

Gnosticism Study Guide



Produced by Magdalene Circle (www.magdalene-circle.org) in Austin Texas.

|

Introduction

This document is intended to serve as an introduction to Gnosticism.

Gnosticism

The term Gnosis is a Greek word that literally means “knowledge.” Since it is associated with spirituality, some have claimed that the term means “hidden knowledge”, but it is more accurate to define it as “experiential knowledge”. Therefore, a true Gnostic is someone who seeks experiential understanding of their spirituality instead of blind faith. Faith is a good starting point for the journey, but it is never the end goal. Faith can be considered to be “belief in experience yet had” and our journey is always faith that our experiences will be followed by gnosis.

Gnosticism was first associated with a group of mystical Christian traditions around the second century CE. Some scholars have limited the definition to only these groups and have not considered the broader picture of what Gnosticism encompasses. Since a Gnostic seeks experiential knowledge of their spirituality, the term can be used for other varied traditions around the world. There is no need to limit Gnosticism to the Christian stream of spirituality. One could consider Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnostic Christianity, Jewish Kabbalah, Taoism, Toltec tradition, ancient Druidism, Islamic Sufi tradition and many other philosophies/religions to be Gnostic.

Because biased scholars consider the term Gnostic to only encompass Christian tradition that was considered heretical during the 2nd Century CE, most of the general public who knows the term believe that all Gnostics are the same. This is absolutely not the case. Just as there are many traditional Christian traditions with a very wide range of practices and beliefs, there is also a very wide range of Gnostic traditions.

Early Christian Gnosticism

Because of the recent scriptural finds, scholarship has made it clear that early Christianity was not a unified belief. Prior to the council of Nicaea in 325 CE lead by the Emperor Constantine, there were many different streams of Christianity with many various beliefs and practices. The New Testament was not officially put together as canon until that time; many different writings were used by various groups to support their positions and views.



The two major Gnostic groups to emerge in early Christianity were the Valentinians and the Sethians. Valentinianism and Sethianism are only two streams of Christian Gnosticism, but since they were the most prolific writers, they are the traditions most associated with Christian Gnosticism of the 2nd & 3rd Centuries.

Valentinianism was one of the major Gnostic movements, founded by Valentinus, in the second century CE. Its influence was extremely widespread, not just within Rome, but also from Egypt through Asia Minor, Syria, and Northwest Africa.

Valentinus was born in approximately 100 CE and died in Alexandria in approximately 180 CE. According to Epiphanius of Salamis, a Christian scholar, he was born in Egypt and schooled in

Alexandria. Clement of Alexandria, another Christian scholar and teacher, reports that Valentinus was taught by Theudas, a disciple of the apostle Paul. It is reputed Valentinus was an extremely eloquent man who possessed a great deal of charisma.

Valentinus was a very successful teacher, and for some time in the mid-second century he was even a prominent and well-respected member of the Catholic community in Rome. He went to Rome sometime between 136 and 140 CE, in the time of Pope Hyginus, and had risen to the peak of his teaching career between 150 and 155 CE, during the time of Pius. At one point during his career he was even considered for Pope, and apparently it was after he was passed over for the position that he broke from the Catholic Church. This is especially impressive when you realize that he was Gnostic even before his break with Rome.

Toward the end of the movement's history it broke into two schools, an Eastern school and a Western school. Disciples of Valentinus continued to be active into the fourth century CE, after the Roman Empire was declared to be Christian.

The Sethians were a group of ancient Gnostics who date their existence to before Christianity. Their influence spread throughout the Mediterranean into later systems of the Thomasines, the Basilideans and the Valentinians. Their thinking, though it is predominantly Judaic in foundation, is arguably strongly influenced by Platonism. Sethians are named for their veneration of the biblical Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, who is depicted in their myths of creation as a divine incarnation; consequently, the offspring or 'posterity' of Seth are held to comprise a superior elect within human society.

Most Gnostic Traditions are broken into Non-Dual or Dualistic categories. Dualistic Gnostic Traditions center around the idea that the earth, body, and world are evil and spirit is good. Most Dualistic Gnostics believe the God of the Old Testament is evil and the God of the New Testament is good. They often believe Yeshua (Jesus) never incarnated in the flesh, but only appeared to do so. This is because of their central tenant that the body is evil.

Non-dual Gnostics often use both Jewish and Christian scriptures and teachings since they do not have the division between the two that dualistic sects follow. They also believe in the inherent unity of earthly and spiritual existence along with accepting the earthly incarnation of Yeshua.

The Nag Hammadi Library



Because most of the Gnostic Scriptures were destroyed by the early church, most of the texts were only known because of their mention in works by church fathers. These references were usually describing how heretical the Gnostic texts were and why they were outlawed. So, very little was known about them or what they contained. Over the past several hundred years, Gnostic texts have started to reappear. The most notable being the texts found at Nag Hammadi Egypt in the 1940s. These texts contain Pagan, Jewish, and Christian Gnostic works thought to be lost to mankind forever. These texts support a wide range of spiritual views and are a gold mine of knowledge.

Since the Nag Hammadi Library was found other texts have been located including The Gospel of Judas which has just recently been brought to public attention. As more and more of these lost books are found, we get a much deeper insight into the origins of Christianity and the varied beliefs of our ancestors.

In Sophian Tradition we use the “Gnostic” scriptures, the Christian New Testament, the Jewish Tanakh, and several mystical Jewish Kabbalistic source works (Sefer Yetzirah, The Bahir, and The Zohar).