consciousness was envisioned by the Gnostics....

Salvation

Evolutionary forces alone are insufficient, however, to bring about spiritual freedom. Humans are caught in a predicament consisting of physical existence combined with ignorance of their true origins, their essential nature and their ultimate destiny. To be liberated from this predicament, human beings require help, although they must also contribute their own efforts.

From earliest times Messengers of the Light have come forth from the True God in order to assist humans in their quest for Gnosis. Only a few of these salvific figures are mentioned in Gnostic scripture; some of the most important are Seth (the third Son of Adam), Jesus, and the Prophet Mani. The majority of Gnostics always looked to Jesus as the principal savior figure (the Soter).

The Bible's View: According to Hebrews 1:1-2, Jesus is not simply another in a long line of prophets. He is the image of God, the Creator of the universe, and the ultimate and final source of God's revelation to mankind.

Gnostics do not look to salvation from sin (original or other), but rather from the ignorance of which sin is a consequence. Ignorance – whereby is meant ignorance of spiritual realities – is dispelled only by Gnosis, and the decisive revelation of Gnosis is brought by the Messengers of Light, especially by Christ, the Logos of the True God. It is not by His suffering and death but by His life of teaching and His establishing of mysteries that Christ has performed His work of salvation.

The Bible's View: Jesus' work of salvation, according to Romans 5:6-11 and many other passages, was specifically accomplished by His life and death and resurrection, as well as by His teachings which revealed God's plan of salvation.

According to Ephesians 4:11-16, ignorance is overcome by attaining “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,” which gives an understanding of the truth, and by working together with others in the church for spiritual growth and mutual strengthening.

According to John 8:31-32, spiritual freedom is achieved by abiding in the teachings of Jesus in order to learn the truth.

... Gnosis and salvation can be, indeed must be, stimulated and facilitated in order to effectively arise within consciousness. This stimulation is supplied by Messengers of Light who, in addition to their teachings, establish salvific mysteries (sacraments) which can be administered by apostles of the Messengers and their successors.

The Bible's View: Rather than trying to *establish* mysteries, the role of Jesus' apostles and prophets was to *reveal* the eternal plan of God. (See Ephesians 3:1-5; 1 Peter 1:10-12.)

More about Jesus

(adapted from material at www.MarkCopeland.net)

“Gnostics”...
1. Claimed to have a superior knowledge,
2. Shrouded their teachings and practices in privileged secrecy, and
3. Believed that the “True” God did not create or have anything to do with the material universe.

Therefore ...

- a) All matter is evil, and
- b) Christ could not have come in the flesh.

The Bible's View: 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. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ 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*

There were differing views about Jesus. One branch of gnosticism, **Docetism** (from the Greek <dokein>, “to seem”), said that Jesus only “seemed” to be physical.

The Bible's View: 1 John 1 clearly says that the writer was an eye-, ear-, and hands-on-witness of Jesus.

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us-- ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. – *1 John 1:1-3*

Cerinthus taught that “Jesus” was physical, but that the “Christ” came upon him at his baptism, and left before his death, so the “Christ-spirit” never suffered.

The Bible's View: Jesus “came by water and blood.” (*1 John 5:6*)

(Back to the Gnostic article...)

One needs also remember that knowledge of our true nature – as well as other associated realizations – are withheld from us by our very condition of earthly existence. The True God of transcendence is unknown in this world, in fact He is often called the Unknown Father. It is thus obvious that revelation from on High is needed to bring about salvation. The indwelling spark must be awakened from its terrestrial slumber by the saving knowledge that comes “from without”.

The Bible's View: According to Acts 17, Paul discovered an altar to “The Unknown God.”

Conduct

If the words “ethics” or “morality” are taken to mean a system of rules, then Gnosticism is opposed to them both. Such systems usually originate with the Demiurge and are covertly designed to serve his purposes. If, on the other hand, morality is said to consist of an inner integrity arising from the illumination of the indwelling spark, then the Gnostic will embrace this spiritually informed existential ethic as ideal.

To the Gnostic, commandments and rules are not salvific; they are not substantially conducive to salvation. Rules of conduct may serve numerous ends, including the structuring of an

ordered and peaceful society, and the maintenance of harmonious relations within social groups. Rules, however, are not relevant to salvation; that is brought about only by Gnosis. Morality therefore needs to be viewed primarily in temporal and secular terms; it is ever subject to changes and modifications in accordance with the spiritual development of the individual....

The Bible's View: Obviously, the Bible is one of the very books being opposed by Gnostics. At different times, God imposed various “systems of rules” on various people in order to guide their conduct. According to 1 John 4:21 – 5:3 (and many other passages), God’s commandments are for our benefit and to teach us to love one another and to be pleasing to God.

Destiny

... Death does not automatically bring about liberation from bondage in the realms of the Demiurge. Those who have not attained to a liberating Gnosis while they were in embodiment may become trapped in existence once more. It is quite likely that this might occur by way of the cycle of rebirths. Gnosticism does not emphasize the doctrine of reincarnation prominently, but it is implicitly understood in most Gnostic teachings that those who have not made effective contact with their transcendental origins while they were in embodiment would have to return into the sorrowful condition of earthly life.

In regard to salvation, or the fate of the spirit and soul after death, one needs to be aware that help is available. Valentinus, the greatest of Gnostic teachers, taught that Christ and Sophia await the spiritual man – the pneumatic Gnostic – at the entrance of the Pleroma, and help him to enter the bridechamber of final reunion. Ptolemaeus, disciple of Valentinus, taught that even those not of pneumatic status, the psychics, could be redeemed and live in a heavenworld at the entrance of the Pleroma. In the fullness of time, every spiritual being will receive Gnosis and will be united with its higher Self – the angelic Twin – thus becoming qualified to enter the Pleroma. None of this is possible, however, without earnest striving for Gnosis.

The Bible's View: The Bible does not leave room for any version of reincarnation. To see a clear example of a story of souls whose destinies were sealed at the time of death, and who maintained their individuality and consciousness, read Luke 16:19-31, and of course, consider the teachings that we will follow Jesus’ example in undergoing a bodily resurrection.

Also, although the above Gnostic passage borrows from the Bible’s use of the figure of the church as the bride of Christ, the Bible does not teach the existence of different levels of closeness to the Father (i.e., some being reunited, with others living in a somewhat distant “heavenworld.” The Bible presents only two possibilities: Dwelling in the presence of God, or being cast out into outer darkness.

The Bible, on “Knowledge”

(We conclude this examination of Gnosticism with some thoughts from the Bible on the very topic from which Gnostics derive their name. -- InkMan)

On the broad topic of “knowledge” (Greek <gnosis>) – as with the majority of Gnostic teachings – there are similarities to Bible teachings. For example, the Bible maintains that **knowledge is indeed crucial to salvation**. The book of Proverbs, for example, contains many passages emphasizing the importance of knowledge and contrasting it with the way of foolishness and wickedness. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7) The words in the Bible allow us to know the very mind of God which His Spirit has revealed. (1 Corinthians 2:11-16)

But while knowledge is necessary and important, beware: **Knowledge can make us arrogant!** (1 Corinthians 8:1) So in your search to gain knowledge keep a check both on your attitude as you seek it and obtain it, and on your reasons for such a pursuit in the first place.

Concerning **the attitude of those with Bible knowledge**, notice that the gospel (the Bible’s good news of God’s plan offering salvation) is intended for those with a simple trust in God (Matthew 13:10-15) and for those who love truth (2 Thessalonians 2:12), not for the intellectual or the wise in their own opinion. (1 Corinthians 1:18-21) Of course, some highly educated and intellectual people can keep their intelligence and learning in perspective, but they are the exception, not the rule.

Knowledge in and of itself is not sufficient. Some people are “always learning, but never able to come to a **knowledge of the truth**” (2 Timothy 3:7), suggesting that we must learn certain things, that our “education” must be directed. “God our Savior, . . . desires all people to be saved and to come to the **knowledge of the truth**” (1 Timothy 2:3-4), so “the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a **knowledge of the truth**, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24-26) Notice here the logical result of knowledge, repentance (that is, a change of mind) which leads to a change in behavior. In the Bible, “knowing” God is equivalent to understanding His will **and putting it into practice**. (See, for example, Jeremiah 22:11-16.)

Finally, people who know and obey God’s will must keep living a life of compliance with God’s wishes. “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the **knowledge of the truth**, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” (Hebrews 10:26-27) In other words – and stated in terminology to contrast Gnostic teachings – knowledge never liberates or saves anyone. **Only God can save us, and He only promises to do so when we meet – and continue to meet – His revealed conditions for salvation.**