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### Gnosticism and its Conflict with Christianity

Gerhardt Nitz

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir\_nitzg@csl.edu

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PROLOGUE

THE CONFLICT WITH GNOSTICISM

A THESIS

GNOSTICISM

AND ITS CONFLICT WITH CHRISTIANITY

St. Louis, Mo.

WALTER B. ELLIS

"Καὶ ἕνεκα τούτων τῶν  
ψευδωδύμων γλώσσαις

- I TIMOTHY 6, 2

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Divinity

St. Louis, Mo.

April 15, 1930



GNOSTICISM

AND ITS CONFLICT WITH CHRISTIANITY

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of

Concordia Seminary

St. Louis, Mo.

by

Gerhardt E. Nitz

In Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

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practical value to anyone." In reply, it may be stated that first of all, this is history. History is not dead. It was made by men who lived with feelings, passions, interests, activities and lives essentially the same as ours today. If we consider our lives and times interesting, then theirs were equally so. Thus, to the student, all phases of history live and breathe as did the original.

Again, the study of such a movement as Gnosticism is really important to the student of theology. This is a phase of history which greatly influenced the church in its infancy. It has left marks upon the church which will never be erased. Moreover, a study of this heresy is essential for the proper understanding of the New Testament. Again, the influence of Gnosticism, as will be pointed out later continued for many centuries. Such a deeply rooted, powerful, paganistic tendency cannot be lightly passed by.

And finally, such a study will prove profitable even today, for the modern counterparts are still in existence. Gnosticism shows us how little the spirit of the age can be trusted to meet the religious needs of the age. Gnosticism was faulty, but it was not the worst of faults. It represents the best work that some of the best minds of that age could do in providing themselves with a religion



**GNOSTICISM**  
**AND ITS CONFLICT WITH CHRISTIANITY**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The uninitiated may well ask "Why study such a movement? Very few people have ever heard of it, and it will never be of any practical value to anyone." In reply, it may be stated that first of all, this is history. History is not dead. It was made by human beings with feelings, passions, interests, activities and lives essentially the same as ours today. If we consider our lives and times interesting, then theirs were equally so. Thus, to the student, all phases of history live and breathe as did its makers.

Again, the study of such a movement as Gnosticism is doubly important to the student of theology. This is a phase of history which greatly influenced the church in its infancy. It has left marks upon the church which will never be erased. Moreover, a study of this heresy is essential for the proper understanding of the New Testament. Again, the influence of Gnosticism, as will be pointed out later continued for many centuries. Such a deeply rooted, powerful, paganistic tendency cannot be lightly passed by.

And finally, such a study will prove profitable even today, for its modern counterparts are still in existence. Gnosticism shows us how little the spirit of the age can be trusted to meet the religious needs of the age. Gnosticism was folly, but it was not the work of fools. It represents the best work that some of the best minds of that age could do in providing themselves with a religion



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when God's religion did not suit them. Our age is another age of restlessness, of fanciful speculation, of religion-making. 1.) Again an enormous value is set on knowledge, on education. Again men are looking for a religion that can meet their wants. Yet the old religion which alone succeeded in meeting men's needs in the second and third centuries will alone meet any real needs in the twentieth century or in any other century.

I

THE MOVEMENT ITSELF

A. IN GENERAL

1. ITS ORIGIN AND RISE

The roots of the gnostic movement can be traced far back into pre-Christian times. We find them in the speculative philosophy of the East which has always had a fascination for the practical-minded West. Alexander the Great's conquests of the Eastern empires brought the victorious Greeks under the sway of Oriental ideas, and these increasingly dominated European thought.

2.)

2. ZOROASTER AND THE ZENDAVESTA

One of these Oriental creeds which had a great influence on Gnosticism is Zoroastrianism. The doctrine of Zoroaster, the great religious teacher of Persia, is found in the Zendavesta which is a work of eight books written at different periods, the earliest of which has been assigned to B.C. 1200-1000. It tells us that

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1.) Modernism in the church today.

2.) Cf. Foakes-Jackson - "The History of the Christian Church" P. 123 f.



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from Zarvana Akarana or Boundless Time, two antagonistic principles emanated, - Ormuzd (Ahuramazda), the eternal Word of the Father, and his younger brother Ahriman. Between these a contest soon began by each principle putting forth emanations; first Ormuzd after creating the pure world by his Word put forth the six Amshaspands, of which he himself was the seventh. These were of both sexes and produced in turn the twenty-eight Iseds, from whom came forth an indefinite number of Frarashis, or ideas.

Afterwards, Ahriman, who for his pride and jealousy of Ormuzd had been condemned by the Supreme Being to sojourn in darkness for twelve hundred years, put forth three series of evil spirits or Devs to oppose his rival. In the contest with Ahriman, the Word of Ormuzd was destroyed, but out of its scattered fragments Ormuzd made man and woman whom he placed in the world which he and the good spirits had created. Ahriman, however, seduced the woman by bribes and filled with evil the whole material world. The Zendavesta predicts that in the day: when evil seems triumphant, three prophets shall arise, one of whom called Saoshyant, shall restore all things to their original purity. It is impossible not to be struck by the resemblance of some of the teachings of the Zendavesta to those of Gnosticism.

3. THE JEWISH KABBALISTIC LITERATURE

The influence of the Zendavesta will be most clearly seen in the Kabbalistic literature of the Hebrews, which in turn also greatly influenced Gnosticism.



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The theosophy of the Jews is found in the Kabbala. Tradition assigns the composition of the Kabbala to the angels at the time of the fall of man; some ascribe it to Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Simon ben Jochai (A.D. 100-200); while in truth, it was compiled as late as A. D. 1300 by Moses da Leon. But though the Kabbala is a late work, the theories it propounds are ancient, many being earlier than Christianity. It closely follows the language of the Zendavesta.

The system of the Kabbala is as follows: - God is Boundless Time and is called En-Soph. He can only be described as non-existent, but the ten Sephiroth emanate from him. These taken together form the Adam Kadmon or Primal Man. They are divided into three triads; those on the right being male, in the center copulative, and on the left female. United, they form the tenth Sephirah which is called Kingdom. From the Sephiroth proceed the four worlds. The first is inhabited by immaterial beings. The second is ruled by Metatron, the highest being man may know. The third is inhabited by the angelic hosts, and the fourth by the devils under Samael. Man has three souls and is fashioned like the Adam Kadmon. He was clothed in skin because of his transgression, but he must eventually be redeemed from the bondage of the flesh.

Jewish literature produced during the two centuries before  
Christ, displays the following distinct tendencies: 3.)

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3.) Qualben - "A History of the Christian Church" p. 71



GNOSTICISM

- 1.) Stress on the absolute majesty and sovereignty of God above the world.
- 2.) Mediary beings - Angels and Archangels, and a special divine agent - between this far distant God and mankind.
- 3.) Development of a remarkable Sophia or Wisdom literature.
- 4.) A doctrine of two primary Powers or Principles, good and evil.
- 5.) A special divine "dynamis" or agent, conceived of in various ways, in Jewish-Babylonian literature as Seth, Enoch, Melchizedek, etc., in Palestine as the Metatron, in Alexandria as the Logos, and in Patristic literature as the Horos, Stauros, Lytrotes, etc.
- 6.) Adoption of several extra-canonical accounts of the creation.
- 7.) Adoption, especially in Alexandria, of a doctrine of Macrocosm and Microcosm, that is, that man is nothing but a small universe, and the universe is nothing but a large man.

Compare these tendencies with the characteristics of Gnosticism which are given later and see how they coincide.

The admonition in Ecclesiasticus 3, 21-22, is now considered a warning against gnostic speculations. Jochanan ben Zakkai, the great contemporary of the apostle Paul, knew of a Mishnah that warned against gnostic speculations, and he himself was well versed



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in them. So these gnostic tendencies must have existed long before Christ was born.

### 4. THE ESSENES

4.)

The Essenes gave these Kabbalistic theories a practical form. Some writers hold that they were merely scrupulous observers of the Law who withdrew from the world to practice asceticism in seclusion. Others consider that their rigid austerity, especially with regard to their prohibition of marriage, their custom of turning to the Sun at their worship, and above all, their magical practices, and the oath they imposed upon their neophytes not to reveal the names of the angels, are proofs that they were not orthodox Jews, but mystics who derived many of their tenets from Oriental sources. In confirmation of the latter view, it may be added that they did not offer sacrifices in the Temple. This shrinking from taking animal life is eminently characteristic of Oriental philosophy. There were four grades or orders among them, and the candidates had to pass through a rigid probation. Strangely enough, they do not seem to be mentioned in the Talmud.

### 5. BUDDHISM

The doctrines of Buddhism were promulgated in India in the sixth century B.C. by Gautama. It is a philosophy rather than a religion, distinguished by the lofty morality, the sublime self-sacrifice taught by its leaders, its rigid asceticism, its view that the highest end is the peace of Nirvana, or freedom from all desire to exist, and its practical denial of the existence of a personal God. Though Buddhism has never established itself in Europe, it made its influence felt in the Christian Church by means

4.) Our Lord is supposed by some unbelieving critics to have been an Essene. Cf. Schweitzer "The Quest of the Historic Jesus" CH. IV



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of Gnosticism. For the affinity of Gnosticism, with the pantheistic, docetic and ascetic elements of Buddhism is quite plain.

### 6. PLATO

The principles of Gnosticism are also to be found in the *Timaeus* of Plato which is an excellent introduction to the subject. According to Plato there are two worlds. The one around us, consisting of sensible objects, is but a shadow of the other, which is the world of essential forms (ideas) which are immaterial. The ideas belong to the real world and all visible objects are partial revelations of unseen actualities. Thus what is material is but a type. The idea itself is the ultimate reality. The world we see is the work of a Creator (or Demiurge) who fashioned the things seen on the model of the unseen.

This Platonic speculation yielded the germs of the Gnostic doctrine of aeons, the conceptions of matter, of the antithesis of an ideal and a real world, of an ante-mundane fall of souls from the ideal world, of the origin of sin from matter, and of the needed redemption of the soul from the fetters of the body. We find also in the Gnostics traces of the Pythagorean symbolical use of numbers, the Stoic physics and ethics and some Aristotelian elements.

### 7. ALEXANDRIA

Greek thought came into contact first with Egyptian and later with Indian ideas at Alexandria. It was the great meeting place for Greek, Jew, Egyptian, Roman and Oriental. In this great center of learning, cultural and religious elements from the various



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nations could be compared, conciliated and fused on a larger scale than anywhere else in the world.

5.) It has been maintained that Egypt was the ultimate source of all Greek philosophy, and certainly the religion of that ancient land was fundamentally Gnostic in character. Greek, Jewish and Christian beliefs experienced at Alexandria the same treatment as the old Egyptian myths. The plain sense of Homer as well as that of the Old and New Testaments was said to conceal a hidden meaning of spiritual truths veiled in allegory. Unrestrained allegory is essentially gnostic in its contempt for realities. As to the Alexandrian the facts of Homer's narrative and of the history of Abraham were equally unimportant compared with the truths they were supposed to inculcate, so by the Gnostic of later times, the circumstances of our Lord's life were disregarded, and their symbolic meaning alone considered of importance. The reality of God on earth began to vanish, and in its place a phantom Teacher instructed mankind about the aeons and heavenly powers.

As an example of this we need only point to Philo, who was a contemporary of Christ, but wholly ignorant of him. He endeavored to combine the Jewish religion by allegorical exposition, or rather imposition, with Platonic philosophy. And this system, according as it might be prosecuted under the Christian or the heathen influence, would prepare the way either for the speculative theology of the Alexandrian church fathers, or for the heretical Gnosis.



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### 8. THE SYNETIC SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

We have briefly studied the roots of Gnosticism. Now let us see how they were all brought together to form the heresy as it appeared in the second and third centuries.

In order to understand the great Gnostic movement we must bear in mind the syncretistic tendency of the age. <sup>6.)</sup> Scepticism had undermined and finally dissolved the traditional religious beliefs of the ancient world. The influence of Oriental religious elements was strongly felt in Greek and Roman culture. These pagan ideas were eagerly absorbed, interpreted through, and harmonized with philosophical ideas.

Christianity appeared and was being diffused at a time when men were interested in what is now known as Comparative Religion. Writers discoursed on the nature of the gods and the origin of the myth concerning them. New religions were eagerly studied and adopted and mystery religions were becoming widespread. Magic was universally believed in, and as the name implies, was traced to the East. Even the religious beliefs and practices in India were studied. Those of Egypt were subjects of intense curiosity. The simple fact that both Strabo and Pliny the Elder mention the Essenes is proof that even an obscure sect of the Jews did not escape notice.

In conformity with the spirit of the age, the great ideas of Christianity were also compared and harmonized with Hellenistic and Jewish philosophy and Oriental theosophy. In Ebionism the syncretistic tendency of the age tried to force Christianity into the legalistic particularism of Pharisaism. In Gnosticism, the

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6.) Klotzche - "An Outline of the History of Doctrines" p. 17



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syncretistic tendency was to amalgamate Oriental theosophy and Hellenistic philosophy with Christianity in order to establish a universal religion.

As many a Jew when he embraced the Christian religion wished to introduce Judaism into Christianity, so many a heathen wished to carry with him the ethnic ideas dear to him, and mingle them with the Christian elements. Christianity was a practical, not a speculative religion. It held out the hope of a glorious future to those who believed in Jesus as the Christ. But many who embraced, or at least were interested in the new religion, brought their own prejudices and presuppositions to explain it.

Hence Gnosticism may be defined as an attitude of mind toward many religions. The outward manifestations of religion in ceremonies and myths were but crude attempts to express the deeper feelings of men toward the unseen; and these naturally varied with the spiritual condition of the individual. Thus in one sense Gnosticism was a phase which by the fourth century had passed away; in another it is so permanent among men that it may be said that it never can be traced to any beginning, and its end can never be predicted. A great deal of the most modern manifestations of religion are only the old Gnosticism in a new guise.

The great test to which primitive Christianity was exposed from the outside world was not so much the danger of succumbing to persecution, as of losing itself in the popular philosophies of the heathen and Jewish world. In the critical period of the first half of the second century the subject for investigation is how the



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Christian religion escaped being one of the many forgotten creeds of the Early Roman Empire, and emerged in a definite and permanent form.

7.) Kurtz in his Church History has given us a fine evaluation of the syncretistic spirit that prevailed at the time:

"A persistent conviction that the ancient world had exhausted itself and was no longer able to resist its threatened overthrow now prevailed and drove the deepest thinkers to adopt the boldest and grandest Syncretism the world has ever beheld, in the blending of all the previously isolated and heterogeneous elements of culture as a final attempt at rejuvenating of that which had become old. Even within the borders of the church, this Syncretism, favored by the prevailing spirit of the age, influenced those of superior culture to whom the church doctrine of the age did not seem to make enough of theosophical principles and speculative thought while the worship of the church seemed dry and barren. Out of the fusing of cosmological myths of Oriental and Greek paganism with Christian historical elements in the crucible of its own speculation, there arose numerous systems of a higher fantasia of religious philosophy, which were included under the common name of Gnosticism. The pagan element is on the whole the prevailing one, inasmuch as in most Gnostic systems, Christianity is not represented as the conclusion and completion of the development of salvation given in the Old Testament, but often merely as the continuation and climax of the pagan religion of nature and the pagan mystery worship. The attitude of this heretical gnosis toward holy Scripture was various. By means of allegorical interpretation some endeavored to prove their system from it; others preferred to depreciate the apostles as falsifiers of the original purely gnostic doctrine of Christ, or to remodel the apostolic writings in accordance with their own views, or even to produce a Bible of their own after the principles of their own schools. With them, however, for the most part, the tradition of ancient wisdom as the communicated secret doctrine stood higher than holy Scripture."



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2. THE THEOLOGY OF GNOSTICISM IN GENERAL

9. MATTER IS EVIL

Gnosticism addressed itself to the same problem; which lay at the foundation of all Oriental religions, the relation of finite man to the infinite God. How can an imperfect world proceed from a perfect God? What is the relation of spirit to matter? How did evil enter the world? What is evil?

The answer was not supplied by the Greek philosophers, who had not allowed themselves to perplex their mind; with the problem usually preferring to dwell on the less gloomy side of life. Far otherwise was it with Oriental; to whom the existence of evil was a question of all-absorbing interest. Indian and Persians had meditated thereon and had decided by universal agreement that everything which was material, or that could be perceived by the natural senses of man, partook of the nature of evil.

Gnosticism sought to present the solution. There are, it taught, two worlds in sharp contrast with one another, the worlds of the good and of the evil, the worlds of light and of darkness, the spiritual world and the material world which is evil. Thus it returned to the dualism of Zoroaster.

If the material of which this world consists is essentially evil, it is evident that it cannot be the creation of the supreme God. It is also obvious that the union between God and the world cannot possibly be a direct one, but must be through the medium of agencies the lowest of which approaches most nearly to material existence.



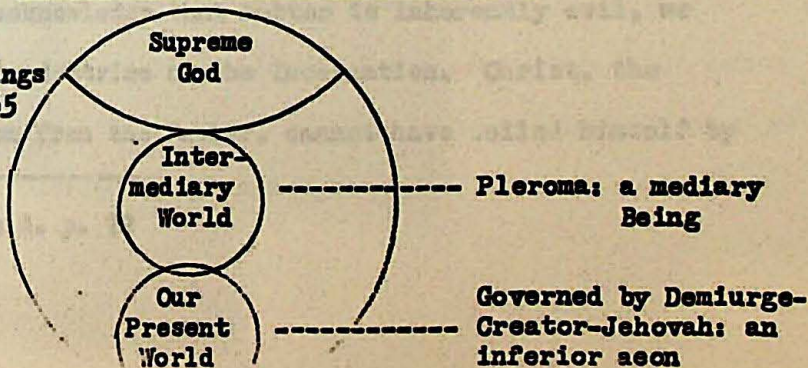
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Hence, stress was laid on a transcendental, nameless, unknowable, not-being God corresponding to the "Great Unknown" of modern times. Mediary beings - the Pleroma - were believed to furnish intercourse between this far-distant God and mankind. There was great respect for the Great Mother, called Sophia, or Wisdom. In the Christian period Sophia was usually identified with the Holy Spirit. The two primary and equal Powers, Good and Evil, are co-eternal; hence, the marked dualism in all gnostic systems. A special divine agent was to be the Redeemer of the world. Several extra-canonical accounts of the Creation were advocated. God himself did not directly create the world. From him proceeded a series of emanations or aeons on a descending scale. The lowest of these emanations was called the Demiurgus or Creator. He was identified with the God of the Jews, the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Hence, the Father of Jesus Christ, the God of the Christians, was vastly inferior to the Supreme God; and the apostles of Christ would accordingly be vastly inferior to the apostles of this Supreme Being. The Gnostics would stamp the Old Testament revelation from Jehovah as far inferior to the true "Gnosis" or revelation of the Supreme Being.

8.)

GNOSTIC CONCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSE

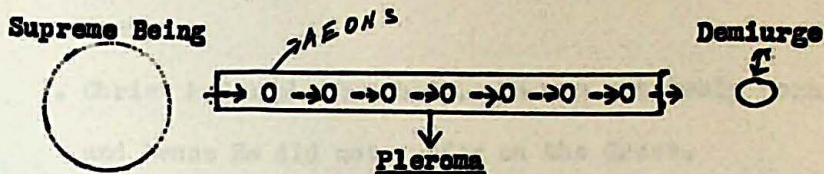
The number of intermediary beings vary from 3 - 365 in different Gnostic systems





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The idea of emanations can best be expressed as follows:



10. ANGELS TO BE WORSHIPPED

The worship of angels is a natural consequence of the foregoing. Man cannot understand one who is separated from his world by so vast a gulf as the perfect God. We can only approach Him through a multitude of beings which form part of a vast chain of emanation: uniting the infinite to the finite.

11. THE REDEEMER AND HIS INCARNATION

When a part of the spiritual world had fallen and had been incorporated into material substance the mediary beings, or inferior gods, held a council to determine how these spiritual elements could be redeemed, or brought back to the world of light. The gods decided that each should contribute the best he had and so they created a new god, the Redeemer. His "humiliation" consisted in his leaving the world of light to come down to our world, in order that he might gather the spirits incarnated or bound up in matter.

But if we acknowledge that matter is inherently evil, we cannot admit the doctrine of the Incarnation. Christ, the highest emanation from the Father, cannot have soiled himself by

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8.) Qualben - Ibid. p. 72



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taking a material body. That "the word became flesh, and  
9.) dwelt among us" had to be explained away. This was done in  
one of several ways.

1. Christ had a phantom body. He was not truly born,  
and hence He did not suffer on the Cross.
2. Jesus was an ordinary human being upon whom the  
divine Christ came in baptism, and left him before  
the Crucifixion.
3. A distinction was made between a higher, heavenly  
Christ, and a lower, earthly Christ.

### 12. GNOSTIC REDEMPTION

Since the material or the natural is evil, it is to be  
fought against. The spiritual must be freed from the world of  
matter. Indeed, the truly spiritual are already freed from and  
above it. Accordingly, Christianity with its great idea of redemp-  
tion is to the Gnostics the world-renewing principle, but it is not  
redemption from sin and guilt, but deliverance of the spiritual  
from the material; it is not soteric, but cosmic principle; and  
in spite of the fact that the Gnostics sought to elevate Christianity  
to the position of the universal religion, they robbed Christianity  
of its fundamental and essential elements.

Sin is conceived of as residing in matter or the body, and  
not as the Christians believed, in the heart or in the moral nature  
of man. The Fall was identified with the incorporation of material  
substance in the universe, and the fall of man simply consisted in

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the incarnation of spirits in material bodies, where these spirits were held as in a prison house. The resurrection of the body is emphatically denied. It merely consists in liberating the spirit from the material.

Salvation comes through knowledge (gnosis) imparted by the Redeemer. A higher knowledge than is possessed by ordinary men is necessary for liberation. This, they claimed, was recognized as a truth by the Christian teachers, especially St. Paul who in I. Corinthians 2, 14 speaks of the impossibility of the natural man understanding spiritual things. But while the Christian sought this spiritual perception from God, through Christ's work, the Gnostics as a rule believed it to be the exclusive possession of those higher nature who were born capable of enjoying the benefit of more perfect instruction. The "gnosis" in the eyes of the latter, was the possession of a favored few, who alone were capable of emancipation from the retraining influences of material existence.

Christ's office as the Redeemer was not to atone for the sins of the world, but to bring knowledge to the world, especially Gnosis to the pneumatics. This Gnosis aids the pneumatic to find his way to the upper world at death and also leads to moral purification and a perfect life on this world.

13. GNOSTIC VIEW OF THE BODY

Matter being evil, the body must be evil, and consequently the duty of the true Gnostic was to show himself hostile to it. Two courses lay open to him:



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1. Either to conquer its desires by ascetic practices.
2. Or to adopt the alternative of showing that he considered the body to be so contemptible that he saw no harm in degrading it by indulgence in every species of sin. Simon Magus claimed that the elect could sin with impunity, since gold when plunged into mire, loses not its beauty.  
10.)

14. MICROCOSM AND MACROCOSM

The doctrine of microcosm and macrocosm has, by some recent investigators, been considered the essential key to a study of Gnosticism. As man consists of body, soul, and spirit, so the universe must have a corresponding division. Our visible world, limited by the sky, corresponds to the human body. The region of the stars and the Holy Seven planets, corresponds to the human soul. The third heaven, where God and the Sophia dwell, corresponds to the human mind. This same doctrine divided mankind into three groups.

1. The "hylics", or men of earth, who are not capable of being saved. This division corresponds to our world.
2. The "psychics", or men of heaven, who might or might not be saved. This corresponds to the <sup>H</sup>ebdomad, the region of the Seven Planets.
3. The "pneumatics", or men of God, who alone were sure

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10.) Compare the Christian view of the body as "the temple of the Holy Spirit. I Corinthians 6, 19; Romans 12, 1.



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of salvation. This corresponds to the Ogdoad,  
where God dwells.

11.)  
Klatsche in his book "An Outline of the History of Doctrines"  
gives this summary of the characteristic doctrine of Gnosticism:

1. From the supreme God, the absolute and infinite being, the "ineffable One", is to be distinguished the Creator of the World, the Demiurge.
2. From the Supreme God must likewise be distinguished the Old Testament God, for the creator of the world is the God of the Jews.
3. Matter is eternal; it did not emanate from God, but the two stand dualistically opposed to each other.
4. The present world came into existence by a process of emanation or evolution. Fallen divinities, or spirits, sank down into the world of matter, or evil, which previously insensible, was animated into life and activity.
5. Matter is identified with evil.
6. There is a natural and gradual unfolding of the divine potency, or emanation from the divine being. The products of emanation are called aeons, which are thought to be the media of creation, development, and redemption of the world.
7. The lowest and weakest of these aeons, the Demiurge is the Creator of the world.
8. One of the highest aeons appears as the Redeemer in whom the celestial aeon and the human person are clearly to be distinguished.
9. His mission was the deliverance of the captive spiritual elements from matter by the imparting of knowledge. (Gnosis)
10. The means of this deliverance are mystical rites, Gnosis and ascetism.

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11.) Ibid. p. 21-22. Essentially the same as Seeberg -  
"Lehrbuch der Dogmen- und Geschichte."



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11. Mankind is divided into three different classes and so fitted for different destinies; the church is the congregation of the pneumatics or spiritual men who are capable of Gnosis; the psychical are capable only of pistis (faith) and will therefore obtain a lower degree of eternal bliss, while the hylic or carnal are left in hopeless subjection to the powers of Satan.
12. The Christian Eschatology as a whole is rejected. There is no room for the resurrection of Christ, nor the resurrection of the dead. The only thing to be expected from the future is the complete deliverance of the spirit from matter and its final return into the pleroma."

15. THE FORM OF GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is not abstract speculation, but mystic religion based on revelation. If it were merely an unintelligible tissue of puerile absurdities and impious blasphemies, as it is grotesquely portrayed by older historians, it would not have fascinated so many vigorous intellects and produced such a long-continued agitation in the ancient church. It is an attempt to solve some of the deepest metaphysical and theological problems, yet in their daring attempt to explain the mysteries of an upper world, they disdained the trammels of reason, and resorted to direct spiritual intuition. Hence, they speculate not so much in a logical and dialectic mode, as in an imaginative and semi-poetic way, and they clothe their ideas not in the clear and sober language of reflection, but in the many-colored, fantastic, mythological dress of type, symbol and allegory. This monstrous nonsense and the most absurd conceits are chaotically mingled up with profound thoughts and poetic intuitions.



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All Gnostic sects boasted of a mystic revelation and a deeply veiled wisdom, in no way accessible to the uninitiated. This secret and mysterious knowledge was not to be proved and propagated by scientific demonstration. It was to be obtained only through initiation into the mysteries and believed by the initiated and anxiously guarded as a secret. Hence, great importance was attached to holy rites, and sacred formulas, names and symbols. They had a number of Sacraments, such as baptism, by water, by Spirit and by fire; anointment by oil; a supper; a sacrament of the bridal chamber, etc.

Casting aside altogether the Old Testament, the Gnostic schools supported their doctrines by arbitrary and allegorical interpretation of the apostolic writings and by unwritten traditions of apostolic teaching and apocryphal gospels. Gnosis promised to raise its adherents far above the faith of ordinary Christian, and aid them in obtaining a higher degree of mortality.

With all this, Gnosticism perverted Christianity, basing it on ancient Oriental theosophy. In the second century Gnosticism became the gravest of all dangers to Christianity. Substituting heathen speculation it claimed to be the universal religion. It promised spiritual renewal without true repentance through outward asceticism. It allured many by the charm of mystern connected with its doctrines.

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12.) "Such apocryphal doctrines arose in great numbers in the second century. Epiphanius, in his Twenty-Sixth Heresy, counts the apocrypha of the Gnostics by thousands, and Irenaeus found among the Valentinians alone a countless multitude of such writings". Schaff, "History of the Christian Church".



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16. THREE SIGNIFICANT GNOSTIC TRENDS EVIDENT TODAY

In the first place, the Gnostic sects stood for the general principle of Rationalism as against the principle of Traditionalism. The modern mind has a prejudice in favor of Rationalism, as if it must be rational, and against Traditionalism as if that must mean the acceptance of everything that has ever been told as a tradition. A distinction more nearly accurate would be that Rationalism is a method of fancy, and Traditionalism, a method of exact historical science. The historical method appeals to an unbroken chain of testimony as to what Jesus Christ actually gave to His disciples and regards that as infallibly true. The Rationalist asks whether this or that statement of religion satisfies the inquirer's mind. If not, it is not to be accepted. Thus has Gnosticism in every age brushed aside that which antagonizes reason.

In the next place, the Gnostic had an exaggerated idea of the value of knowledge. He held, as many do in these days, that education was salvation. All sin was delusion. Even the host of evil spirits were represented as enslaved by error rather than willfully choosing evil when good was before them. As in these days, so in those, the consequences of such a theory were bad. Sin does not appear sinful when it is stated that a better knowledge will do away with it.

Another common feature of the Gnostic sects was the habit of regarding matter as evil. "The spirit is good," says the



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Gnostic, "but the flesh is bad." Man is dragged down by the imprisonment of his spirit in the body. Deliver him from that bondage and he will soon be perfected. That Gnostic tendency reappears today in what is called "Christian Science", which teaches that matter is a mere delusion fastened upon the "spirit" by "mortal mind". Again, this teaching crops out in the denial of the Resurrection of the body.

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B. VARIOUS GNOSTIC SCHOOLS

We have studied the Gnostic movement in general, but we will not gain a complete picture of this heresy unless we study it in all its various phases and ramifications, for each leader represents a slightly different tendency. 13.)

17. SIMON MAGUS

Simon Magus is a historical character known to us from the eighth chapter of Acts. He was probably a native of Githon in Samaria as Justin Martyr reports, but he may nevertheless be identical with the contemporaneous Jewish magician of the same name, whom Josephus mentions as a native of Cyprus and as a friend of Procurator Felix.

Simon represented himself as a sort of emanation of the deity, ("The power of God which is Great") made a great noise among the half-pagan, half-Jewish Samaritans by his sorceries, was baptized by Phillip about the year 40, but terribly rebuked

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13.) We shall follow the enumeration of Schaff, Vol. II, p. 461 ff. "Church History".



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by Peter for hypocrisy and abuse of holy things to sordid ends. He thus affords the first instance in church history of a confused syncretism in union with magical arts; and so far as this goes, the Church Fathers are right in calling him the patriarch or the magister and progenitor (Irenaeus) of all heretics, and of the Gnostics in particular. Beside him, two other contemporaneous Samaritans, Dositheus and Menander bore the reputation of heresiarchs. Samaria was a fertile soil of religious syncretism even before Christ, and the natural birth-place of that syncretistic heresy - Gnosticism.

The wandering life and teaching of Simon were fabulously garnished in the second and third centuries by Catholics and heretics. Simon the Magician is contrasted as the apostle of Falsehood with Simon Peter, the Apostle of Truth. He follows him as darkness follows the light, from city to city, in company with Helena (who had been a prostitute at Tyre, but was now elevated to the dignity of his first son); he is refuted by Peter in public disputations at Caesarea, Antioch and Rome. At last he is ignominiously defeated by Peter after a mock-resurrection and mock-ascension before the Emperor Nero. He ends with suicide, while Peter gains the Crown of Martyrdom.

The Gnosticism which Irenaeus, Hippolytus and other fathers ascribe to this Simon is crude, and belongs to the earlier phase of this heresy. It was embodied in a work called "The Great Announcement" or "Proclamation" of which Hippolytus



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gives an analysis. According to Simon the origin of all is fire, and this Unbegotten Fire, produced the Boundless Power who is potentially but not actually in six roots or aeons. A female aeon, he being the Great Power, had long been imprisoned in the form of women of surpassing beauty, like Helen of Troy, and now dwelt in Helen of Tyre, who traveled as his companion, having been "redeemed" by Simon when a prostitute. Hippolytus says that Simon claimed to have been crucified, in appearance only, as the Son in Judaea; had been manifested as the Father in Samaria; and as the Holy Spirit elsewhere. Here we have the Gnostic conception of the syzygy, or marriage of male and female aeons.

The sect of the Simonians, which continued into the third century, took its name, if not its rise, from Simon Magus, and worshipped him as a redeeming genius. It chose the most infamous characters of the Old Testament for its heroes and was immoral in its principles and practices.

### 18. THE NICOLAITANS

The Nicolaitans are mentioned as a licentious sect in the Apocalypse. (2, 6.15) They claimed as their founder Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch and one of the seven deacons of the congregation of Jerusalem. (Acts 6,5) He is supposed to have apostatized from the true faith, and taught the dangerous principle that the flesh must be abused, that is, at least as understood by his disciples, that one must make the whole round of sensuality to become its perfect master.



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But the views of the fathers are conflicting. Irenaeus (who is followed by Hippolytus) gives a very unfavorable account. He says "They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, where they are represented as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.

However, Clement of Alexandria says that Nicolaus was a faithful husband and brought up his children in purity, but that his disciples misunderstood his saying, "that we must fight against the flesh and abuse it".

19. CERINTHUS

Cerinthus appeared towards the close of the first century in Asia Minor, and came in conflict with the aged apostle John who is supposed by Irenaeus to have opposed his Gnostic ideas in the Gospel and Epistles. The story that John left a public bath when he saw Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, fearing that the bath might fall in, and the similar story of Polycarp meeting Marcion and calling him "the first-born of Satan", reveal the intense abhorrence with which the orthodox churchmen of those days looked upon heresy.

(14.)

Cerinthus was an Egyptian either by birth or conversion, studied in the school of Philo in Alexandria, was one of the false apostles who opposed Paul and demanded circumcision (Galatians 2,4; 2 Corinthians 11, 13), claimed to have received angelic revelations, traveled through Palestine and Galatia and once came to Ephesus. The time of his death is unknown.

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14.) According to the uncertain traditions collected by Epiphanius.



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His views, as far as they can be ascertained from confused accounts, assign him a position between Judaism and Gnosticism proper. He rejected all the Gospels except a mutilated Matthew, taught the validity of the Mosaic law and the millennial kingdom. He was thus strongly Judaistic and may be counted among the Ebionites; but in true Gnostic style he distinguished the world-maker from God, and represented the former as a subordinate power, as an intermediate, though not exactly hostile being. In his Christology he separates the earthly man Jesus, who was a son of Joseph and Mary, from the heavenly Christ, who descended upon the man Jesus in the form of a dove at the Baptism in the Jordan, imparted to him the genuine knowledge of God and the power of miracles, but forsook him in the Passion to rejoin him only at the coming of the Messianic kingdom of glory. The millennium has its center in Jerusalem and will be followed by the restoration of all things.

The Alogi, an obscure anti-trinitarian and anti-chiliasm sect of the second century, regarded Cerinthus as the author of the Apocalypse of John and also of the fourth Gospel because of the chiliasm supposedly taught in them.

Simon Magus, the Nicolaitan, and Cerinthus belong to the second half of the first century. We now proceed to the more developed systems of Gnosticism which belong to the first half of the second century, and which continued to flourish till the middle of the third.



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20. BASILIDES

IN ALEXANDRIA ~ A.D.125

Basilide produced the first well-developed system of Gnosis, but it is too metaphysical and intricate to be popular. He claimed to be a disciple of the apostle Matthias and of an interpreter of St. Peter, named Glaucias. He taught in Alexandria during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 A.D.). His early youth fell in the second generation of Christians, and this gives his quotations from the writings of the N.T. considerable apologetic value. He wrote "twenty-four books on the Gospel". This work was probably a commentary on the canonical Gospels.

His doctrine is very peculiar, especially according to the extended and original description of it in the "Philosophumena", of Hippolytus, in which he deviates in many respects from the statements of many of the other Church Fathers, but which nevertheless must be regarded as correct, since he probably derived his information from the work of Basilides himself. The system is based on the Egyptian astronomy and the Pythagorean numerical symbolism. It betrays also the influence of Aristotle, but Platonism, the emanation theory, and dualism do not appear.

Basilides is monotheistic rather than dualistic in his primary idea, and thus differs from the other Gnostics, though later accounts make him a dualist. He starts from the most abstract notion of the absolute, to which he denies even existence. The ineffable and unnamable God, not only super-existent, but non-existent, first forms by his creative word the world-seed, that is chaos, from which the world develops itself according to



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arithmetical relations.

In the world-seed Basilides distinguished three kinds of son-ship or three races of children of God, a pneumatic, a psychic, and a hylic. The first son-ship liberates itself immediately from the world-seed and rises to God and remains in the Pleroma. The second son-ship, with the help of the Holy Spirit, who bears it up as the wing bears the bird, strives to follow the first but can only attain to the limit of the firmament. The third son-ship remains fixed in the world-seed and is in need of purification and redemption.

Next Basilides makes two archons or world-rulers issue from the world-seed. The first or great archon creates the upper heaven, the Ogdoad, as it is called. The second is the maker and ruler of the lower planetary heaven below the moon, the Hebdomad.

Each of the two archons, however, according to a higher ordinance, begets a son, who towers far above his father, communicates to him the knowledge received from the Holy Spirit concerning the upper spirit-world and the plan of redemption, and leads him to repentance. With this begins the process of the redemption or return of the fighting children of God, that is the pneumatics, to the super-mundane God. This is effected by Christianity, and ends with the consummation or apokatastasis of all things. Basilides held a three-fold Christ, the son of the first archon, the son of the second archon, and the son of Mary.

In his moral teaching Basilides inculcated a moderate asceticism, from which, however, his school soon departed. He used as the basis of his teaching some of Paul's Epistles and the canon-



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cal Gospels. His son Isidore was his chief disciple. The Basilidians, especially in the west, seem to have been dualistic and docetic in theory, and dissolute in practice. The whole life of Christ was to them a mere sham, a spurious Basilidian sect maintained itself in Egypt till the end of the fourth century.

21. VALENTINUS

IN ROME - 140 A. D.

15.)

Valentinus is the author of the most profound and luxuriant, as well as the most influential and best known, of the Gnostic systems. Irenaeus directed his work especially against Valentinus. He founded a large school and spread his doctrines in the West. He claimed to be a student of Theudas, a pupil of St. Paul. He also pretended to have received revelations from the Logos in a vision. He was probably of Egyptian Jewish descent and Alexandrian education. Tertullian reports, perhaps from his own conjecture, that he broke with the orthodox church from disappointed ambition, not being made a bishop. He came to Rome about 137 and stayed till 154. At that time Rome was the center of the church and the gathering place of all sects. He was thus one of the first Gnostics who taught in Rome about the same time with Cerdo and Marcian. Though he made considerable impression with his genius and eloquence, the church was too orthodox and he was excommunicated.

He went to Cyprus where he died about 160. His system describes in three acts the creation, the fall and the redemption. He derived

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15.) Cf. Schaff "Church History" Vol II p.472



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his material from his own fertile imagination, from Oriental and Greek speculation and from Christian ideas.

Valentinus starts from the eternal primal Being which he calls "Abyss". It is the fathomless depth in which the thinking mind is lost, the ultimate boundary beyond which it cannot pass. The Bythos or Abyss continues for immeasurable ages in silent contemplation of his own boundless grandeur, glory, and beauty. This "Silence" or "Solitude" is his Spouse. (Syzygy)

After this eternal silence, God enters upon a process of evolution or emanation. From the abyss emanate thirty aeons in fifteen pairs, in three generations, the first called the Ogdoad, the second the Decad, the third the Dodecad. The aeons constitute together the Pleroma. They all partake in substance of the life of the abyss, but their form is conditioned by the Heros, the limiting power of God.

The process of the fall and redemption takes place first in the ideal world of the Pleroma, and is then repeated in the lower world. In this process, the lower Wisdom or Sophia plays an important part. She is the mundane soul, a female aeon, the weakest and most remote member of the series of aeons (the twenty-eight of thirty). Feeling her loneliness and estrangement from the great Father she wishes to unite herself immediately, without regard to the intervening links, with him who is the originating principle of the universe. She jumps, as it were, by a single bound into the depth of the eternal Father, and brings forth of herself alone



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an abortion. By this sinful passion she introduced confusion and disturbance into the Pleroma. She wanders about outside it and suffers with fear, anxiety and despair because of her abortion. This is the fall.

But Sophia yearns after redemption. The aeons sympathize with her suffering; and a pirations and the eternal Father himself commands the projection of the last pair of aeon, Christ and the Holy Spirit, to restore order in the Pleroma. They comfort and cheer Sophia and separate the abortion from the Pleroma. At last the thirty aeons together project in honor of the Father the aeon Soter or Jesus, and send him forth beyond the Pleroma as a Spouse for Sophia, and as a rectifier of her sufferings. Sophia is then purged of all passions and brought back into the ideal world.

We have again three redeeming beings:

1. The heavenly Christ who with the Holy Spirit forms the last pair of aeons. He also announces the plan of redemption to the other aeons.
2. The Soter, produced by all the aeon: to unite with Sophia.
3. The Jewish Messiah, sent by the Demiurge and crucified by the Jew: He is united with the Soter and leads the pneumatics to perfection.

#### 22. THE SCHOOL OF VALENTINUS

Of all the forms of Gnosticism, that of Valentinus was the most popular and influential. He had a large number of followers but his school is divided chiefly into two branches, an Italian and an Oriental.



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A. ITALIAN SCHOOL

1. Heraclion flourished somewhere in Italy, between 170-180. He is the earliest known commentator on the Gospel of John. Although he acknowledges it as canonical, he reads his own system into it. He finds in John the favorite Valentinian ideas of logos, life, light, love, conflict with darkness, and mysteries in all the numbers. Yet he deprives the facts of historical realness, e.g. - The woman of Samaria represents the redemption of Sophia.
2. Ptolemy is the author of the Epistle to Flora, a wealthy Christian lady, whom he tried to convert to the Valentinian system. He deals chiefly with the objection that the Creation of the world and the Old Testament could not proceed from the highest God.
3. Marcos taught in the second half of the second century probably in Asia Minor and Gaul. He blended numerical symbolism with the ideas of his master, and introduced a ritual abounding in ceremonies. His followers were called Marcosians.

B. ORIENTAL SCHOOL

1. Axonico is mentioned by Hippolytus but not known otherwise.
2. Bardesanes was a distinguished Syrian scholar and poet who lived at the court of the prince of Edessa at the close of the second and in the early part of the third



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century. Hardly a Gnostic. He was at first orthodox but became corrupted by contact with the Valentinians. Eusebius says on the contrary that he was in later life an orthodox scholar who wrote against the heresy of Marcion. His writings show no trace of the Gnostic mythology and dualism usually ascribed to him.

16.)

3. Harmonius, son of Bardesanes, or Bardesanes himself, is the father of Syrian hymnology. He or his father composed a book of one hundred and fifty hymns (after the Psalter), which were used on festivals, till they were superseded by the orthodox hymns of St. Ephraem the Syrian, who retained the same meters and <sup>TUNES</sup> ~~lines~~. Only vaguely gnostic.

23. MARCION

Marcion was the most earnest, the most practical, and the most dangerous among the Gnostics, full of energy and zeal for reforming, but restless, rough and eccentric. He has a remote connection with modern questions of biblical criticism and the canon. He could see only superficial differences in the Bible, not its deeper harmony. However, he rejected the heathen mythology of the other Gnostics, and adhered to Christianity as the only true religion. He represents an extreme anti-Jewish tendency, and a magical supernaturalism which nullifies all history and turns the Gospel into an

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16.) Cf Schaff "Church History" Vol. II p.482



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abrupt, unnatural appearance.

Marcion was the son of a bishop of Sinope in Pontus who gave his property to the church, but was excommunicated by his own father, probably on account of his heretical opinions and contempt of authority. He came to Rome in 140 A.D. and joined the Syrian Gnostic Cerdo, who gave him some speculative foundation for his practical dualism. He is said to have intended to apply at last for restoration to the communion of the Catholic church, when he died. He wrote a rescension of the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline epistles. Justin Martyr regarded him as the most formidable heretic of his day and Polycarp called him "the first-born of Satan".

Marcion supposed two or three primal forces: the good God, whom Christ first made known; evil matter, ruled by the devil; and the righteous world-maker who is the finite imperfect, angry Jehovah of the Jews. He rejected the pagan emanation theory, the secret tradition, and the allegorical interpretation of the Gnostics. In his system he has no Pleroma, no aeons, no syzygies, no suffering Sophia.

He rejected all the books of the Old Testament. In his view, Christianity has no connection whatever with the past, but has fallen abruptly and magically, as it were, from heaven. Christ, too, was not born at all, but suddenly descended into the city of Capernaum in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, and appeared as the revealed of the good God. His body was a mere appearance, and his death an illusion, though they had a real meaning. He cast the Demiurge into Hades, secured the redemption of the soul, (not the body), and called apostle Paul to preach it.



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Marcion formed a canon of his own, which consisted of eleven books, an abridged and mutilated Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles. Notwithstanding his violent antinomianism, Marcion taught and practiced the strictest ascetic self-discipline, which revolted not only from all pagan festivities, but even from marriage flesh and wine. In worship he excluded wine from the eucharist, but retained the sacramental bread, water-baptism, anointing with oil, and the mixture of milk and honey given to the newly baptized.

The Marcionite sect spread in Italy, Egypt, North Africa, Syprus and Syria. His followers included: Prepo, Lucanus and Appeles. Constantine forbade the Marcionites freedom of worship but they existed in the fifth century, and the Trullan Council of 692 thought it worth while to make provision for the reconciliation of the Marcionite. Remains of them are found as late as the tenth century.

24. THE OPHITES

The origin of the Ophites, or in Hebrew, Naasenes, i.e., Serpent-Brethren or Serpent Worshipers, is unknown and is placed by some before the time of Christ. In any case, their system is of purely heathen stamp. The sect is connected with Syro-Chaldaic mythology and still existed as late as the 6th century, for in 530 Justinian passed laws against it.



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Their name comes from their ascribing special import to the serpent as the type of gnosis, with reference to the history of the fall (Gen. 3, 1), the magic rod of Moses, (Ex. 4, 2.3), and the healing power of the brass serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21, 9. Compare John 3, 14). That mysterious awe-inspiring reptile which looks like the embodiment of a thunderbolt, or like a fallen angel, tortuously creeping in the dust is in the Bible the Devil, the father of lies, who caused the ruin of man; but in these false religions it is the symbol of divine wisdom and an object of adoration.

The serpent far from being the seducer of the race was its first schoolmaster and civilizer by teaching it the difference between good and evil. So the Ophites, regarded the fall of Adam as the transition from the state of unconscious bondage to the state of conscious judgment and freedom. They identified the serpent with the Logos, or the mediator between the Father and the Matter, bringing down the powers of the upper world to the lower world, and leading the return from the lower to the higher.

With this view is connected their violent opposition to the Old Testament Jaldabaoth (Product of chaos), as they termed the God of the Jews and the creator of the world, was, according to them, a malicious misanthropic being. In other respects their doctrine strangely resembles the Valentinian system, except that it is much more pantheistic, unchristian, immoral, and far less developed.

The Ophites branched out into three sects:



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- 1.) The Sethites considered the third son of Adam the first pneumatic man and the forerunner of Christ.
- 2.) The Peratae (Transcendentalists) are described by Hippolytus as allegorizing astrologers and as mystic tritheists, who taught three God, three Logoi, three Minds, three Men. Christ has a three-fold nature, body, and power.
- 3.) The Cainites boasted of the descent from Cain and made him their leader. They regarded the God of the Jews as a positively evil being, whom to resist is virtue. Hence they turned the history of salvation upside down and honored all the infamous characters of the Old and New Testaments from Cain to Judas as spiritual men and martyrs to the truth. Judas Iscariot alone among the apostles had the secret of true knowledge, and betrayed the psychic Messiah with good intent to destroy the empire of the evil God of the Jews.

No wonder that such blasphemous travesty of the Bible history, and such predilection for the serpent and his seed was connected with the most unbridled antinomianism, which changed vice into virtue. They thought it a necessary part of "perfect knowledge" to have a complete experience of all sins, including even unnamable vices.

Some have identified the Ophites with the false teachers denounced in the Epistle of Jude (verses 8 and 11). The resemblance is very striking and those heretics may have been the forerunners



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of the Ophites of the second century.

25. SATURNINUS

Contemporary with Basilides under Hadrian was Saturninus in Antioch. He was like him a pupil of Menander. His system is distinguished for its bold dualism between God and Satan, the two antipodes of the universe, and for its ascetic severity. God is the unfathomable Abyss, absolutely unknown. From him emanates by degrees the spirit-world of light, with angels, archangels, powers, and dominions. On the lowest degree are the seven planetary spirits with the Demiurge or God of the Jews at the head. Satan, as the ruler of the hyle, is eternally opposed to the realm of light. The seven spirits invade the realm of Satan, and form out of a part of the hyle the material world with man, who is filled by the highest God with a spark of light. Satan creates in opposition a hylie race of men and incessantly pursues the spiritual race with his demons and false prophets. Finally, the good God sends the aeon Nous in an unreal body as Soter on earth, who teaches the spiritual men by gnosis and strict abstinence from marriage and carnal food to emancipate themselves from the vexations of Satan, and also from the dominion of the Jewish God and his star-spiritis, and to rise to the realm of light.

26. CARPOCRATES

Carpocrates also lived under Hadrian, probably at Alexandria and founded a Gnostic sect, called by his own name, which put Christ on a level with heathen philosophers, prided itself on



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its elevation above all other popular religions and sank into unbridled immorality. The world is created by angels greatly inferior to the unbegotten Father. Jesus was the son of Joseph, and just like other men, except that his soul was steadfast and pure. He possessed a power from the Father that by means of it he might escape from the creators of the world. He then ascended again to the Father. We may rise to an equality with Jesus by despising in like manner the creators of the world.

17.)

The Carpoerations practiced also magical arts, incantations, and love<sup>^</sup>potions, and had recourse to familiar spirits, dream-sending demons, and other abominations, declaring that they possess power to rule over the princes and framers of this world. But they led a licentious life, and abused the name of Christ as a means of hiding their wickedness. They were the first known sect that used pictures of Christ.

Epiphanes, a son of Carpoerates, who died at the age of seventeen, was the founder of "m<sup>e</sup>o<sup>a</sup>dic" Gnosticism, which in opposition to Dualism seems to have denied the independent existence of evil, and resolved it into a fiction of human laws. He was worshipped by his adherents after his death as a god, by sacrifices, libations, banquets, and singing of hymns.

27. TATIAN AND THE ENCRATITES

Tatian, a rhetorician of Syria was converted to Catholic Christianity by Justin Martyr at Rome, but afterwards strayed into Gnosticism, and died A. D. 172. He resembles Marcion in his anti-Jewish turn and dismal austerity. Falsely interpreting 1 Cor. 7,

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17.) According to Irenaeus and Hippolytus



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5 he declared marriage to be a kind of licentiousness and a service of the devil. He invented certain invisible acous similar to those of Valentinus. His Gospel Harmony (recently recovered) which was written between 153 - 170 shows no clear traces of Gnosticism unless it be the omission of the genealogies of Jesus.

His followers who kept the system alive till the fifth century, were called, from their ascetic life, Encratites, or Abstainers, and from their use of water in the Lord's Supper, Aquarians. They abstained from flesh, wine, and marriage, not temporarily for purposes of devotion nor for the sake of expediency or setting a good example, but permanently and from principle, on account of the supposed intrinsic impurity of the things renounced.

The practice of using mere water for wine in the Eucharist was condemned by Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, and Chrysostom, and forbidden by Theodosius in an edict of 382. A certain class of modern Abstainers in America have resorted to the same heretical practice and substituted <sup>TITUTE</sup> water or milk for wine.

28. JUSTIN THE GNOSTIC

Hippolytus acquaints us with a Gnostic by the name of Justin of uncertain date and origin. He propagated his doctrine secretly, and bound his disciples to silence by solemn oaths. He wrote a number of books, one called Baruch from which Hippolytus gives an extract. His gnosis is mostly based on a mystical interpretation of Genesis, and has a somewhat Judaizing trend. Hippolytus indeed classes him with the Naassenes, but Justin took an opposite view of the serpent as the cause of all evil in history.

He assumes three original principles, two male and one female.



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The first is the Good Being; the second, Elohim, the Father of creation; the third is called Eden and Israel, and has a double form, a woman above the middle, and a snake below. Elohim falls in love with Eden, and from their intercourse springs the spirit-world of twenty angels, ten paternal and ten maternal, and these people the world.

29. HERMOGENES

Hermogenes was a painter in Carthage at the end of the second and the beginning of the third century. Tertullian describes him as a turbulent, loquacious, and impudent man, who "married more women than he painted." He is but remotely connected with Gnosticism by his Platonic dualism and denial of the creation out of nothing. He derived the world, including the soul of man from the formless, eternal matter, and explained the ugly in the natural world, as well as the evil in the spiritual, by the resistance of matter to the formative influence of God. He taught that Christ on his ascension left his body in the sun and then ascended to the Father. Otherwise he was orthodox and did not wish to separate from the Church.

30. OTHER GNOSTIC SECTS

- 1.) The Docetists taught that the body of Christ was not real flesh and blood, but merely a deceptive, transient phantom, and consequently he did not really suffer and die and rise again. Docetism was a characteristic feature of the first antichristian errorists whom John had in view (1 John 4, 2; 2 John 7).
- 2.) The name Antitastes denotes the licentious antinomian Gnostic.



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3.) The Prodicians considered themselves the royal family and in crazy self-conceit thought themselves above the law, the Sabbath, and every form of worship, even above prayer itself.

Almost every form of immorality and lawlessness seems to have been practiced under the sanction of religion by the baser schools of Gnosticism. Hence we need not be surprized at the uncompromising opposition of the ancient fathers to this radical corruption and perversion of Christianity.

**31. MANI AND THE MANICHAEANS**

We come now to the latest, the best organized, the most consistent, tenacious, and dangerous form of Gnosticism, with which Christianity had to wage a long conflict. Manichaeism was not only a school like the older forms of Gnosticism but a rival religion and a rival church. In this respect it resembled Islam which at a later period became a still more formidable rival of Christianity. Both claimed to be divine revelations, both grafted Christian elements on a heathen stock, but the starting point was radically different. Manichaeism was anti-Jewish and dualistic. Mohammedanism was pseudo-Jewish and fanatically monotheistic.

The origin of Manichaeism is confused and obscure. It is traced to Mani, a Persian philosopher, astronomer and painter who lived 215 - 277 A.D. He introduced some Christian elements into the Zoroastrian religion and thus stirred up an intellectual and moral revolution among his countrymen. He belonged originally to the Judaizing Gnostic sect of the Elkesaites, but in his nineteenth



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and again in his twenty-fourth year, a new religion was divinely revealed to him. In his thirtieth year he began to preach his syncretistic creed. He proclaimed himself to be the last and highest prophet of God and the Paraclete promised by Christ. He composed many books in the Persian and Syriac languages and in an alphabet of his own invention, but they are all lost.

At first Mani found favor at the court of the Persian king, Shapur I, but stirred up the hatred of the priestly class of Magians. He fled to East India and China and became acquainted with Buddhism. Indeed the name of Buddha is interwoven with the legendary history of the Manichaean system.

In the year 270 Mani returned to Persia and won many followers by his symbolic illustrations of the doctrines, which he pretended had been revealed to him by God. But in a disputation with the Magians, he was convicted of corrupting the old religion and therefore was crucified or flayed alive about the year 277.

Soon after his death his sect spread in Turkistan, Mesopotamia, North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and Spain. As it moved westward it assumed a more Christian character especially in North Africa. Though persecuted, it flourished till the sixth century and even later. The mysteriousness of its doctrine, its compact organization, the apparent solution of the problem of evil, and the show of ascetic holiness were the chief points of attraction. Even such a profound and noble spirit as St. Augustine was for nine years an auditor of the sect before he was converted to the Catholic Church.

The violent and persistent persecutions of the emperors and



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popes finally destroyed their organization. But their system extended its influence throughout the Middle Ages down to the thirteenth century, reappearing with a larger infusion of Christian elements in the Priscillianists, Paulicians, Bogomiles, Albigenses, Catharists, and other sects.

Manichaeism is a compound of dualistic, pantheistic, Gnostic, and ascetic elements, combined with a fantastic philosophy of nature, which gives the whole system a materialistic character notwithstanding its ascetic, abhorrence of matter. The foundation is radical dualism between good and evil, light and darkness, derived from the Persian Zoroastrianism. The prominent ethical feature is a rigid asceticism which strongly resembles Buddhism. The Christian element is only a superficial varnish. The Jewish religion is excluded altogether, and the Old Testament is rejected as inspired by the devil and his false prophets. The chief authorities were the apocryphal Gospels and the writings of Mani.

The morality of the Manichaeans was severely ascetic, based on the fundamental error of the intrinsic evil of matter and the body. They taught that the perfection of the elect consisted in a threefold seal:

- 1.) purity in words and in diet;
- 2.) renunciation of earthly property;
- 3.) celibacy.

Manichaeism differed from all the Gnostic schools in having a fixed, and that a strict hierarchical, organization. This accounts in a large measure for its tenacity and endurance. The worship of the Manichaeans was on the whole very simple. They had no



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sacrifices, but four daily prayers, preceded by ablutions, and accompanied by prostrations, the worshipper turned toward the sun or moon as the seat of light. They observed Sunday as a fast day. The Sacraments were mysteries of the elect. They probably practiced water baptism and anointing, and celebrated a kind of holy supper.

The first traces of Gnosticism, as has been stated, are found in the Egyptian Gnostic Gospels. These were discovered by the French Consul at Luxor, M. de Sade, in 1845, and were published by him in 1858. They consist of the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John, and the Gospel of Peter. The Gospel of Thomas is the most important of these, and is a collection of sayings of Jesus, which are arranged in a somewhat haphazard order. The other Gospels are also collections of sayings, but are more complete than the Gospel of Thomas. The Gnostic Gospels are written in Coptic, and are of great value to us as they show the development of Gnosticism in the second century. They also show that the Gnostics were not a sect, but a movement, and that they were not opposed to the Church, but were a part of it. The Gnostic Gospels are a valuable source of information on the history of Gnosticism, and on the development of the Christian religion in the second century.



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II

ITS CONFLICT WITH CHRISTIANITY

In treating the various teachings of Gnosticism and also its various sects we have endeavored to bring out how it conflicted with Christianity. Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness we shall sum it all up again under the heading:

A. ITS CONFLICT WITH CHRISTIANITY IN APOSTOLIC TIMES

The first traces of Gnosticism, as has been stated, are found already in the apostolic age. Gnostic ideas threatened especially the churches in Asia Minor as is evident from the Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles, 2 Peter, Jude and the Revelation of John.

18.)  
32. THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

Signs of incipient Gnosticism were not wanting as is evidenced by St. Paul's Epistle, written about A.D. 63 from Rome to the Colossian Church, which was threatened by a heresy. That the heresy at Colossae was Judaic in character is evident from such a passage as "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, etc." (Col. 2, 16). That the heresy contained many of the <sup>elements of</sup> 1. Gnosticism may be seen:

- 1.) By the way in which St. Paul dwells on such words as wisdom, understanding, knowledge (gnosis), and by the implied condemnation of any intellectual exclusiveness in the words of Col. 1, 28; "Whom we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." Here the word  $\pi\alpha\sigma$  is repeated four times in order to



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exclude any idea of the Gospel lacking universality or completeness.

- 2.) By the condemnation of the worship of angels (Col. 2, 18) and the repeated assertion that Christ is above all heavenly thrones, lordships, powers, and authorities, and that the Pleroma, or fullness of divine perfection dwells in him (Col. 2, 18).
- 3.) As the false teachers of Colossae laid great stress on asceticism, Paul warns the Colossians, "Let no man judge you in meat or in drink," and again, "why do you subject yourselves to ordinances, etc." (Col. 2, 20-23.) The Colossian heresy has subsequently been pronounced to contain all the essential elements of a Gnostic system.

33. EPHESIANS

The neighboring city of Ephesus was a great stronghold of apostolic Christianity, and it was there that the most insidious attacks on Christianity were made. The Epistle to the Ephesians which bears a very strong resemblance to the Colossian letter, earnestly upholds the superiority of Christ to all the heavenly powers, (Eph. 1, 20-23). But this letter being a circular Epistle does not attack the false doctrine so directly as the letter addressed to the Colossians.

We see also from the Acts that St. Paul had been very apprehensive of the danger of heresy in Ephesus. The attempt made by Jewish exorcists like the sons of Sceva to form an alliance with the Christian teachers boded no good (Acts 19, 14). At a later



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date, Paul in his speech to the elders at Miletus says that he knows that grievous wolves would enter in (Acts 20, 29-30).

34. REFERENCES IN I TIMOTHY

That these forebodings were fulfilled is evident from the epistles to Timothy who was left at Ephesus. The errors are like those at Colossae, but the Jewish element is more prominent. The false teachers desire to be teachers of the Law (1 Tim. 1, 7); they dislike marriage (1 Tim. 4, 3); they command abstinence from meat.

In the Epistle to Titus, the myths of the heretics are expressly styled Jewish. The Gnostic element appears in asceticism and in the concluding words of 1 Timothy in which the apostle speaks of "the oppositions of knowledge (science-gnosis) falsely so-called" (1 Tim. 6, 20).

The first indications of the Docetic error, denying the reality of the incarnation of our Lord, appear to have induced Paul to plainly state that Christ was manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3, 16 and 2 Tim. 2, 8).

35. JOHN'S WRITINGS

On turning to the Johannine literature, which also seems to have been produced at Ephesus, we find special stress laid on the fact that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, (John 1, 14). (See also paragraph 30 - other Gnostic Sects, where the same statement is made. Cf. also 1 John 4, 2; 2 John 7).

36. PETER AND JUDE

After the death of St. Paul, the false teachers appear to



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have pushed their doctrines to the most fatal of all conclusions adopted by the Gnostics. We have seen how the Gnostics prized Gnosis, above all else, how they indorsed asceticism, how they tampered with faith and now they denied the reality of the incarnation. But though we may condemn the errors of the false teachers, their lives at first were free from moral stain. But now immorality began to be the distinguishing feature of the false teachers at the close of the apostolic age. In 2 Peter 2, 1. 2. 10. 13. 14. 18 we find them condemned in the strongest language for their sinful life.

Peter uses the future tense, as though he were speaking prophetically, but St. Jude (verses 8-13) speaks in the present tense as though he witnessed the corrupt doings of the false teachers. (Compare paragraph 24 - "Ophites" with special reference to the Cainites, where this same passage is mentioned).

**37. REVELATION**

Revelation alludes not infrequently to heresies of this type, and the false doctrines are compared to the teachings of Balaam who caused the children of Israel to commit fornication. This is the only book in the New Testament which mentions the sect of heretics called Nicolaitans. (Compare paragraph 18 - "The Nicolaitans" where Rev. 2, 2. 6. 9. 13-15. 20; 3, 4. 9 are mentioned).

Simon Magus and the reference to the eight chapter of Acts have been fully discussed previously. See paragraph # 17.



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B. LATER WRITERS AGAINST GNOSTICISM

38. IN GENERAL

Klotsche has summed up all the teachings of the Antignostic Fathers very well in his "Outline of the History of Doctrines,"

p. 24-25:

"The Church most successfully met the great movement of Gnosticism and prevailed against it. The opposition was at first directed especially against Marcion and his adherents. Almost every apologist from Justin onward takes some notice of him. The danger threatening the Church from the Marcionites was the greater, since their master's doctrine, though mixed with error, was more closely related to true Christianity than that of the Gnostics."

19.)  
The Antignostic Fathers rejected:

- 1.) The separation of the Creator of the world from the supreme God, and maintained that God is at once Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer.
- 2.) The dualistic separation of matter and spirit. Good and evil cannot be explained by two antagonistic natural endowments. This would do away with man's responsibility. According to the Gnostics, sin was a physical necessity. The Apologists showed that it was a free act of man.
- 3.) The docetic views of the Gnostics, and laid stress on the necessity of the Incarnation of the Logos.
- 4.) The Gnostic conception of the resurrection and championed the resurrection of the flesh.

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19.) Who these Fathers were will be treated in the following paragraphs.



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39. ANTIGNOSTIC FATHERS

1.) Justin Martyr

ca. 100 - 165 A.D.

Justin Martyr is the earliest Christian writer against Gnosticism. According to Eusebius, he wrote a work against his contemporary, the heresiarch, Marcion.

2.) Irenaeus

ca. 133 - 203 A.D.

Even in early times the Church produced men well capable of defending its doctrines and upholding its opinions. Irenaeus is one of them and hence one of the most valuable witnesses to Christian belief. He was a native of Asia Minor and a pupil of the venerable Martyr Polycarp, who was burned alive in Smyrna about 156, at the age of 86, and therefore was born in 70 A.D. Polycarp had been a disciple of John and was therefore separated from the apostles by only a single link. He attacks particularly the heresy of Valentinus. First he states the doctrine and then refutes it, sometimes earnestly, sometimes by ridicule. Next he shows that as a novelty it has no right to be heard, and is, moreover, opposed to the teaching of Scripture. His chief weapons are (1) the tradition of the apostles, (2) the episcopal succession, and (3) the Canon of Scripture.

He makes very much of the fact that he could trace his creed to St. John. Though the heretical teachers



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declared that they taught the secret doctrine of the apostles, none of them were able to prove that they were teaching the ancient belief of the Church. To the above-mentioned advantage Irenaeus added a knowledge of the various Gnostic systems. He published his great work in five books between A.D. 185 - 188, when he was bishop at Lyons. After describing the teaching of Valentinus, he gives a summary of the uniform teaching of the Catholic Church, contrasting it with the diversity of the Gnostic doctrines. He lays much stress on the unity of the Old and New Dispensations. His book was translated into Latin before the end of the second century, since the Latin version was in the hands of Tertullian, the famous African opponent of Gnosticism.

3.) Tertullian

ca. 160 - 240 A.D.

Tertullian tries to treat the matter as a lawyer. His "Prescription" against heretics is an attempt to show that the heretics have no case. He brings six arguments forward to prove his points:

- a.) Perverse disputings are forbidden by St. Paul.
- b.) Heretics either resist or corrupt the Scriptures.
- c.) The Faith was committed by the apostles to their successors.
- d.) The truth of the Catholic Faith is proved:
  - aa.) by its unity,
  - bb.) by its antiquity.



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e.) No heretics have a line of bishops going back to the Apostolic Age.

f.) The earliest heretics were condemned by the apostles.

He had little sympathy for theories. As a literary artist he may be compared to Tacitus and Carlyle. He invents phrases that have become proverbs. He says things so pointedly that they cannot be translated into any language. Yet his method is more suited to win a verdict in court than to convince the mind of an inquirer. This is especially manifest in his treatment of Scripture. To him a Gnostic is a perverse theorist and a careless thinker, who tries to expound Scripture. By what right does he do so? Scripture is the property of the Church, and without its mind, no outsider can comprehend its meaning. The Church is a living organism. It is regularly constituted and has a lawful existence. A Gnostic sect is an undisciplined collection of faddists lacking cohesion, without any regular ministry. He hit hard at Gnosticism (especially Marcion's) and his blows told.

4.) Hippolytus

ca. 220 A. D.

A short and unimportant treatise called "Philosophumena" or Philosophisms, had long been known and was published in 1701 and attributed to Origen. In 1840 much of the continuation of this was discovered on



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Mount Athos, and from later chapters it became evident that Hippolytus, whoever he was, was the author. Two books are lost, but the most important part, those on the heresies, remain. It is considered that the whole is a series of lecture notes, delivered at Rome in the first part of the third century, with the object of showing that the opinions of the heretics are really purely pagan, being borrowed wholesale from the ancient philosophers.

Hippolytus quotes Irenaeus, whom he regards with great respect, but the objects of the two are not identical. Irenaeus holds that the Church is right and states its position. Hippolytus labors to show how all heresy is pagan.

5.) Clement of Alexandria

ca. 155 - 220 A.D.

Though Clement flourished a little before Hippolytus, his name is placed after him on the list of Christian champions of Gnosticism, because to him and to his school we owe the phase which gave it a death-blow.

The weakness of the Church's position lay in the neglect of philosophy, which in the ancient world was regarded much in the same way as we today look upon scientific research. The Gnostics, on the other hand, tried to reconcile Christianity and philosophy in order to provide a religion for educated men. Clement, though he was called a Gnostic because of it, professed to teach the



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true Christian Gnosis in opposition to the false. He held that faith was not something which only the ignorant possessed, but that it was the means by which mankind arrived at the true knowledge.

He bases his antagonism to the false Gnostics:

- a.) on their denial of man's free will,
- b.) on their condemnation of the material creation.

He says that the true Christian Gnostic is the wise man enriched with knowledge, yet established in the Faith. This did much to break the spell of Gnosticism, for when the Church threw open her doors to men of learning, the attractions of error gradually lost their power.

6.) Epiphanius

d. 403

The last great Christian writer on Gnosticism is Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus. This erudite collector of all the heretical opinions which had distracted the Church till his day is often credulous, ill-informed, and prejudiced; but his testimony cannot be ignored.

C. THE INFLUENCE OF GNOSTICISM ON CHRISTIANITY

40. WHY GNOSTICISM WAS SO DANGEROUS

When Gnosticism came in touch with Christianity, it rapidly adopted the garb of the latter:



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- 1.) By using the Christian form of thought.
- 2.) By borrowing its nomenclature.
- 3.) By acknowledging Christ dualistically as the Savior of the world.
- 4.) By simulating the Christian sacraments.
- 5.) By pretending to be an esoteric revelation of Christ and his apostles.
- 6.) By producing a great number of apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelations.

Although Gnosticism was utterly the opposite of Christianity it appealed to the unwary as a modification or refinement of Christianity, because it was so well camouflaged by this borrowed garb. In fact it soon claimed to be the only true form of Christianity; set apart for the elect, unfit for the vulgar crowd.

And that is another reason why Gnosticism spread so rapidly in the Church. It appealed to the intellect and thus drew the best thinkers into its fold. Again, it satisfied the syncretistic craving of many.

Finally, some joined it because it seemed to supply an answer to the problem of good and evil; others because they were attracted by its asceticism.

**41. THE RESULTS OF GNOSTICISM ON THE CHURCH**

There is no evil out of which good does not come. And so out of the confusion and strife of the Gnostic systems the Church gained much at the time:

- 1.) Amid the general confusion ushered in by the Gnostics,



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the Church was obliged to set up certain standards to be acknowledged by anyone who claimed to be a Christian. These standards included the Apostles' Creed, the formation of the New Testament Canon, and the apostolic office, or the Historic Episcopate.

Foakes-Jackson - "The History of the Christian Church," p. 144 ff.:

"It is a noteworthy fact that the first commentator on a canonical Gospel, the first harmonist of the Evangelical narrative, and the first scholar to pronounce an opinion on the Canon, were not orthodox Christians but Gnostics. Heracleon, the Valentinian, wrote a commentary on St. John, to which Origen devotes much serious attention. Tatian, the Encratite, composed the famous Diatessaron, or Harmony of the Gospels. Despite his erroneous conclusions, Marcion deserves the credit of having first attempted to define the Canon of the New Testament. The impulse to explain, define, and understand the writings of the New Testament was due to Gnosticism, and to the opposition it aroused. In the face of the numberless forgeries, which were multiplied in support of the various doctrines of the Gnostic sects, the Church found it necessary to declare what writings were accepted by her as sacred. The most venerated names were pressed into the service of the heretics and the Church was bound to pronounce what books she received as Scripture and what she rejected."

- 2.) The defence of the Christian faith led to the formation of Christian dogmas, expressed in current philosophical terminology. Gnostic criticism forced men to face the questions: "What do we know?" "Why do we believe?" It was of inestimable value to the Church to be obliged to begin to contend earnestly for the faith before there was any possibility that her leaders could have forgotten what the faith was. It is just that strife about the Gnosis, so early and so bitter, that enables us to depend



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confidently upon the tradition of the Faith today.

- 3.) The Gnostic stress on mysteries, spiritual hymns, and impressive rituals induced more elaborate liturgical services in the churches.
- 4.) The Gnostic dualism, and contempt for matter, paved the way for Christian asceticism, which in turn led to monasticism.
- 5.) The intermediary beings of the Gnostics paved the way for the Saints in the Catholic Church. Notice the relative position of Sophia and the Virgin Mary in the two systems.
- 6.) The superficial division of mankind into elect and non-elect groups paved the way for the doctrine of predestination.
- 7.) Although condemned by the Church, the Gnostic movement lived down to the present day. The Christian Science movement, <sup>and</sup> the radical wing of the so-called liberal Christians still continue this old heresy in a new form.

Thus our short study of Gnosticism is ended. As we close, three thoughts remain in our mind;

- 1.) The perversity of man's reason.
- 2.) God's grace in preserving the true faith to the present day.
- 3.) Despite all attacks "The Scripture cannot be broken,"  
John 10, 35.

S o l i D e o G l o r i a



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