

# Gnosticism

## Introduction

Many non-Biblical teachings, practices and interpretations have their roots in practices of the mystical and mythological religions and were introduced within a few years following the Apostolic era, around 100 AD. Perhaps you have observed variations of some of them in practice today.

Objectives of the Study to show that:

1. If Christians are not diligent in their study of the Bible they may believe things that sound right but are only partially true.
2. Every Christian must study their Bible, challenge their belief and be willing to go where God's message takes them.
3. No one has a perfect understanding of God's message even though they are willing to die for their belief.
4. Some current day beliefs, opinions, interpretations or teachings have their roots in some teaching of 'church fathers'. Many of whom did not shed all their Pagan or Gnostic beliefs. In fact, some of them studied in great detail the writings of earlier "church fathers," e.g.; Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna and Augustine in forming their beliefs (perhaps more than the writings of the apostles).
5. In one generation error can creep into ones practices and beliefs.

Everyone is encouraged to be vigilant in questioning what they read or hear. They must not take as the basis for your salvation anyone's word, not mine, some commentator, a trusted friend, church leader or one of the "church fathers". Christ is the only way. You must work out your own salvation from the Bible.

The beginnings of Gnosticism have long been a matter of controversy and are still largely a subject of research. Whereas formerly Gnosticism was considered mostly a corruption of Christianity, it now seems clear that the first traces of Gnostic systems can be discerned some centuries before the Christian Era. [catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=5209](http://catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=5209)

Some of the beliefs associated with Gnosticism appear to be from Zoroastrianism which has been dated "between the 18th and 10th centuries BCE." But "Some ancient authors also give a mythological "date" corresponding to about 6000 BCE." <sup>[1]</sup> [wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroaster](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroaster)

Plato lived from 428-348 BC. Most history books and encyclopedias credit Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle for being the most influential people in Western history. Their philosophical views sprang forth from Homer's great mythical heroes. This led to the ultimate philosophical goal of excellence which led to the various social structures of Greek life. Plato, of course, was a member of the social elite. This was part of the background of his most powerful contribution to religious thought, the dualism of man. Plato taught that man consisted of two parts, the "soul" and the "flesh". He taught that only the soul was good and good is what all men seek. The flesh was evil and could do no good. [This dualism of man (i.e., the soul and body are separate) is part of the Gnostic belief as will be noted below (rd)].

Brad Scott in The Greek Mind verses the Hebrew Mind wrote:

In the times of Jesus and Paul there were many thinking groups that would fall under the banner of gnosticism. The nihilists and the libertines would be two of these. Both of these groups would also be classified as antinomians or 'against the law' [opposite of legalism (rd)]. This would be the definition as it is commonly known in the English. However, in the Hebrew the word for 'anti' is *tachat*, which means 'instead of' or 'in place of'. You see, no one is really against laws, they simply deny GOD's laws and replace them with other laws. Every society, large or small, has rules. One may think he is free when unrestrained by law but he soon comes up with his own.

Since the rise of gnosticism, I believe the 'church' has been theologically duped into believing that liberty is freedom from law. The only way that one could claim to be a 'Christian' and hold this theology is to allegorize or spiritualize the text. Allegorization [not real just symbolic (rd)] sprang forth from the early gnostics, and gnosticism is Hellenistic thought at its best.

So, what is gnosticism? Literally the word *gnosis*, a Greek word, means 'knowledge'. This way of thinking was also a religious sect at the time of Jesus. However, more appropriately it is a way of thinking. Notice I said it IS a way of thinking, not it WAS a way of thinking. There is no way to define this word in a few sentences, so we will define it as we go. The whole idea of gnosticism dove-tails with the whole philosophy of the holy psyche or soul, and the evil body and physical world. There are degrees, if you will, of this philosophy. Much of what is taught in modern Christianity is very pale compared to some extremes of people like Simon, Saturninus, Cerinthus, Valentinus, or even Marcion. If you begin with a relatively small, unscriptural doctrine, it soon leads to a big one. Many of these men (circa 1-2nd century AD) concluded that Jesus was not a man, but the spirit of the Messiah. Why? Because the "deity" would not have an evil body since the flesh is by nature wicked. Marcion taught that Jesus' body was a 'phantom'. Many early church fathers stood against this doctrine for a time, except for Clement and Origen, who were sympathetic to this doctrine. Fundamental to clearly gnostic systems is dualism, which opposes the transcendent God [a god without limitation (rd)] and an ignorant demiurge. (This was the caricature of GOD). In some systems, the creation of the world resulted from the presumption of wisdom (*Sophia*).

The material creation, including the body, was regarded as inherently evil. Sparks of divinity, however, had been encapsuled in the bodies of certain pneumatic or spiritual individuals, who were ignorant of their celestial origins. The transcendent God or demiurge sent down a redeemer (Christ), who brought them salvation in the form of a secret *gnosis* or knowledge. To the gnostics, salvation was not dependent upon faith or works but rather knowledge of one's nature, so there was much indulgence in licentious behavior. There were no rules for the body since the *logos* or ultimate knowledge was not interested in physical or material things. This also meant that marriage was held in contempt as well, for procreation involved the body. A "unisex" being was held in hopeful reverence. The bottom line of gnosticism is an 'other worldly' existence. Many New Testament doctrines are used to support this thought which we will put back into context later. Gnosticism, historically speaking, is simply the logical progression of Greek or Hellenistic thinking. This philosophy, several centuries later, led to the monastic system and eventually to the Papal system as well.

The Greek/gnostic thinking of 'inwardness' only sounds holy, good, and scriptural. The problem is this. Our mind and our bodies are created by GOD and have natural needs and desires. These needs and desires are anticipated by our Creator, so He has rules for the mind and the body. If our theology denies these rules (the reason is really irrelevant), our mind and body will satisfy them some other way. This is why in much Christian theology the laws of YHVH are superseded by the 'law of Christ' where there is the Spirit. God, who lives in the transmundane, is only interested in the spiritual and has no interest in the mundane cares of the world.

To the Greek mind there was so much diversity to be seen that there could not be just one God. This is why there could be just as much change and diversity in ethics and morals as well. There were no foundational guidelines for moral behavior. Behavior changed as the times changed [situation ethics of today (rd)], and each philosopher was no more or less correct than the last one. Christian teaching from the first century has taught that there is but one Elohiym (God), however, much Christian theology betrays this intellectual proposition about Elohiym (God). The early disciples, all Jewish, remained faithful in every way to the *Sh'ma* [central tenet of Judaism "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" Deuteronomy 6:4 (rd)]. All doctrine in the book of Acts attested to this fact. In the middle of the second century the church was dominated by gentiles, and gentile thought began to flow naturally into Greek thinking.

There are many aspects of the nature of Elohiym (God) that differs in these two contrasting cultural views. The two most important ones with respect to scriptural doctrine are found in His oneness and His unchangeableness. In Hebrew thought, His nature is intimately tied to His commands and instructions. Many religions may 'confess' that He is one and unchangeable, but they betray that confession doctrinally. This is because Greek thinking is embedded in our own thought process, and a mere confession of beliefs about Elohiym (God) is truly missing the mark. **Believing things about Elohiym (God) is not the same as believing Elohiym (God).**

## WORSHIP

Worship is at the very heart of Greek culture. Many great colosseums were built to accommodate the throngs of worshippers gathered to idolize and revere the gods [so they could go to worship (rd)]. These gatherings were thought to please the gods and cause them to cast favor upon the people. [I give this to you so you will give to me – *quid pro quo* (rd)].

Different gods were worshipped for different reasons in that each god was hovering over a different aspect of the world. Songs were sung, instruments were played, and nude dancing was common. Singing songs, playing, and dancing to the gods was worshipping, and this worship is what unified the people. Homosexual acts were quite common in that the body is irrelevant to the gods. It was the state of mind that the gods were interested in. The Stoics however, would have nothing to do with this kind of activity. Worship to them was equally a state of mind; however, a proper state of mind does not succumb to the writhing pleasures of the body. The Greek concept of worship, (*proskuneo*), was seen as a specific act of reverence or homage. Modern worship is also seen from the Greek point of view. We worship on Sunday morning. Praise and worship teams are popular today, as those who lead in Sunday morning worship time. Praise is seen as upbeat with a faster tempo and worship is when the tempo is slowed down and more serious adoration is displayed. When the weekly, mundane, cares of the world go through their cycle, then Praise and Worship begins again with the next Sunday morning.

But worship was at the heart of the Greek culture. Colosseums were built for the multitudes to gather [to go to worship] to idolize and revere their gods in an attempt to garner favor from them.

## **SPIRITUALITY**

To the Greek mind, true spirituality is “otherworldly”. It is found in living outside of this world and this philosophy can and does lead to all kinds of "New Age" teachings and related religions including modern Christianity. The gods lived outside of this world and so a truly spiritual man lived outside of the cares of this world as well. Denying the physical and condemning emotion was part of this philosophy. Right thinking and right ideas were the hallmarks of the spiritual person. Only the truly educated (the rich) could attain true spirituality, as the poor were destined to take care of the mundane, daily necessities. They were the ditch diggers, caretakers, farmers, and of course carpenters.

Worshipping was something you did with the mind and was not to be demonstrative. Denying one's self was very spiritual, because the physical was evil. The sooner one entered the heavenlies the better. This is why suicide was a very noble thing in Greek thinking. Any Scriptures dealing with a heavenly citizenship was seen as advocating this otherworldly existence. Marriage was seen as of this world and was shunned. Abstaining from meat and certain foods was also promoted as obtaining a higher calling with the new *logos*. Since the *logos* was considered the mind of the minds, focusing on correct thinking was being "in the spirit".

Emotions were also looked down upon in Gnostic thinking. To show emotion was to demonstrate weakness and spiritual immaturity. When emotion was stoic and the body denied then the initiate was truly spiritual. Many early initiates of gnostic thought were vowed to silence, as there was nothing that a truly spiritual person could have to say. Early initiates would live together away from the 'other' people for a time in order to focus on their thinking. When they returned they were the truly spiritual people who only could communicate with the *logos* [count, tell, say, speak, thought, inward intention underlying the speech act (rd)]. This led to the great gulf fixed between clergy and laity. Jesus more than likely referred to this thinking when He condemned the Nicolaitans. These men would take a vow of celibacy for life, as they were married to the Lord (the only true bride).

## **SALVATION**

Salvation is right thinking and creedal in its nature. To 'believe' is to know the right things. This knowledge comes only from the gods. Salvation is a matter of creeds and correct knowledge about the gods. In gnostic thought, the concept of 'keys' is mentioned quite liberally. Scriptural terms such as, 'believe', to 'know' or 'knowledge', 'word' or 'words', 'keys' and 'gates', 'confess' and 'faith', are all tied in with this esoteric knowledge given by the gods. These terms were easily transferred to New Testament teaching. When Jesus said "*I am the door... I am the good shepherd... I am the light of the world... I am the way, the truth, and the life...*", these were understood to speak of the *logos* or the *nous* come down from heaven to distribute this knowledge or *gnosis*. He came to bring the 'keys' of salvation. Let me remind you that in Greek thought the *logos* was the collective mind or *nous* of the gods. In order for the soul to be destined for heaven one must 'believe' certain propositions about the *logos*. The early 'church' remained very 'Hebrew' for the first two centuries and this is why there is no record of 'creeds' being established. The creeds come later when the church is dominated by gentiles and the 'Jewish believers' have been chased away by the Jews and the Christians.

## **PRAYER**

Praying or communicating with the gods was not an everyday, consistent event in Greek life. The gods were primarily called upon when something was wrong or someone was in need. Prayers were offered by the individual spontaneously. When celebrations in the great arenas were observed, this would be a time of group participation in communicating with the gods.

This would be primarily to help with the success of the spectacles arranged to entertain the participants. Prayers would usually be lengthy and colorful. Leaders in the gatherings would usually offer up these prayers to the gods for the people. Communication with the gods was primarily help and request orientated. But worship was at the heart of the Greek culture.

In Hebrew thinking, prayer is both ritual and spontaneous. Prayer was usually communal and in the plural. In Hebrew thinking, prayer is usually blessing Elohiym (God), thanking Him and speaking in the past tense. Prayer is much like the feasts in that it is also assigned to 'set times'. Prayer is part of discipline, to train one to daily communicate with the Creator.

Many times today:

- a. Someone is praying for everyone
- b. The preacher is studying the Scriptures for everyone.
- c. Man's soul can now be placed in an eternal, spiritual state by believing the right things and confessing certain propositions about the *logos*. [Acts to earn salvation rather than acts of love and praise (rd).]

**What does God require of me?** has been replaced by **Who is the *logos*?** Adapted almost entirely from Hebrew Mind vs. Greek Mind [wildbranch.org/Gkhebcla/index.html](http://wildbranch.org/Gkhebcla/index.html) 2-10-2007

Understanding the differences in the Greek dualism view of man [e.g., soul and body are separate and the Hebrew, oneness view; e.g., soul and body were inclusive as God created them (rd)] will provide a basis for understanding the teachings and interpretations of the Bible following the Apostolic era (100 AD).

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