



# Gnosticism & Orthodox Christianity



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## Introduction to Gnosticism

Gnosticism is an understudied but vastly important movement that informs our understanding of the world today. It is responsible for refining the beliefs of Christianity as it is known in the modern world. Many of the ideas that are rejected by Orthodox Christianity were challenged by the ideologies of Gnosticism. I wanted to pursue this topic because I am personally interested in learning about Christian theology and history, and Gnosticism is an important aspect of both. Furthermore, I wanted to apply biological concepts such as taxonomy to better understand the evolution of Gnostic ideologies. Christianity is largest religion in the world and gaining a better comprehension of Gnosticism will help to gain a better understanding of Christianity and its influence on society.

Gnostics were a group of people who laid claim to mystical and divine revelation of their own accord without the need for reliance on the interpretive guidance of religious authoritative figures. They considered knowledge to be the path towards salvation (Meyer, Gnosticism, Gnostics, and the Gnostic Bible, 2003).

Orthodox Christianity, in an oversimplified explanation is the primary body of modern Christian belief. There are of course countless nuances to the various denominations and sects within Christianity, but they all extract their beliefs from the same (for the most part) set of texts that comprise the Bible that is known today. Most of these texts come from Jewish literature written over the course of several centuries BCE. The latter part of the texts comprising what is known as the "New Testament" were written in the first century CE and were eventually compiled together into an official canon in the fourth century CE. From these texts and various traditions arises what would be considered the theological beliefs associated of Christianity today. The foremost of these beliefs include that of a trinitarian God, a human and divine savior figure, and a salvation from sin. The God of Orthodox Christianity is a good God that is all powerful and all knowing. The Savior figure in this framework of understanding is seen as God's own divine Son but made human in what is called the incarnation. The savior figure enters humanity to impart divine grace and redeem the sinfulness of humanity. This savior figure is able to overcome evil and sin through their obedience, whereas everyone else has been disobedient to God in some shape way or form.

## Understanding Taxonomy

Taxonomy tries to understand the relationship between different organisms and how they are related. One of the most difficult aspects of taxonomy is that many organisms are not easily differentiated. Even in the case of using genetic data different conclusions can be drawn on the interrelatedness of organisms based on what types of genetic techniques were used to distinguish the organisms. Organisms are categorized into more and more specified groups based on their shared characteristics, until they get to the point of being considered a single species. However, even at this point it can be difficult to define what is and is not a different species. There are many factors taken into consideration when organizing organism into different clades, and many taxonomic trees are constantly being reworked as new testing is done. In the same vein, our understanding of religions from antiquity evolves as archeologists uncover new findings and new theories are created through the rigorous study of various intertextual techniques and criticisms. Often, it can be difficult to distinguish the subtle yet profound differences between different cosmological ideologies. Many of these religious cosmologies are influenced by one another and form complex relationships as ideas are exchanged over the course of many centuries.

This parallels the flow of genes between different populations of geographic regions that is known as gene flow. Geographical barriers inhibit the mixing of populations, and thus allow organisms to evolve in unique ways. The same applies to groups of people that are unable to easily exchange ideas with other groups. The challenges of communication between groups gives people time for their ideas to deviate from one another, thus promoting the evolution of old ideas and the creation of new ideas.

## The Apocryphon of John

The first copy of this piece of work was discovered in 1896 but was not made public until the 1950s due to the world wars. However, three more copies of the book were discovered in 1945 as a part of the Nag Hamadi Codices in Egypt. In total this brings us to a total of four copies of the text that have been discovered (Davies, Introduction, 2005). The current versions of the text available today are written in Coptic, but it is believed that the original version of the text is written in Greek. The Nag Hammadi codices are dated to 348 CE, but the original text is believed to have been written in the late first or early second century (Davies, Introduction, 2005). There is a Christian narrative that appears to have been added onto the text at a later date. Having this section added to the beginning of the text shifts the entire work into a Christian revelatory context. The Apocryphon of John reads, "I have come to teach you About what is And what was And what will be In order for you to understand The invisible world And the world that is visible And the immovable race of perfect humanity" (Davies, Prologue, 2005). Here there is a clear Christian narrative element promising knowledge of the spiritual. This prologue to the Apocryphon of John sets the entire book into a Christian perspective because of its placement at the beginning of the text.

## Schools of Gnosticism

### Sethianism

Sethian literature, as its name implies, is a subset of Gnosticism that draws its inspiration from Seth, who is the third son of Adam and Eve. The authors of Sethian literature consider themselves to be descended from the line of Seth. Seth is seen as a righteous bloodline, unlike the bloodline of Cain, who killed his brother Abel. Furthermore, Sethian literature also portrays Seth as a prominent figure within its text. This prominence coupled with the author's claim to be from Seth's bloodline is how a Gnostic text is defined to be Sethian. The Apocrypha of John is an example of Sethian literature that will be given a deeper look later during this discussion.

### Valentinianism

Another form of Gnostic texts is Valentinian texts. Unlike Sethian texts, which are defined by the author's connection to a prominent figure in the text, Valentinian Gnosticism is associated with the second century author Valentino (Barnstone & Meyer, Valentinian Literature, 2003). He was born in Egypt and converted to Christianity. He combined Christian beliefs with platonic thinking and Egyptian mythology to create what is now known as Valentinian literature. His writings gained a following during his lifetime, which has helped to preserve what few Valentinian texts that are extant today (Barnstone & Meyer, Valentinian Literature, 2003).

### Hermeticism

Hermetic literature gets its name from the Greek messenger god, Hermes. The idea of Hermes being a messenger to the people incarnates itself in the form of the Hermetic Gnostic texts that deliver a vital message to the people that it is written for (Barnstone, Hermetic Literature, 2003). They were also associated with Hermes to demonstrate their divine importance. Many of the ideas present in Hermetic literature are influenced by both Judeo-Christian and Egyptian ideology, as well as neo platonic philosophy. There is a strong emphasis on escaping the physical world through gnosis, or knowledge. Many of these works of literature do not have a recognizable author. They are shrouded in an anonymous mystery as historians are unable to find a particular individual responsible for their writing (Barnstone, The Legacy of Hermes Trismegistos, 2003).

### Mandaeism

Mandaeism is unique because it is one of the few forms of Gnosticism that it is still practiced today. Its longevity can be much attributed to the Mandaean community's decision to remain relatively isolated from the outside world. In doing so, they have been able to preserve their beliefs and traditions for nearly two-thousand years. In Mandaean Gnosticism, there is a dualist ideology between the physical world and the spiritual world called, The World of Light.

People are trapped in the physical world but can achieve ecstasy and enter into the World of Light through gnosis (Deutsch, Mandaean Literature, 2003). One of the prominent elements of Mandaean Gnosticism is the inversion of Judeo-Christian ideas and teachings. For example, they have a memorial meal for the Egyptians when the Israelites escaped Egypt. This is the inverse of the Jewish Passover meal. These types of practices both distinguish Mandaeans from the Israelites and creates deep parallels between them (Deutsch, Mandaean Literature, 2003). Mandaeans follow a set of liturgical practices including a form of baptism and mass. There are many hymns and practices that are recited during these rituals. Many of these rituals and traditions can quickly find similarities to Jewish traditions such as priests needing to remain pure by following strict practices such as avoiding improperly slaughtered meat (Deutsch, Ritual and Ethics, 2003).

### Manichaeism

Manichaeism is a form of Gnosticism that can be attributed to an Iranian prophet by the name of Mani who lived in the third century CE (Mirecki, Manichaeism Literature, 2003). He claimed to receive revelation at the age of 12, and again at 24. After this he began his ministry, proclaiming himself as a messenger. Mani travelled to many places during his ministry, but for his first mission he travelled to what would now be considered a part of Southeast Iran. During these travels he was successful in spreading his religion to several areas including Turan and Persia. Something distinctive about Manichaeism is that Mani pushed for the translation of the sacred texts that he wrote into as many languages as possible. This effort has led to the discovery of pieces of Mani's writing to be found in various languages. The encouragement of the translation of his texts into the local languages assisted with the spread of Manichaeism and more accessible teachings to locals. Mani was eventually imprisoned for his teachings and died a prisoner shortly after. Many of his followers were persecuted and Mani's teachings were suppressed in many of the places that he had spread them to, leading to a decline of Manichaeism (Mirecki, Life of Mani, 2003).

## Summary and Conclusions

Understanding Gnosticism guides our understanding of Christianity and the role it plays in the modern world. Gnosticism is often used as an umbrella term to describe a wide variety of ideologies that arose around the first six centuries of the common era. They are classified into specific categories based on their content and the author that wrote them. This is not unsimilar to how taxonomy is used in biology. The Apocryphon of John is one of the most influential Gnostic texts that has come to light through the Nag Hamadi codices. This archeological discovery in Nag Hamadi Egypt has uncovered many of the few copies of Gnostic texts that are extant today. Understanding what is left from the past is important to understanding the present. Dinosaurs are extinct, but they are important and fascinating to study because they teach us about a different time in the world. Their fossils shed light onto the evolution of many modern animals such as birds. Gnosticism is for the most part, also extinct with few forms of it being practiced in modern society. However, the texts that have survived teach us an invaluable lesson on how the people of that time understood their world and how Christianity became what it is today. Through our gnosis of these texts, we receive a whole new world of knowledge. It is up to us to decide, what we do with it.

## Future Work

Gnosticism continues to fall victim to being used as an umbrella term for a diverse set of beliefs. Further studies are needed in order to help differentiate these systems of belief that are all placed within this single category. Discovering more gnostic texts through archeological research is also essential to unlocking our understanding of these religious beliefs as many gnostic traditions have very few surviving texts that are known of. There may be more texts waiting to be discovered.

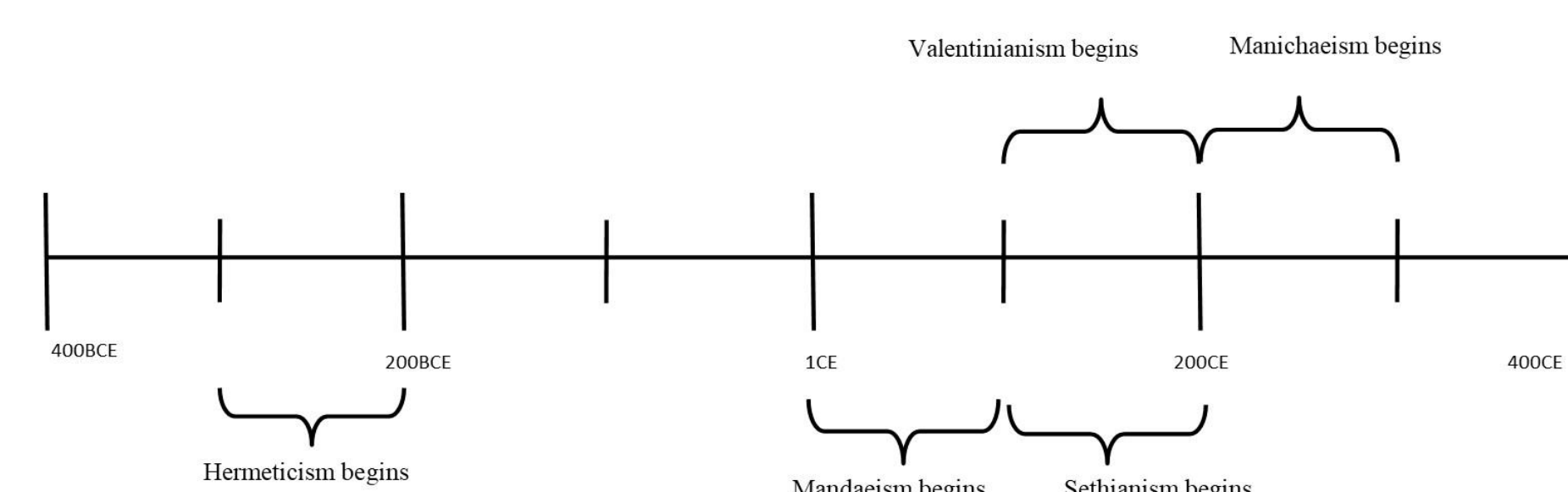
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## Gnostic Cosmology

An important part of The Apocryphon of John is its Cosmology. The Apocryphon of John is Sethian in its cosmology. Seth is an important figure in Christianity because Seth is the offspring of Adam and Eve that is traced throughout the Bible that ultimately leads directly to Abraham, which in turn leads directly to Jesus. Seth, therefore, is seen as a progenitor to the messianic figure of Christ in The New Testament. This importance is also found within Sethian cosmology. However, a key distinction to make is that the Gnostics believe that a spiritual embodiment of Seth is the savior figure, and that they themselves are the offspring of Seth. They are the messianic figures that ultimately save themselves from the worldly corruption (Barnstone & Meyer, Sethian Literature, 2003). The children of Seth are understood to have divine power and are responsible for salvation. It is through one's own gnosis or knowledge that salvation can be achieved. Hence the name, Gnosticism. The Gnostics are the children of Seth and reach salvation through their knowledge of the divine. The restoration of humanity that is an important part of Orthodox Christianity is interpreted as a restoration of God in Sethian Gnosticism.

Development of Gnosticism



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