

Observations on Gnosticism and Manicheism

~Other Speakers S-Z: Howard F. Vos:

Gnosticism seems to have existed in germ form in the days of Paul and John. For instance, Colossians 2:8, 18-19 and much of 1 John may well have been aimed at this error. Gnosticism was a product of the spirit of religious fusion that characterized the first century. It borrowed elements from Judaism, Christianity, Greek philosophy, and Oriental mysticism and constructed a system of thought that sought to combine revelation with the "wisdom of this world". Spawned primarily in Egypt and Syria, it spread to Rome, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and Persia. Gnostics taught that matter was evil and spirit was good. ...

Gnosticism derived its name from a Greek word for knowledge (gnosis), and emphasis in the system was put on attaining knowledge of the good God — which would ensure salvation. The system was extremely aristocratic. It taught that the true Gnostics, of whom there were few, were born with a high degree of intuitive knowledge of God. Christ's teachings would help them to overcome the material world and enable them to establish communication with God and gain entrance into the kingdom of light. Ordinary church members could attain salvation by faith and good works. But the mass of humanity did not have a chance to be saved. Of great value to the true Gnostic and the average church member in attaining an experience of God was initiation into the mysteries of marriage to Christ, baptism, and other mystical rites of the church. The path of redemption also involved a low estimate of the flesh. Some punished the body by extreme asceticism; others gave full rein to the carnal desires of the flesh, for they felt that in such a manner the flesh could best be destroyed. ...

Gnosticism as a system was fairly short-lived, partly because of its inherent weaknesses and partly because the polemicists (especially Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus) were effective in dealing with it. It left lasting effects on the church, however, negatively in asceticism and the division of Christians into higher and lower orders (clergy and laity) and positively in forcing the church to a clearer definition of her doctrine and the limits of her canon. ...

Some of its teachings survived in Manicheism; and a Gnostic or Manichean type sect, the Mandaean, still exists in Mesopotamia south of Baghdad. ...

Until the end of World War II, students of Gnosticism were almost entirely dependent for their information on references in the opponents of Gnosticism. Then in 1945, as a camel driver was doing some digging at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt, he found a jar containing the remains of thirteen codexes from the fourth century A. D. These contained Coptic versions of some fifty writings, most of which were Gnostic texts. ...

Manicheism has been described as Gnosticism with its Christian elements reduced to a minimum and Oriental elements raised to a maximum. The system was developed by Mani in Southern Babylonia about 240 and thereafter rapidly spread through Persia, India, China, Egypt, North Africa, and Italy. ... In this system there were two classes: elect and auditors. Only the former were admitted to the secret rites of baptism and communion, which were celebrated with great pomp. The elect were very ascetic and occupied themselves with religious exercises. The auditors participated in the holiness of the elect in return for supplying the elect with the necessities of life. Manicheism helped to foster the ascetic spirit in the churches and was in large measure responsible for the division of church members into clergy and laity. Moreover, it promoted the growth of the priestly function, or the belief that ministers are intermediaries between God and humanity and have extraordinary power from God.