

Were the “Lost Gospels” Really Lost? -Sam A. Smith

For all of the attention currently being given to the subject of “lost gospels,” there simply are no “lost gospels.” There are, of course, numerous post-New Testament writings that purport to be gospels. Almost all of these documents were composed between the mid-second century and the close of the third century A.D., over a hundred years after the death of Christ, and well after the writing of the New Testament. (A few documents like “The Wisdom of Jesus”—one of the Nag Hammadi texts—might date to the early part of the second century, possibly within fifty years after the close of the New Testament canon.) These documents, mostly written under assumed names of early disciples or apostles, were composed by people who did not know Christ or the early disciples and apostles personally. Virtually all of these documents, including the popular “Gospel of Judas” and the “Gospel of Thomas,” can be attributed to a cultic belief system called “Gnosticism.” As Christianity spread to the Greek and Roman world, many embraced the message of the gospel. However, beginning in the early second century there was a widespread revival of interest in the Greek philosophy of Platonism. Platonism was built around a mythical cosmology in which the material world was viewed as merely an inferior copy of ideal objects in a higher realm. It was just a matter of time before Christianity and Platonism collided. The result of that collision was that some people who rejected the redemptive message of the gospel attempted to recast Christianity in the image of Platonism. This cross between Platonism and Christianity is now broadly referred to as “Gnosticism.” Since the Gnostics could not support their beliefs from the Bible, they forged their own “scriptures” by writing gospel accounts and other polemics they contrived, not based on any available and reliable eyewitness accounts (such as contained within the New Testament), but based solely on their own preconceptions about cosmology and spirituality, much of which was borrowed from Platonism. In essence, the Gnostics rejected the central message of the gospel (sin and redemption) and used the story of Christ as a vehicle for recasting Platonic philosophy in religious terms. It would not be extreme to say that the Gnostics literally attempted to hijack Christianity as a vehicle for spreading their own pagan worldview. The more one understands about Gnosticism, the easier it is to see that the Gnostic writings were nothing more than a co-opting of Christianity in the service of paganism.

So, what did the Gnostics believe? There were, of course, many varieties of Gnosticism in the late second century and third century; however, there are themes that resonate throughout Gnosticism. Gnostics universally believed that the God of the Old Testament, called “Yahweh,” (or “Jehovah”) is not, in fact, the eternal and holy God, but rather a very powerful angelic-like being (often referred to as “the Demiurge,” and by the name “Ialtabaoth”) who, because he does not know of the true God, is under the impression that he is the highest of all powers, and who in the process is either wittingly or unwittingly keeping man from the knowledge of the true God. According to the Gnostics, the Demiurge created heavenly powers (rulers and authorities called, “archons”) who along with him ordered the chaotic world created by the rogue act of a spirit being named “Sophia.” However, the true God sent his messenger (Christ) into the world to reveal the truth about these powers and the true God, and to tell men how they can escape the material realm and arrive at the realm of spirit and light. (The physical realm is, after all, only an inferior realm created by ignorant, inferior, and self-absorbed beings who do not know the true God.)

From where does the Demiurge come? Gnostic cosmology is both complex and somewhat obscure, but the basic story is that the Divine Parent (expressed as the “Barbelo,” consisting of Father, Mother {Spirit}, and Son) created Christ (not the Christ of the New Testament, but the “spirit Christ”), who created the first man, “Adamas” (not a physical being, but the spirit prototype of humanity), who with the help and permission of the divine parent created Seth (again, not a physical being, but a prototype of the incorruptible, chosen race who are capable of understanding spiritual truth), along with a set of four “luminaries” (again, spirit beings). Somewhere in this process other divine emanations (spirit entities) were brought into being. The Divine Parent, Christ, Adamas, Seth, the four luminaries, and the other divine emanations constitute what is called the “Pleroma,” or “fullness.” The members of the Pleroma know of the existence of the true God (though he cannot be fully known). One of these spirit emanations called “Sophia,” in a rogue act begot the physical world (or possibly the Demiurge, who along with the powers he begot, created and ordered the world). The Demiurge begotten by Sophia, and the powers begotten by the Demiurge are not part of the Pleroma, and know nothing of the true God or his realm. The Demiurge, knowing no greater power than himself therefore thinks he is God. The Gnostics equate the God of the Old Testament (Yahweh) with the Demiurge. (There are, of course, many variations to this story.) Sophia’s act, which she did without the consent of either her consort or the Divine Parent, resulted in the creation of the chaotic physical/material realm, and at least a part of Sophia became trapped in this realm, where it longs to return to its native realm of light and peace.

There are different Gnostic accounts of how man was created, but the basic idea seems to be that God (the true God), in an effort to recover the part of Sophia that had been trapped and was in the possession of the Demiurge, allowed the Demiurge to see an image of Adamas (the heavenly {ideal} human). The Demiurge, along with his cohort of begotten powers was intrigued, and immediately set about to copy the image, but it had no life. Thus the Demiurge was tricked into breathing the part of Sophia that he possessed into the human body in order to bring it to life. This portion of the spiritual essence of Sophia was then passed down from Adam and Eve to Adam’s descendants through the line of Seth—who was formed after the pattern of the heavenly Seth. The Gnostics believed Cain and Abel to have been of inferior birth (possibly even the result of the rape of Eve by the Demiurge or others among his cohort of angelic powers). The result of this cosmology is that the line of Seth (the “Sethites”) are the only descendants of Adam and Eve capable of true good and of understanding certain spiritual truths. Naturally, the Gnostics viewed themselves as Sethites. Non-Sethites may escape the bondage of the physical realm, but can only ascend to the lower levels of the heavens.

There are a number of theological conclusions that derive from this cosmology.

- 1) The God of the Old Testament (Yahweh) is not God at all, he is instead, a very powerful but ignorant, possibly paranoid, self-serving, finite spiritual being.
- 2) Since Yahweh promotes the worship of himself, and thus a false religion, he is an obstruction to true worship and religion, and thus in some sense serves an evil purpose (that is not to say that all Gnostics believed Yahweh to be personally evil).
- 3) Therefore, it stands to reason (given Gnostic cosmology) that the acts of the God of the Old Testament result in and perpetuate evil.
- 4) Given the fact that the Gnostics viewed the religion of Yahweh as perpetuating evil, it goes without saying that they viewed the Jewish religion in the Old Testament as a false religion, and consequently they largely viewed the Old Testament as the literature of a false religion, and the Jewish people as being in league with a false God. (Some Gnostics did believe that the true God spoke indirectly through some of the Old Testament prophets.) This explains why the Gnostics had an aversion to the Old

Testament (other than to adapting bits and pieces of the creation story), and it also explains why Gnosticism tended to have an anti-Jewish bias. 5) Given their view of Yahweh, the Gnostics believed he and the powers begotten by him are intent on keeping the souls of men trapped in the material cycle of existence so they would always have subjects, and so the Demiurge would always have worshipers. The Gnostics believed in reincarnation, and so they believed that when a person dies, the powers of the Demiurge would prevent their soul from escaping the gates of the various levels of the realm of this world. The key to escaping this existence is to learn and believe in the existence of the true God and his kingdom of light, and to know how to gain passage through the gates kept by the powers of the Demiurge. That body of knowledge that allows one to pass to the realm beyond at death is called the “*gnosis*.” It was this *gnosis* that Christ came to deliver to those who could receive the message—*i.e.*, to the Sethites. (Both Freemasonry and Mormonism inherited much of their theology, particularly regarding the passage of gates at death, from Gnosticism.) 6) The Gnostics did not believe in original sin (to them that was part of the corrupt religion of the Jews), and so they saw no need of redemption. To the Gnostic, Christ was not a redeemer from the power of sin, but a deliverer from the power of the false God of the Jews. 7) Given their cosmology, the Gnostics viewed the material world as inferior, deficient, and in some sense “evil”—at least contrary to “good.” Therefore, they denied that Christ came in the flesh as is so forcefully declared in the New Testament (1 Jn. 4:2-3). The Gnostics also believed that Christ did not die on the cross. Some Gnostics believed that the “Christ spirit” departed from Jesus before he went to the cross, others believed that he mysteriously switched places with Simon of Cyrene who carried his cross, making Simon appear to look like him, and he to look like Simon, while Jesus (in the form of Simon) stood at a distance looking on laughing. (Gnostic literature seems to have a penchant for picturing Jesus laughing at the ignorance of others.) 7) Since the Gnostics viewed Yahweh (the Demiurge) as a self-serving creature, they tended to view the people whom Yahweh punished as righteous. In fact, since they viewed the religion of the Old Testament as evil, they saw that which the Old Testament said was “evil,” as good; and that which the Old Testament said was “good,” as evil. Thus, according to the Gnostics, the real heroes of the Old Testament were the Serpent in the Garden, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and later, the enemies of Israel—while the Ten Commandments and the worship of Yahweh were thought to be part of the deception of the Demiurge and his cohort. This inversion tended to carry over into the New Testament, and some Gnostics (as evidenced in the “Gospel of Judas”) viewed only Judas as the good (insightful and faithful) disciple, while all the other disciples were viewed as having been deluded by the false religion of the Old Testament. Naturally, the Gnostics viewed the Old Testament promises to Israel as simply a ploy on the part of the Demiurge to bribe Israel into worshiping him.

Summarizing, the Gnostics generally held to these tenants: 1) Yahweh (Jehovah) is not God at all. 2) The creation of the physical world was due to the blunder of one of the divine emanations (*i.e.*, Sophia—an angelic-like being). 3) The religion taught in the Old Testament is corrupt and serves an evil purpose. 4) The serpent in the Garden was actually an agent of good and tried to help man see the truth about the Demiurge. 5) Many of the peoples judged by Jehovah in the Old Testament were treated unjustly, since Jehovah was acting only in his own self-interest. The Jews and their religion in the Old Testament serve an evil purpose. 6) The material realm is intrinsically corrupt by reason of its nature and origin. 7) There was no fall of man (original sin) in the Garden. 8) Men are not born in sin (*i.e.*, they do not have a sin nature). 9) There is no need for redemption from sin. 10) Christ did not come in the flesh, and he did not die for sin.

11) Much of the Old and New Testament Scriptures reflect the religion of the Demiurge, and are therefore unreliable.

Gnosticism can in no sense be viewed as an alternate form of Christianity as has been suggested by some. It is nothing less than an “anti-Christianity”—an anti-Christianity that, at least in part, the writers of the New Testament anticipated and concerning which they warned the church (see the New Testament books of 1 John, Colossians, Philippians)—though only the seminal ideas which would later emerge as Gnosticism were present in the apostolic era. To be sure, Gnosticism was built upon Christian themes, but more accurately it was a perversion of those themes set within the framework of a Platonic and anti-Semitic worldview.

Gnostic Documents

English translations of the following documents related to Gnosticism are available at the Gnostic Society’s Library (<http://www.gnosis.org/library.html>). The documents generally fall into two categories: those that come to us through the opponents of the Gnostics (*i.e.*, the early Christian apologists), and actual source material produced by the Gnostics themselves (most of which comes from the Coptic writings found at Nag Hammadi Egypt in 1945).

Gnosticism as viewed from the writings of early Christian apologists:

Ireneaus: Against All Heresies
Tertullian: Against Marcion (Books 1-5)
Against Hermogenes
Against Praxeas
Against the Valentinians
Appendix: Against all Heresy
Prescription Against Heretics
Scorpiace

Origen: Contra Celsum (Books 1-8)

Hippolytus: Refutation of all Heresies (Books 1-10)

Clement of Alexandria: Stromata (Books 1-7)

(Pseudo-Clementine): Recognitions, Book 2 (the Duel Between Simon Magnus and Peter)

Augustine: Contra Epistolam Fundmenti Manichaei
Contra Faustum Manichaeum (Books 1-33)
De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae
De Moribus Manichaerorum
De Duabus Animabus Contra Manichaeos
Disputatio Contra Fortunatum Manichaeum
De Natura Boni, Contra Manichaeos

Chrysostom: Homily Against Marcionists and Manichaeans

Jerome: Letter to Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem

Ephraim: Third Discourse to Hypatius Against Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan

Documents (some previously known from other sources) discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi Egypt which were written from a Gnostic perspective include:

The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles
Allogenes
The Apocalypse of Adam
The (First) Apocalypse of James
The (Second) Apocalypse of James
The Apocalypse of Paul
The Apocalypse of Peter
The Apocryphon of James:
The Apocryphon of John
Asclepius 21-29
Authoritative Teaching
The Book of Thomas the Contender
The Concept of Our Great Power
The Dialogue of the Savior
The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth
Eugnostos the Blessed
The Exegesis on the Soul
The Gospel of the Egyptians
The Gospel of Philip
The Gospel of Thomas:
The Gospel of Truth
The Hypostasis of the Archons
Hypsiphron
The Interpretation of Knowledge
The Letter of Peter to Philip
Marsanes
Melchizedek
On the Anointing
On the Baptism A
On the Baptism B
On the Eucharist A
On the Eucharist B
On the Origin of the World
The Prayer of the Apostle Paul
The Prayer of Thanksgiving
The Second Treatise of the Great Seth
The Sentences of Sextus
The Sophia of Jesus Christ
The Teachings of Silvanus
The Testimony of Truth
The Thought of Norea
The Three Steles of Seth
The Thunder, Perfect Mind
The Treatise on the Resurrection
Trimorphic Protennoia
The Tripartite Tractate
A Valentinian Exposition
Zostrianos

Other important Gnostic documents include:

The Pistis Sophia
The Epistle of Rheginus, On the Resurrection
Eugnostos the Blessed and The Sophia of Jesus Christ
The Second Treatise of the Great Seth

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