

The Gnostic Gospels: A Panoramic Overview

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Introduction

Gnosticism has been around the world for many centuries, though in different forms. It has evolved over time, changing shape and at times structure, but remains essentially the same at its core. Different people and epochs have reacted differently to its presence, from a serious aversion to a total embrace and love for it! One generation may have tolerated and even encouraged it while another has ignored, opposed or fought it to almost a point of extinction. But amazingly, it has survived the dynamic tides and presently enjoys a lot of goodwill among many world religions and movements such as the New Age. The first century Christians wrestled with aspects of it but it evolved and became a formidable force by the second century. For instance, the Apostles Paul and John tackled aspects of this heresy in its infancy but Irenaeus and others would contend with it in later centuries. This paper attempts to highlight some core tenets of this heresy as relates to the gospel accounts. In recent times, the *Nag Hammadi* documents and others have generated a fresh interest in what could have been a weaker side of an argument that was somewhat defeated with the rise of the apologists. It is hoped that the saint will learn and apply what they learn while navigating the poisoned deadly waters of the secular world.

Gnosticism defined

Gnosticism has been defined variously but it essentially is the quest to acquire esoteric inner light leading to salvation. This is a first or second century heresy that taught that the human spirit has been trapped in an evil body and can only be liberated once a certain knowledge was acquired that triggered the inner divine person. Jesus, according to scripture, is said to be the saviour that incarnated to enlighten people to escape from this bondage by teaching people the truth. He sets free (John 8:32,36). Those that buy into this truth are then said to be liberated. While Gnosticism tends towards asceticism with a very negative view or attitude towards the material world, Christianity liberates, engendering a correct view of the world around. This defective Gnostic teaching has survived to the present day and in fact, form core aspects of some theologies today even in Christian circles!

Nature and core tenets of Gnosticism

Gnosticism is esoteric in nature meaning that it is subjective thriving on inner light or knowledge which leads to liberty. This teaching holds that pure human spirits are trapped in an evil material body. In fact the entire created order is evil and one needs to liberate themselves by accessing and triggering the inherent divine being. Although Gnosticism is not monolithic but of varied shades and emphasis, its core tenets revolve around (i.e. apart from passwords, signs and seals) the need to be delivered from an evil material world accidentally created (but gone wrong) thus leading to the need of saviour (i.e. the illuminator) to enlighten people about the way to freedom. In effect, Gnosticism holds that ignorance is an evil to be overcome before true tranquillity and happiness can occur. As we shall see, Gnosticism's saviour does not deliver people from sin but ignorance. This knowledge is extremely secret and critical to the world to the extent that to be without it is viewed as tragically unfortunate, consigning one to perpetual bondage. From the foregoing, it is evident that the Jesus described in the so-called gnostic gospels is different from the one revealed in the authentic synoptic gospels.

The Biblical four Gospels Versus Gnostic gospels: similarities and differences

With the passage of time and increased discovery of documents (such as the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945), it is now possible to compare as well as make objective assessment of what Gnosticism at its core exactly is (Robinson 1988). The Gnostic gospels have a narrative of Jesus that is clearly different from the accepted texts because they (i.e. Gnostic gospels) primarily focus on aspects that the authentic texts do not (Groothuis 1984). Furthermore, these narratives give details not available before or even contradictory to what is accepted or known. For instance, Jesus is said to have kissed Mary Magdalene on the lips which is not found in the authentic texts or narratives. From another angle, the gnostic gospels state that Jesus came to save people from their body trap by offering knowledge or information (*gnosis*) which would enable them to trigger the latent divine being resident within them. As can be noted, salvation from sin through Christ's blood atonement is nowhere in the picture. Moreover, Jesus is said not to have suffered or been crucified in some texts of the gnostic gospels while the four known gospels all assert that Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead. Whereas the accepted holy scriptures teach that Jesus physically died and rose in bodily form, the gnostic gospels deny this fact claiming that the Christ never died but another. Some even go so far as to put a clear distinction between Jesus and the Christ (who descended at Baptism and left at Crucifixion). Thus, it can safely be concluded that the gnostic gospels are not authentic nor inspired for various reasons while the accepted gospels passed

down to us have the divine stamp of authority. It may further be asserted that the gnostic gospels were late compositions written using a *pseudo names* when in fact the actual authors were different from the famous name that carries the name of the narrative. People have tried to argue that the gnostic gospels are equally credible as they give an alternative perspective of Christianity though were marginalised in the past (Robinson 1988; Pagels 1989; Funk & Hoover, 1993). Now, according to these pundits, the world is prepared and more open to accept other views, of course, riding on postmodernism. That explains recent eye catching and controversial movies like the Da Vinci Code among other humanistic literary works (See our detailed treatment of the Da Vinci Code in a separate paper). Most of the gnostic works are not orderly or logical making it difficult to easily assess them in a given context. The synoptic gospels on the other hand, are intimately connected to history, chronological, logical and can comfortably be traced, verified and followed through, even in terms of timing. Finally, most of the gnostic works are not original but are believed to have either been plagiarised, late works (e.g. Gospel of Barnabas, some even claim this one is a fake from as late as the 17th or 18th century AD) or derived from the synoptic gospels making them secondary works which appeared later on the scene. Although some of them appear to be closer to the original works time-wise and to some extent, content, they at some point within the narrative veer, at a tangent, effectively excluding them from what is accepted or authentic. They fail the test by that token

The Gospels: Gnostic and Biblical: A further analysis & review

The synoptic gospels as we know them today paint a different authentic picture of the Jesus that actually existed, his life, mission, death and resurrection. The gnostic gospels on the other hand suggest a totally different picture altogether. What is troubling is that some narratives seem to have aspects agreeing with the known gospels as well as others that directly contradict with what is known. This mingling of error and truth in one text can be confusing if not misleading for novices. The gospel of Thomas for instance, is said to be the closest narrative to what has been accepted as the authentic narratives because of many similarities as well as the time of its alleged writing (i.e. Between AD 50-150) although some suggest that this too was written far outside the apostolic era, hence its disqualification. That said, the gospel of Thomas has been heralded as the once *lost gospel* or the fifth narratives which is composed of random sayings of Jesus, though not arranged in an orderly form. Dr Robert Funk and Roy Hoover (1993), among others thus claim (Groothuis 1984; Funk & Hoover 1993). Other gnostic narratives are however far different from what is known because they make outrageous claims or statements that cannot be substantiated, were refuted by the apologists or were evidently clearly plagiarised works with massive editing to fit into the gnostic theological framework. The Christian should ask some key questions that could include the following prior to making a decision as to what to believe. The first is, *who wrote the said work and why? Why exactly was it written*

and from where? Can it stand criticism especially as relates to authenticity and the historical test? Is the writing in agreement with the accepted (by the early Church) Gospel texts? When was the work believed to have been written? Does it pass the test of inspiration and authority? Was it accepted by the early Church? These, and many others, are but a few key questions one needs to ask in relation to veracity, perspicuity, authenticity, accuracy, historicity, general acceptance, theology and more crucially, inspiration. Christianity is bound up in history. It stands or falls contingent on how historically accurate it is. From this description, the Christian may clearly see that the purported/alleged suppressed gospels which the famous film *Da Vinci Code* attempted to popularize are mere human imaginations trying to draw sympathy and attention for what was clearly heretical; without the inspiration stamp. Contrary to what some have asserted that the gnostic gospels were suppressed and destroyed, the apologists read these works and adequately responded to the existing ones at the time. In fact, reading their works alone (i.e. the apologists' works), one would reasonably 'reconstruct' what Gnosticism was all about. The Nag Hammadi find in fact helped prove this very point because there is no material difference from what the apologists presented about what was authentic or not to what has been passed down to us. Knowing the truth will certainly set some one free.

What others have written/said about Gnosticism, it's gospels in relation to the synoptic gospels

A minority of spiritually alert saints today are alive to the lingering lethal dangers of Gnosticism and have actively traced and responded to its threat. Sadly, many other saints are dangerously and woefully ignorant of this deadly teaching. It's virulently ugly tentacles are all around us today, though in an increasingly mutating or syncretic form. The New Agers are not alone in imbibing this cancer. Even among the so-called evangelicals, the deadly tentacles of Gnosticism have all pervasively been spread, finding a cosy unsuspecting haven within the house of God. Douglas Groothuis (1984) has written a two part series paper in which he meticulously traces this ancient heresy, its documents and implications for today. He states that Gnosticism preaches a different Jesus, a different salvation and a different anthropology. From a creation gone awry, humans have been trapped in an evil body and only need to trigger the inherent knowledge latent within them that the saviour (Jesus) came to ignite. If they can realise their divinity within, then they can be saved. Some of these claims make one's hair stand on end but for the naïve person, it does not click because error is so well mingled with truth, subtly sugar coated intended to deceive. Thankfully, the New Testament scriptures are readily available to aid the saint compare what is authentic or not. Another, Robinson (1977) wrote a helpful article exploring the existence, nature and beliefs of ancient Gnosticism. He asserts that Gnosticism predates the Christian faith although evolved over time. Basing on the 1945 Nag Hammadi find of the *The Apocalypse of Adam*, it would appear that there existed several brands of early Christianity from which cults like the Latter Days Saints (LDS)

and possibly the Free Masons, draw part of their theologies (Robinson 1977 p2). According to Robinson (1977), apart from the belief in gnosis as basis for salvation, the “Christian” Gnostics held other beliefs/practices including baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29?), literal creation of Adam & Eve, that Jesus was married or romantically sexually active (unlike the standard orthodox narrative), some Jewish beliefs or the need to be liberated from the body to become divine among other beliefs. It is interesting to read that *the Apocalypse of Adam* narrates how man fell having been deceived but before dying passes on knowledge to Seth his progeny. Further more, although some believe that the Apocalypse was exclusively hewn from Eastern sources in places like Mesopotamia or Iran, there is equally substantial evidence (internal and external) in the content to have been derived from Western sources as well, including Jewish. Robinson thus concludes that the work was drawn from neutral sources rather than wholesomely plagiarised (Robinson 1977 p12; Robinson 1988; Pagels 1989). It needs to be said that the Gnostic narratives about Adam, Eve or Jesus are substantially different from the authentic OT and NT biblical narratives. Although we do not fully agree with Robinson’s claim that a fully fledged and blossoming Gnostic type of normative Christianity existed within the first two centuries after Christ, we dare not dismiss his claim lightly given the bold claim that Gnostic Christianity was once *THE* leading form of Christianity. To buttress his argument, Robinson cites interesting sources like Josephus’ *Antiquities*. Additionally and according to Robinson (1977), he states the following (p2) that is rather shocking: “*Actually, in the first three centuries, there were several brands of Christianity all competing for the title of “orthodoxy...”*” implying that Gnosticism was one of the authentic many in ancient history! This reads like the Arian controversy but, of course, different! We further briefly quote Robinson (1977 p 2) as a window to our assertion: “*The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library has re-emphasized the fact that Gnosticism was not merely the “heretic fringe” of the Universal Church, but that in large areas of the ancient world Gnosticism was the Church*”. That said, Robinson helps us appreciate the need not only to know Gnosticism’s *anciency* but the need to tread carefully as we read Gnostic writings albeit, in it’s evolving nature over the centuries. Tobe fair, it needs to be said that today, Gnosticism has its strong supporters. Pundits like Carl Jung, Elaine Pagels, Bart Erhman and Stephen Hoeller are some of the prominent proponents of Gnosticism or it’s gospels in the recent modern times.

Recent push to expand the number of gospels

As briefly hinted at above, there is a growing movement among scholars, largely of the liberal stripe forcefully contending for the expansion of the New Testament canon. They argue that that the said canon is either not closed or deliberately and unfairly excluded some equally authentic gospels among the Gnostics. They, by that token, question by what sanction or authority that the canon was closed and by who. One group claims that the more potent rather than theologically correct group carried the day, hence their views and convictions widely

supported today. They sometimes cite the emperor facilitated Arian/ Nicene Credal sessions resulting in the better resourced Trinitarian camp carrying the day. Still others like Bart D Ehrman (2016) claim that the original gospel narratives were edited or actually changed to foster a given agenda. These advocates raise their voices because they want to include the Gnostic gospels into the canon because, according to these pundits, the said spurious gospels are equally authentic. Robinson (1988), has written a whole book on the Nag Hammadi Library demonstrating that the Gnostic gospels exist. He is supported Elaine Pagels (1989), whose work on Gnostic gospels is highly respected in academia, though we do not hold her views.

Importance and Strategic nature of this Subject

This study is indeed an eye opener for both the naive or least theologically exposed. It is, to some extent, shocking but true. Even Christians may be startled to discover that they have probably imbibed, adopted gnostic tendencies or even it's tenets unawares. Orthodoxy is important over ceremonial rituals, washing legalistic practice. Paul addressed this in Colossians. That is not to belittle good works at all but only to state that good works result from right belief not the reverse. The claims made by other people, including well meaning friends trapped in Charismatic, Word of Faith or New Age Movements can be staggering as is the sheer number of spurious gnostic gospels stunningly interesting. That said, a discovery of truth as elucidated in this discourse is important to not only protect naive people but alert saints as well about ferocious lurking danger at every turn, is what makes this discussion relevant. A good panoramic view of the subject matter is an essential trigger to further research and inoculation against error. Readers are therefore encouraged to read widely, review recent research and expose themselves to some of these actual gnostic gospels/materials (e.g. Gospels of Thomas, Philip, Truth, Barnabas (although this one is strictly not among the original gnostic gospels but considered a fraud of a much, much later generation by some authorities) & Peter among others) thus appraising themselves. In that way, knowledge acquisition is not only broadened but maximized.

Lessons Gleaned from this Consideration

From what we have seen and read, it is evident that the ground to be covered can potentially is vast and deep. However, we summarise some of these points for our learning and remembrance.

- Gnosticism centres around an esoteric inner knowledge. This secret knowledge is what is said to deliver a person from ignorance that has kept people in bondage. Some of its key tenets revolve around passwords,

signs and seals. Some of these sound familiar from trending mystical or animistical circles today (Robinson 1977 p3; Groothius 1994).

- Gnosticism claims to be *the truth* because it is subjective and esoteric unlike exoteric objective truth.
- Gnosticism is increasingly popular in both evangelical and religious circles today. There are even gnostic temples and periodic magazine all over the world. There is clearly a resurgence of this ancient heresy, though viewed as unfairly suppressed by the heretics or their sympathisers.
- The Nag Hammadi documents discovered in upper Egypt (December 1945) have generated a lot of debate as to which is the authentic narrative of Jesus. Was Jesus married and have a family? Was he crucified or another? Such and many other tenets have arisen at the discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents. A reading of Groothius and/or Robinson is helpful to gain further insights on these matters.
- Different gnostic gospels and documents have been discovered, many of which could be referred to by the apologists as they combated this heresy in its various shades and form. Some of these gospels include that of Thomas, Philip, Truth, first apocalypse of James and the second treatise of the Seth, Apocalypse of Adam, among many.
- Gnosticism has several tenets that include the following: 1. A divine being (*Demiurge*) attempted to create the world but made a mistake resulting in a dysfunctional world where ignorance reigns and pure spirits held in bondage/trapped in an evil body. 2. Jesus (i.e. illuminator) came as a saviour to deliver people from this trap by bringing a secret knowledge. 3. Every human being is therefore potentially divine if only they can trigger the dormant divinity within them. If they do, then they may be said to be *saved* and thus liberated. 4. The Jesus explained in the accepted synoptic gospel narratives is not true but corrupted. According to Gnostics (and perhaps Muslims' Quran), the current versions of the bible are corrupted because the true one is found in what has come to be called the "*gnostic gospels*", though they are not authentic gospels like the accepted four. The Jesus Seminar, led by late Dr. Robert Funk have joined this bandwagon of proponents advocating for the expansion of the gospel canon. They claim at least five should exist. 5. Gnosticism holds a Docetic view of Jesus claiming that Jesus and the Christ were distinct with the

latter descending on Jesus at the baptism and leaving before the crucifixion. 6. Gnosticism rejects the idea of sin (and thus total depravity) or that Jesus died for sinners. They claim that Jesus actually came to enlighten people of their inner light and potential rather than deliver from sin. Gnostics further claim that Jesus was actually romantic, if not married! 7. Gnosticism has extensive narrations of Jesus with his disciples post the crucifixion (though some brand of this heresy denies the passion or even the crucifixion of Christ!) which the authentic narratives do not have or support. 8. According to Gnostics, Jesus rose spiritually from the dead rather than physically.

- As earlier hinted at, in Gnosticism, a serious distinction between Jesus the man and the Christ is made. This then helps their theology. It also helps them in rejecting the physical resurrection of Christ.
- In Gnosticism, the God of the Old Testament is said to be inferior (and evil!) and different to the one in the New Testament. Marcion the heretic held this view.
- Amazingly, Gnosticism teaches that Jesus actually encouraged Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit to mock the evil God of the Old Testament (Groothuis 1994; Robinson 1977).
- The gospel of Thomas is the closest to the synoptic gospels in terms of time recording 114 random sayings of Jesus. Though close in authorship timing, it has some things which are totally at variance with the scriptures as we know them in the canon. For instance, it denies the crucifixion of Jesus or his having been the Messiah. The spuriously later Gospel of Barnabas is further off.
- The Gnostic gospels are evidently of a later date by the kind of vocabulary of conversations narrated. For example, in the Letter of Peter to Philip, words such as 'aeons' are referred to as having said by Jesus' fishermen disciples!
- Most of the gnostic documents are not in good condition posing a challenge on their integrity, veracity or even inspiration.

- The Gnostic gospels, unlike the accepted accounts, were written by individuals who personified others so that their writings would receive wide acceptance. They are thus said to be *pseudepigraphic*.
- The Gnostics claim that the synoptic gospels are corrupted, mistaken and exoteric (outward) rather than esoteric.
- Some forms of Gnosticism are reportedly clandestine, reclusive and secretive. Robinson (1977 p 12), makes this claim when he states the following: “The *power of the gnosis bound up with “the Name” at three points in the text (The Apocalypse of Adam; 72:5-7, 77:20, and 83:6), although we are never told what the name is. The Gnostics will be rewarded for not writing down the words of the secret knowledge for they remain oral and secret (85:5-6). In the epilogue to the Apocalypse all of this is placed in a ritual setting, and the secret gnosis of Adam is identified with a ritual baptism or announcing (85:22-28).*” This partly explains why it is difficult to exactly and fully define Gnosticism. That said, sufficient data exists to make an intelligent framework for it’s description including from the detailed work of the early Church apologists.
- Christians need to beware of Gnostic tendencies. This is a very slippery and subtle heresy. It keeps making inroads even within the sleepy Church. It is high time to awake, keeping watch as we pray!

Conclusion

The Gnostic gospels are to be rejected as not inspired. Their doctrine is both poisonous and potentially lethal to one’s theological perspectives. The noise we get from all sides is needless because biblical Christianity is ratified by History upon which it is couched. The Jesus of the synoptic gospels is real and authentic unlike the imaginary later narratives posited by the heretics.

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