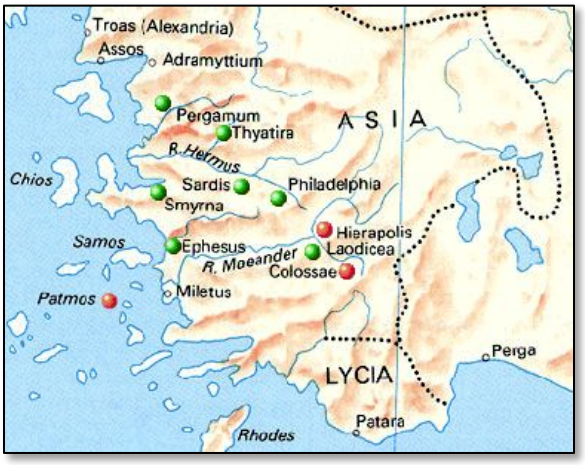
Study of Colossians – Introduction
Bellevue Church of Christ – Fall 2013



Destination:

1:2 (ESV) [2] To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Colossae *- Colosse was a small town situated on the south bank of the Lyous River in the interior of the Roman province of Asia (an area included in modern Turkey). Located about a hundred miles east of Ephesus, its nearest neighbors were Laodicea (ten miles away) and Hierapolis (thirteen miles away).*

Author:

1:1 (ESV) Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

4:18 (ESV) I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Both Paul and Timothy are identified, however all evidence points to Paul was the only Author. Timothy is most likely mentioned as a courtesy, and because he was with Paul at the time of the writing.

Irenaeus (c.125–c.202), Clement of Alexandria (d. c.215), and Origen (c.185–c.254) atrribute it to Paul

Place / Date of Origin:

*4:10, 18 (ESV) Aristarchus my **fellow prisoner** greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), …* [18] *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember **my chains**. Grace be with you.*

Colossians was obviously written during an imprisonment of Paul, and it is most likely this was in Rome. If this were the case, the epistle would be dated around A.D. 62 during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:30, 31). It is also likely that Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon were all written around the same time.

Theme:

The supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ (1:18; 2:9; 3:11)

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Occasion / Purpose:

The immediate reason for the letter was the arrival of Epaphras (1:8) in Rome with news about the presence of heretical teaching at Colossae.

What can we infer of this false teaching?

(1) It professed to be a "philosophy" (2:8)
(2) It placed emphasis on circumcision, dietary laws, and observance of holy days (2:11, 14, 16, 17)
(3) It promoted the worship of angels but minimized the importance of Christ (2:15, 18, 19)
(4) It promoted asceticism (2:18, 20-23)
(5) It was presented as Christian teaching (2:3-10)

What we infer regarding the source of this false teaching?

(1) ***Judaism*** (i.e. legalism, ritualism, and the observance of holy days)
(2) ***Early Gnosticism*** (i.e. paganism → philosophy, angel worship, asceticism, minimization of Christ)
(3) ***Christianity*** (i.e. wore the mask of Christianity)

Paul wrote to encourage the brethren at Colossae and refute this false teaching.

Relation to Ephesians:

- Approximately 3/5 of the Colossian letter is reflected in Ephesians
- Both Epistles are concerned with the lordship of Christ and the unity of his body (the church)
- In Ephesians the emphasis is on the church as the body of Christ
- In Colossians the emphasis is on Christ as the head of the church

Outline:

I. Introduction (1:1-14)
II. The Supremacy of Christ (1:15-23)
III. The Ministry of Paul (1:24-2:7)
IV. Warning Against False Teaching (2:8-23)
V. Appeal for Christian Living (3:1-4:6)
VI. Conclusion (4:7-18)

Colossae. A city in the Roman province of Asia, in the W of what is now Asiatic Turkey. It was situated about 15 km up the Lycus valley from *LAODICEA, on the main road to the E. It was originally the point at which the great routes from Sardis and Ephesus joined, and at a defensible place with an abundant water-supply. It was an important city in the Lydian and Persian periods, but later it declined when the road through Sardis to Pergamum was resited farther W at the prosperous new foundation of Laodicea. The site is now uninhabited; it lies near Honaz, 16 km E of the town of Denizli.

The gospel probably reached the district while Paul was living at Ephesus (Acts 19:10), perhaps through Epaphras, who was a Colossian (Col. 1:7; 4:12–13). Paul had apparently not visited Colossae when he wrote his letter (Col. 2:1), though his desire to do so (Phm. 22) may have been met at a later date. Philemon (Phm. 1) and his slave Onesimus (Col. 4:9; Phm. 10) were members of the early Colossian church. The mixture of Jewish, Greek and Phrygian elements in the population of the city was probably found also in the church: it would have been fertile ground for the type of speculative heresy which Paul's letter was designed to counter.

The neighbourhood was devastated by an earthquake, dated by Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.27) to AD 60. There is no hint of this in the Epistle, which we must suppose was written before news of the disaster had reached Rome.

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Colossae (Κολοσσαι, *Kolossai*). A city of Phrygia on the Lycus River. The letter to the Colossians was addressed to the church located there.

Location and Archaeology

Colossae was a city in the province of Phrygia located in the Lycus Valley within Anatolia, or Asia Minor, about 120 miles east of the major port city of Ephesus (Arnold, *ZIBBC*, 73). Today this is part of southwestern Turkey. In the first century AD, Colossae was a small agrarian town. However, by the 5th century BC, Colossae was a thriving economy, known especially for its unique textiles and wool (Moo, *Colossians*, 26).

The first known reference to Colossae can be found in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, who mentions that Xerxes stopped briefly at the great city of Colossae during the Persian wars (Herodotus, The Histories: Xerxes, 7.30).

Yet, the eventual demise of Colossae was linked to the construction of a trade route in the third century that went west of Colossae to Laodicea (Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 194). Eventually Laodicea became a prominent city, and Colossae turned into a rural community. Thus, in the first century Colossae was a rather insignificant city in the Roman world (Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 4).

Colossae remains an unexcavated "tell" or mound, although a few stone steps from a small theatre are visible on the eastern side (Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 195).

Biblical Relevance

Paul wrote a letter to the small community of Colossae, although it's unlikely that he personally visited the town (Col 2:1). An errant "philosophy" (Col 2:18) had arisen in the midst of the church—one that likely denied the supremacy of Christ in all matters of life (Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 246–309; Dunne, "The Regal Status of Christ"). Dunn suggests that the tension arose from conflict with the Jewish synagogue (Dunn, *Colossians*, 23–35).

Colossae was a small town overshadowed by two nearby cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul mentions Laodicea and Hierapolis at the end of his letter to the Colossians (Col 4:13), which suggests a connection between the Christian communities in these cities. Colossae was located 11 miles southeast from Laodicea, which explains why Paul could end his letter to the Colossians by asking them to greet brothers and sisters from Laodicea (Col 2:15). Paul also asks them to exchange the letter he had written to them for the letter he wrote to the Laodiceans (Col 2:16).

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GNOSTICISM. A term derived from Gk. *gnōsis*, 'knowledge'. Until modern times it was applied exclusively to a body of heretical teaching denounced by the church Fathers in the early Christian centuries. But in 20th-century scholarship it has often been applied more loosely to any form of religious belief which emphasizes any kind of dualism and/or the possession of secret knowledge. So, for example, Zoroastrianism, Mandaeism, the Hermetic literature, the Dead Sea scrolls and even the NT itself have all been described as 'gnostic'.

I. Definition

This is one of the most hotly debated issues today, and there are two main schools of thought: one, represented by conservative British scholars such as R. McL. Wilson, which supports a 'narrow' definition (*i.e.* restricting the term to the 2nd century Christian heresies); and the other, popularized especially by German scholars like R. Bultmann and K. Rudolf, which supports a 'wide' definition (*i.e.* including other groups with a similar outlook).

There are difficulties with the 'wide' definition of the term, for under this usage the word 'Gnosticism' comes to have such a broad connotation that it almost ceases to have any specific reference at all, and simply denotes the lowest common denominator of Hellenistic thought, in which dualism of one sort or another was often a prominent feature. -At the same time, however, there are also difficulties in defining more precisely what Gnosticism is. Some groups in the early church (*e.g.* Valentinians, Naassenes) actually called themselves Gnostics. But the church Fathers are far from unanimous in their attempts to define what was common even to these groups. Indeed Irenaeus went so far as to comment that 'there are as many systems of redemption as there are teachers of these mystical doctrines' (*Adv. Haer.* 1. 21. 1).

But in spite of such obstacles to comprehensive definition, these 2nd-century groups had enough in common for us to be able to form some idea of a basic Gnostic belief.

The foundation-stone of this belief was a radical cosmological dualism, *i.e.* the belief that the created world was evil, and was totally separate from and in opposition to the world of spirit. The supreme God dwelt in unapproachable splendour in this spiritual world, and had no dealings with the world of matter. Matter was the creation of an inferior being, the *Demiurge*. He, along with his aides the *archōns*, kept mankind imprisoned within their material existence, and barred the path of individual souls trying to ascend to the spirit world after death. Not even this possibility was open to everyone, however. For only those who possessed a divine spark (*pneuma*) could hope to escape from their corporeal existence. And even those possessing such a spark did not have an automatic escape, for they needed to receive the enlightenment of *gnōsis* before they could become aware of their own spiritual condition: '… it is not only the washing that is liberty, but the knowledge of who we were, and what we have become, where we were or where we were placed, whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed, what birth is, and what rebirth' (*Exc. Theod.* 78. 2). In most of the Gnostic systems reported by the church Fathers, this enlightenment is the work of a divine redeemer, who descends from the spiritual world in disguise and is often equated with the Christian Jesus. Salvation for the Gnostic, therefore, is to be alerted to the existence of his divine *pneuma* and then, as a result of this knowledge, to escape on death from the material world to the spiritual.

The Gnostics themselves conceptualized all this in a highly mythological form, but the realities to which it corresponded were undoubtedly of a more existential nature. The Gnostic was trying to discover his own identity, and the appreciation of this fact led the eminent psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, for example, to base many of his observations about human nature on an understanding of ancient Gnosticism.

From the standpoint of traditional Christianity, Gnostic thinking is quite alien. Its mythological

setting of redemption leads to a depreciation of the historical events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Its view of man's relationship to God leads to a denial of the importance of the person and work of Christ, while, in a Gnostic context, 'salvation' is not understood in terms of deliverance from sin, but as a form of existential self-realization.

II. Sources We know of the Gnostic sects from two different sources:

a. The church Fathers

The most important work here is Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, though Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome all wrote extensively on the same subjects. Some of these writings are interdependent, and they all have a similar outlook. They were all written from the standpoint of orthodox Catholic Christianity, to refute what the Fathers saw as a corruption of that 'original' apostolic Christianity of which they believed themselves to be the true upholders. This means that they are tendentious works, rather than impartial accounts of Gnostic beliefs. They were also written on the basis of secondhand knowledge. This, of course, was inevitable, since *gnōsis* by its very nature was esoteric and was not therefore readily accessible to anyone who was not an initiate. Nevertheless, when compared with the writings of the Gnostics themselves, the accounts of the church Fathers can be seen to be fair and reliable, at least in their general outlines, if not always in specific details.

b. Gnostic texts

These are by far the most important sources of our modern knowledge of Gnosticism, for they suffer from none of the disadvantages of the patristic accounts, and give us a direct insight into the workings of the Gnostic mind.

A number of isolated Gnostic texts have been known for some time, including important ones like the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Books of Jeû* and the *Apocryphon of John*, as well as a number of lesser works. But most of our direct knowledge of Gnostic writings comes from a remarkable find of 13 codices discovered about 1945 near Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt (*CHENOBOSKION). These were written in Coptic, though they are all translations of Gk. originals. They formed part of a library collected by an early Christian sect, and were eventually abandoned about AD 400. They comprise some 52 separate works. Publication of these texts has been a long and arduous business, and a complete facsimile edition of the original text did not become fully available until 1978. An Eng. translation of the texts had been published the previous year, though some of them had been made known much earlier through various scholarly articles and monographs. Nevertheless, the real task of interpreting these texts is only just beginning, and any assessment of them made now can only be provisional and tentative.

Some of the better-known works found at Nag Hammadi include a number of so-called 'gospels'. Like the Synoptic Gospel source Q, the *Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of sayings of Jesus, some of which parallel those found in the NT Gospels. Others are quite different, though some of them may well be genuine sayings of Jesus. But the collection as a whole has obviously been edited from a distinctively sectarian viewpoint. The *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Truth*, the Coptic *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Gospel of Mary* have less in common with the NT Gospels, and are more explicitly Gnostic in character.

The other Nag Hammadi texts include various collections of prayers, works with the title of *Apocryphon* ('secret book'—of James and of John), a number of others with the title of *Apocalypse* (of Paul, of James, of Adam, of Peter), together with heterogeneous examples of Gnostic speculative literature. Not all the works in this library represent the same type of Gnosticism. Many seem to be of Valentinian origin, but this does not apply to them all. Indeed some are not Gnostic at all. Codex VI, for example, contains a Coptic version of part of Plato's *Republic*, while two examples of early Christian wisdom writing are preserved in the *Teachings of Silvanus* (Codex VII) and the *Sentences of Sextus*

(Codex XII).

An important question raised by these texts is the nature of Gnosticism itself 8 Christianity. Was it really a Christian heresy, as the Fathers supposed—or was it a non-Christian form of belief which in certain circles became overlaid with Christian ideas? So far as the evidence has been assessed, the Nag Hammadi texts do seem to show that there were non-Christian forms of Gnosticism. This can be seen most clearly in a comparison of *Eugnostos the Blessed* with the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. For the two are so closely parallel that it is obvious that they must be different versions of the same text, though the former is cast in the form of a religio-philosophical tractate written by a teacher to his pupils, whereas the latter has the form of a post-resurrection discourse delivered by the risen Christ to his disciples. Detailed study of these two texts has so far tended to confirm that *Eugnostos the Blessed* is the original version, which was subsequently Christianized as the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. Other texts, such as the *Apocalypse of Adam* and the *Paraphrase of Shem*, also seem to represent a non-Christian form of Gnosticism.

III. Origins

Where did Gnosticism come from? According to the church Fathers, it was a perversion of Christianity. But that idea is now all but universally discounted, for it does not square with the evidence. There is, however, no consensus on the question of Gnostic origins. It is easy to recognize this or that Gnostic idea as having affinity with the concepts of some other religion, but it is very difficult to pin down more precisely the actual origin of Gnostic thought.

Some believe that Gnosticism was in some way connected with Judaism in one of its various forms, and it is undoubtedly true that OT ideas feature prominently in Gnostic speculations, though always in a context that tears them from the fabric of authentic OT thought. Others point to the similarities between Gnosticism and the kind of dualism often found in the writings of the Gk. philosophers. The discovery of part of Plato's *Republic* at Nag Hammadi certainly demonstrates that his ideas were not uncongenial to the Gnostics, though at the same time it is hardly proof that there was some intrinsic connection between them.

A different origin for Gnosticism has been sought in Iranian religion. Here again the evidence is scarcely conclusive, though it cannot be denied that Gnosticism is much closer in outlook to the cyclical concepts of those eastern religions which stem from Zoroastrianism than it is to traditional Christianity.

It is impossible to pinpoint accurately the origins of Gnosticism. Indeed it is unlikely that it had a single origin, for by nature Gnostic thinking was extremely syncretistic, and its adherents were always ready, even eager, to utilize religious ideas from many diverse sources to serve their own ends.

IV. Issues in New Testament interpretation

Two major issues for the student of the NT stem from the study of Gnosticism:

a. Pre-Christian Gnosticism

According to Reitzenstein (followed by Bultmann and many other German scholars), when Christianity first made its appearance in the Hellenistic world, its apostles found already in existence a comprehensive world-view that combined Greek and Oriental thought, and included the descent of a divine redeemer who saved the souls of mankind. This 'Gnostic' view was taken over *in toto* by the first Christians and applied to their experience of Jesus, so that he became the heavenly redeemer figure. Thus, the NT itself can be viewed as a form of Christianized Gnosticism.

There are many difficulties with the view that Gnosticism antedated Christianity. For one thing,

there is no evidence for it, either in the texts known to Reitzenstein or in those now known to us. The Nag Hammadi texts have shown that there were non-Christian forms of Gnosticism, but that does not provide evidence for pre-Christian Gnosticism.

The idea that the NT is a form of Gnosticism is in any case unlikely, for there are serious and fundamental differences between the outlook of the Gnostics and that of the NT writers. The Gnostics held a cyclical concept of time, and the notion of history was meaningless to them. Gnostic redemption could never have any meaning in this life, but only in an escape from temporal existence to the world of spirit. By contrast, both OT and NT emphasize that time and history are important and both have a divine significance. God has acted in the course of the historical process as both Creator and Redeemer to provide salvation for his people. Whereas, for the Gnostic, God can be known only by an escape from history, to the Christian he can be supremely known because of his involvement in history, specifically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Christian salvation is something to be enjoyed here and now in this world, rather than in some ethereal, 'spiritual' world.

b. Heresy and orthodoxy

Gnosticism is not, however, irrelevant for NT study. For traces of 'Gnostic' belief can be found in a number of NT writings, most strikingly in the beliefs of the Corinthian church as reflected in 1 Cor. These people claimed that because of their possession of special 'knowledge' they were released from the normal rules of society, and they claimed to be living an elevated, 'spiritual' existence even in their present material state. For them the resurrection was already a past event-past because they understood it spiritually, as did many Gnostics. And, like other Gnostics, they laid considerable emphasis on the supposed magical properties of the Christian sacraments.

Colossians has often been supposed to indicate the existence of a similar, though not identical, view in the church at Colossae, while the letters to the seven churches in Rev. 1–3 confirm the presence of similar 'Gnostic' ideas in other churches in the same area of Asia Minor. The Pastoral Epistles go so far as to denounce explicitly 'what is falsely called *gnōsis*' (1 Tim. 6:20), and 1 Jn. likewise seems to be written against some kind of 'Gnostic' background.

The NT writers themselves condemn these ideas. Though they often use Gnostic terminology in doing so, they make it clear that they do not accept its Gnostic connotations. But at the same time, the fact that such ideas seem to have been current, perhaps even widespread, in churches in different parts of the Roman empire, does give some credence to the hypothesis of W. Bauer, that the difference between heresy and orthodoxy was not so neatly defined in the 1st century as it later came to be by the anti-Gnostic Fathers of the Catholic Church.

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GNOSTICISM A variety of second-century AD religions whose participants believed that people could only be saved through revealed knowledge, or *gnosis* (γνῶσις, *gnōsis*). Gnostics held a negative view of the physical or material world.

Introduction

Gnosticism shared many characteristics with Judaism and Christianity but remained markedly distinct from either. Traditionally, Gnosticism was thought to have emerged from within Christianity (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 18–25). Recent scholarship, however, has acknowledged Gnosticism as an existing belief that only later came into contact with Christianity (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 11; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 44). The New Testament identifies many similarities between Christian and gnostic belief, particularly in Acts, 1 Timothy, 1–3 John, and Revelation (Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 29–38).

Origins and Definitions

Origins of the Term. The earliest example of a group being described as "gnostic" comes from the work of Irenaeus, a second-century Greek church father (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 9), who described certain groups of heretics as the "gnostic heresy." At that time, the term "heresy" (αἵρεσις, *hairesis*) did not have the contemporary connotation of opposition to orthodoxy, but merely meant "opinion," "sect," or "school of thought." Henry More coined the modern term "Gnosticism" in the 17th century to describe the heresy of the church in Thyatira (Rev 2:18–29; Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 9).

Definition of the Term. The term "Gnosticism" may be an inadequate description of "the great variety of phenomena attributed to it" (Logan, *The Gnostics*, 1) because it elicits "misleading generalizations and unwarranted stereotypes" (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 8). Williams has argued that the term reflects a "dubious category" which should be dismantled and abandoned (Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*). Pearson has likewise acknowledged that there is a "bewildering degree of variety" in the historical expressions of Gnosticism (Pearson, "Gnosticism as a Religion," 89).

Pearson argues that Gnosticism is purely a historical term used to classify religious features that are "clearly distinguishable from anything that is found in Christianity, Judaism, or other religions of antiquity" (Pearson, "Gnosticism as a Religion," 95–96). However, many strands of gnostic thought share common characteristics with both Christianity and Judaism. Therefore, Gnosticism should be defined as a descriptive category arising from historical observations rather than a prescriptive system of unilateral belief.

Common Gnostic Beliefs

The second-century church fathers identified a set of common characteristics of gnostics. These characteristics differ by region or school of thought but provide a general picture of gnostic belief (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 8–10). Our understanding of Gnosticism has grown exponentially through a close study of the Nag Hammadi Library of gnostic texts, discovered in 1945 (see Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*). Acknowledging the multiplicity of gnostic beliefs represented in the Nag Hammadi Library, the following examples are merely representative of a prominent strand of gnostic belief.

God. Gnostic texts often describe God as incomprehensible, unknowable, and transcendent. For example, one text describes God as: "God and father of the all, the holy, the invisible … existing as pure light into which it is not possible for any light of the eye to gaze" (Apocryphon, 22:17–19 [King, 4:2]). The *Apocryphon of John* demonstrates the gnostic view the nature of God, stating it is not "fitting to think of [God] as divine or as something of the sort, for [God] is superior to deity" (*Apocryphon*, 33–36 [Layton, 1:29]). Thus, Gnosticism holds that God cannot be observed with our senses nor easily grasped with our understanding. Gnostic texts commonly speak of God only in negative terms, such as "the unknown

God," "the unknown Father," "ineffable," "unspeakable"; God is even described as "nonexistent" because He does not exist in the usual manner of being (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 4). Additionally, gnostic texts commonly address God as the "Ultimate Ground of Being" (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 4).

Dualism and Dichotomy. For gnostics, the world was divided into the physical and spiritual realms. Gnostics held that the world was not created by the "Ultimate Ground of Being" (God), but by a lesser deity resulting from the fall of the divine personification of Wisdom (Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 15). This lesser deity or demiurge created the material world, which is entirely isolated from the divine realm in which the Ultimate Ground of Being exists (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 16).

Likewise, gnostics believed that humans are split between the physical and spiritual world: "the true human self is as alien to the world as is the transcendent God" (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 13). They asserted that the true human self or soul is naturally divine, belonging to the same realm as the Ultimate Ground of Being, but is trapped and imprisoned by the material world. They viewed the physical body as a prison which malevolently trapped the "divine spark" within humanity (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 12–14). Because of this imprisonment, Gnosticism incorporates an active hatred of the physical body, similar to Docetism. This dualistic split between the body and the soul means that the divine spark of the human soul must be freed from the material constraints of the world in order to attain salvation and unity with the Ultimate Ground of Being.

Gnosis and Salvation. Gnostics advocated *gnosis*, or "revealed knowledge," as the basis for salvation (Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism*, 7). Rather than being a philosophy, gnosis is a single revelation of the true nature of human and divine selves (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 1). The gnostics' goal is to attain salvation from the fallen physical world in which they are trapped through obtaining the secret knowledge, or *gnosis* (Logan, *The Gnostics*, 63). Gnostics believed that *gnosis* frees the divine spark within humans, allowing it to return to the divine realm of light (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 13). When all elect gnostics have been restored through *gnosis*, the physical world will be destroyed, and the chosen humans will return to their divine state (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 13–14). Salvation is thus initially brought about by *gnosis*, but ultimately constitutes a return of the human soul to the divine realm in which it belongs.

The *gnosis* which brings about salvation varies greatly within the different gnostic schools, as each group of gnostics claimed to exclusively possess the necessary knowledge (Foerster, *Gnosis*, 8). However, the *gnosis* generally took the form of a special revelation of the divine, transcendent realm to a mediatory figure who was required to spread the true knowledge of God among humanity (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 12). Thus, *gnosis* was both a revealed knowledge of the transcendent God as the Ultimate Ground of Being and a revealed knowledge that the human soul ultimately belongs to the divine transcendent realm. This revealed knowledge frequently took the highly complex and spiritualized form of mythopoeic revelation in which *gnosis* involves understanding the true nature of God and the human soul as immanently divine.

Myth. The elaborate gnostic myths function to reveal *gnosis* through a complex series of cosmological, anthropological, and soteriological developments. While features of gnostic mythology vary among sects, the *Apocryphon of John* is typical of the elaborate mythopoeic formulation. It indicates that the divine mother, Pronoia-Barbelo ("Thought" or "Foreknowledge"), was the first of the transcendent God's created beings (Apocryphon 4:26–5:6 [Layton]). From the divine mother, the self-generated Christ appeared and produced four great Lights with three pairs of Aeons who embody abstract esoteric principles—Life, Grace, and Wisdom (Sophia) (King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 3; Apocryphon, 5:10–10:4 [Layton]). Sophia wished to create a being with her own likeness, but instead produced an evil being known as the "Chief Ruler." According to gnostic belief, the evil "Chief Ruler" was the creator God of Genesis, whose true name was Yaldabaoth (King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 3–4). Yaldabaoth then

stole some of the Spirit from Sophia, which he used to create Adam. The mythological system in the *Apocryphon* develops further in what Pearson describes as "extended commentary" on several texts in the book of Geneis to account for sin, sexual lust, and human ignorance of their divine spirit (Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, 66). Finally, the "Spirit of Life" descends to earth to teach humans of the power of *gnosis* to save humanity through recognition of the divine spirit humans unknowingly possess (King, *Secret Revelation of John*, 4–6; Apocryphon, 27:31–28:29 [Layton]).

The New Testament and Gnosticism

Simon Magus. According to Irenaeus, Simon Magus was the one "from whom all the heresies take their origin" (Irenaeus, Haer, 1.23.2 [Foerster]). Simon Magus, a sorcerer found in Samaria by Phillip, worked wonders among the people before Phillip converted him to Christianity (Acts 8:13). Following his conversion, Simon attempted to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter before being rebuked (Acts 8:9–24). Perhaps because the New Testament claims that Simon assumed the divine title of "the Great Power of God" (Acts 8:10, NAS), Irenaeus records that Simon actually believed himself to be God (Irenaeus, Haer., 1.23.2 [Foerster]). In Irenaeus' account, Simon preached himself as the god who first created "Thought, the mother of all"—his female companion (Irenaeus, Haer., 1.23.2 [Foerster]). From thought, the angels and human beings were created. But because "the angels were governing the world badly," Simon descended into human form "to bring things to order" (Irenaeus, Haer., 1.23.3 [Foerster]).

Simon promised that when "order" came, his followers would be saved, and "the world will be dissolved" (Irenaeus, Haer., 1.23.3 [Foerster]). Although the account of Simon's religious beliefs includes no reference to a saving *gnosis*, Irenaeus concludes that Simon gave the "falsely so-called *gnosis*" its beginnings (Irenaeus, Haer., 1.23.4 [Foerster]).

Hymenaeus and Philetus (1 Tim 1:20; 6:20). Hymenaeus and Philetus provide the framework for the beginning and conclusion of 1 Timothy and have traditionally been identified as gnostic teachers. The author of 1 Timothy begins with an admonition to keep "certain men" from teaching "strange doctrines" centering on "fruitless discussion" (1 Tim 4). The author then warns that teachers of the strange doctrines, including "Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme" (1 Tim 1:20). 1 Timothy concludes with an exhortation to avoid "worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ' (')knowledge' " (τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσις, *tēs pseudōnymou gnōsis*; 1 Tim 6:20). Irenaeus picked up the concept of "falsely called knowledge" when he undertook his heresiology, which, though generally known as *Against Heresies*, is formally titled, *On the Detection and Overthrow of the Falsely Called Knowledge*.

However, Johnson argues that the use of *gnosis* in 1 Timothy should be interpreted broadly, asserting, "there is no need to take [*gnosis*] as referring to a second century Christian elitist movement" (Johnson, *First and Second Letters*, 312). By contrast, Wisse argues that the author of 1 Timothy deliberately placed Hymenaeus and Philetus "in the context of the despised gnostics" (Wisse, "Prolegomena", 143).

The Nicolatians (Acts 6:5; Revelation 2:6, 15, 18–29). The Nicolatians of Rev 2 were identified as an early gnostic heresy. According to Irenaeus, the Nicolatians originated from Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch who was given church leadership in Act 6:5 (Irenaeus, Haer., 1.26.3). Although Irenaeus did not initially identify Nicolaus as gnostic, he later referred to the Nicolations as an offset of the "falsely called knowledge" (Irenaeus, Haer., 3.11.1). However, Pearson argues that there is no explicit reason other than the testimony of Irenaeus to relate either Nicolaus or the Nicolatians to Gnosticism (Pearson, Ancient Gnosticism, 36–37). Likewise, Fitzmyer points out that no substantial evidence has been found associating the Nicolatians with Gnosticism since the second century AD (Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 350).

1–3 John. Individuals such as Smalley have examined potential gnostic influence in the Gospel and letters of John (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 44). Although the noun *gnosis* is entirely absent from the Johannine literature, the verb "to know" (γινώσκειν, *ginōskein*) appears over 80 times. Additionally, the idea of the knowledge of God is an important motif throughout John's works (e.g., John 17:3; 1 John 2:13; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 44). Smalley contends, however, that this knowledge of God is markedly different than the *gnosis* of the gnostic sects, for it is, "not intellectual and speculative, but experimental and dynamic" (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 45).

Bultmann and Marshall have traditionally acknowledged the gnostic themes in the Johannine letters by concluding that the secessionist opponents of 1 John were themselves gnostics (Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, 11; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 14–18). In this reading, 1 John may be seen as a deliberate polemic against Gnosticism that appropriates gnostic elements into the Christian faith. Bultmann contended that the author of 1 John used specific verbs of knowing and sense perception in order to counter the "Gnosticizing Christians against whom the letter is directed" (Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, 11). Marshall believed that the Johannine opponents were "forerunners" of the later gnostic sects (Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 15).

In recent years, however, the idea that the Johannine letters were written against any strand of Gnosticism has been largely abandoned. Thompson notes that, "While the secessionists may have held beliefs that lent themselves to Gnostic interpretation, it is doubtful that they ought to be called Gnostic" (Thompson, *1–3 John*, 17; see also Perkins, "Gnostic Revelation"). This approach has largely coincided with the rise in understanding of Gnosticism in its own right during the latter half of the 20th century.

Contemporary scholarship still affirms the existence of gnostic themes and influence in the Johannine letters. For example, Brown has identified substantial parallels between the author of 1–3 John and early gnostic belief (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 59–65), including the nature of knowledge of God and the dualism between light and darkness (e.g., 1 John 1:6–7; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 60–62). However, Brown cautioned that "at most, similarity is suggested," (Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 60). Likewise, commentator Yarbrough addressed 1–3 John without restricting the Johannine letters to a monolithic gnostic or protognostic belief, and he relegated discussion of any gnostic parallels primarily to footnotes (Yarbrough, *1–3 John*). In commentaries such as Yarbrough's, the parallels between gnostic belief and the Johannine letters are left to be examined with their unique differences triumphing over any thematic similarities.

Problems for Further Study of the New Testament and Gnosticism

A major problem with connecting the New Testament and Gnosticism is the prominent use of the word "*gnosis*" throughout the Gospels and the Pauline letters. Johnson maintained that the use of the word was "non-technical" and referred only to a generalized knowledge throughout the New Testament (Johnson, *First and Second Letters*, 311–12). Perkins, though, demonstrates that a closer correlation between the New Testament and Gnosticism is plausible—particularly in light of the absence of an early fixed canon (Perkins, *Gnosticism*, 29–38). Smith advocated extreme caution: "Although it must be admitted that Paul addressed issues similar to those of Gnosticism, it also must be emphasized that he came to radically different conclusions regarding them" (Smith, *No Longer Jews*, 157). Further study of Gnosticism must be careful to recognize both the similarities and the differences between gnostic writings and the New Testament.

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