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An Introduction to Gnosticism and The Nag Hammadi Library

What is Gnosticism?

Gnosis and *gnosticism* are still rather arcane terms, though in the last two decades the words have been increasingly encountered in the vocabulary of contemporary society. *Gnosis* derives from Greek, and connotes "knowledge" or the "act of knowing". (On first hearing, it is sometimes confused with another more common term of the same root but opposite sense: *agnostic*, literally "not knowing", a knower of nothing.) The Greek language differentiates between rational, propositional knowledge, and the distinct form of knowing obtained not by reason, but by personal experience or perception. It is this latter knowledge, gained from experience, from an interior spark of comprehension, that constitutes *gnosis*.^{[1](#)}

In the first century of the Christian era this term, *Gnostic*, began to be used to denote a prominent, even if somewhat heterodox, segment of the diverse new Christian community. Among these early followers of Christ, it appears that an elite group delineated themselves from the greater household of the Church by claiming not simply a belief in Christ and his message, but a "special witness" or revelatory experience of the divine. It was this experience, this *gnosis*, which--so these Gnostics claimed--set the true follower of Christ apart from his fellows. Stephan Hoeller explains that these Gnostic Christians held a "conviction that direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings, and, moreover, that the attainment of such knowledge must always constitute the supreme achievement of human life."^{[2](#)}

What the "authentic truths of existence" affirmed by the Gnostics were will be briefly reviewed below. But a historical overview of the early Church might first be useful. In the initial decades of the Christian church--the period when we find first mention of "Gnostic" Christians--no orthodoxy, or single acceptable format of Christian thought, had yet been defined. During this first century of Christianity modern scholarship suggests Gnosticism was of many currents sweeping the deep waters of the new religion. The ultimate course Christianity, and Western culture with it, would take was undecided at that early moment; Gnosticism was one of forces forming that destiny.

That Gnosticism was, at least briefly, in the mainstream of Christianity is witnessed by the fact that one of the most prominent and influential early Gnostic teachers, Valentinus, may have been in consideration during the mid-second century for election as the Bishop of Rome.³ Valentinus serves well as a model of the Gnostic teacher. Born in Alexandria around A.D. 100, Valentinus had rapidly distinguished himself as an extraordinary teacher and leader in the highly educated and diverse Alexandrian Christian community. In the middle of his life, around A.D. 140, he migrated from Alexandria to the Church's evolving capital, Rome, where he played an active role in the public life of the Church. A prime characteristic of the Gnostics was their propensity for claiming to be keepers of secret teachings, gospels, traditions, rituals, and successions within the Church -- sacred matters for which many Christians were (in Gnostic opinion) simply either not prepared or not properly inclined. Valentinus, true to this Gnostic penchant, professed a special apostolic sanction. He maintained he had been personally initiated by one Theudas, a disciple and initiate of the Apostle Paul, and that he possessed knowledge of teachings and perhaps rituals which were being forgotten by the developing opposition that became Christian orthodoxy.⁴ Though an influential member of the Roman church in the mid-second century, by the end of his life some twenty years later he had been forced from the public eye and branded a heretic.

While the historical and theological details are far too complex for proper explication here, the tide of history can be said to have turned against Gnosticism in the middle of the second century. No Gnostic after Valentinus would ever come so near prominence in the greater Church. Gnosticism's secret knowledge, its continuing revelations and production of new scripture, its asceticism and paradoxically contrasting libertine postures, were met with increasing suspicion. By A.D. 180, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, was publishing his attacks on Gnosticism as heresy, a work to be

continued with increasing vehemence by the orthodox church Fathers throughout the next century.

The orthodox catholic church was deeply and profoundly influenced by the struggle against Gnosticism in the second and third centuries. Formulations of many central traditions in orthodox theology came as reflections and shadows of this confrontation with the Gnosis.⁵ But by the end of the fourth century the struggle with the classical Gnosticism represented in the Nag Hammadi texts was essentially over; the evolving orthodox ecclesia had added the force of political correctness to dogmatic denunciation, and with this sword so-called "heresy" was painfully cut from the Christian body. Gnosticism, which had perhaps already passed its prime, was eradicated, its remaining teachers murdered or driven into exile, and its sacred books destroyed. All that remained for scholars seeking to understand Gnosticism in later centuries were the denunciations and fragments preserved in the patristic heresiologies.

Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library

It was on a December day in the year of 1945, near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, that the course of Gnostic studies was radically renewed and forever changed. An Arab peasant, digging around a boulder in search of fertilizer for his fields, happened that day upon an old, rather large red earthenware jar. Hoping to have found buried treasure, and with due hesitation and apprehension about the *jinn*, the genie or spirit who might attend such an hoard, he smashed the jar open with his pick. Inside he discovered no treasure and no genie, but books: more than a dozen old papyrus books, bound in golden brown leather.⁶ Little did he realize that he had found an extraordinary collection of ancient texts, manuscripts hidden up a millennium and a half before (probably deposited in the jar around the year 390 by monks from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius) to escape destruction under order of the emerging orthodox Church in its violent expunging of all heterodoxy and heresy.

How the Nag Hammadi manuscripts eventually passed into scholarly hands, is a fascinating even if too lengthy story to here relate. But today, now fifty years since being unearthed and more than two decades after final translation and publication in English as *The Nag Hammadi Library*⁷, their importance has become astoundingly clear: These thirteen beautiful papyrus codices containing fifty-two sacred texts are the long lost "Gnostic Gospels", a last extant testament of what orthodox Christianity

perceived to be its most dangerous and insidious challenge, the feared opponent that the Patristic heresiologists had reviled under many different names, but most commonly as Gnosticism. The discovery of these documents has radically revised our understanding of Gnosticism and the early Christian church.

Overview of Gnostic Teachings

With that abbreviated historical interlude completed, we might again ask, "What was it that these "knowers" knew?" What made them such dangerous heretics? The complexities of Gnosticism are legion, making any generalizations wisely suspect. While several systems for defining and categorizing Gnosticism have been proposed over the years, none has yet gained any general acceptance.⁸ So with advance warning that this is most certainly not a definitive summary of Gnosticism and its many permutations, we will outline just four elements generally agreed to be characteristic of Gnostic thought.

The first essential characteristic of Gnosticism was introduced above: Gnosticism asserts that "direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings," and that the attainment of such knowledge is the supreme achievement of human life. *Gnosis*, remember, is not a rational, propositional, logical understanding, but a knowing acquired by *experience*. The Gnostics were not much interested in dogma or coherent, rational theology--a fact which makes the study of Gnosticism particularly difficult for individuals with "bookkeeper mentalities". (Perhaps for this very same reason, consideration of the Gnostic vision is often a most gratifying undertaking for persons gifted with a poetic ear, as Harold Bloom has amply witnessed in his last several books). One just cannot cipher up Gnosticism into syllogistic dogmatic affirmations. The Gnostics cherished the ongoing force of divine revelation--*Gnosis* was the creative experience of revelation, a rushing progression of understanding, and not a static creed. Carl Gustav Jung, the great Swiss psychologist and a life-long student of Gnosticism in its various historical permutations, affirms,

we find in Gnosticism what was
lacking in the centuries that
followed: a belief in the efficacy of
individual revelation and individual
knowledge. This belief was rooted in

the proud feeling of man's affinity
with the gods....

In his recent popular study, *The American Religion*, Harold Bloom suggests a second characteristic of Gnosticism that might help us conceptually circumscribe its mysterious heart. Gnosticism, says Bloom, "is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the self, and [this] knowledge leads to freedom..."⁹ Primary among all the revelatory perceptions a Gnostic might reach was the profound awakening that came with knowledge that something within him was uncreated. The Gnostics called this "uncreated self" the divine seed, the pearl, the spark of knowing: consciousness, intelligence, light. And this seed of intellect was the self-same substance of God, it was man's authentic reality; it was the glory of humankind and the divine alike. If woman or man truly came to gnosis of this spark, she understood that she was truly free: Not contingent, not a conception of sin, not a flawed crust of flesh, but the stuff of God, and the conduit of God's immanent realization. There was always a paradoxical cognizance of duality in experiencing this "self-within-a-self". How could it not be paradoxical: By all rational perception, man clearly was not God, and yet in essential truth, was Godly. This conundrum was a Gnostic mystery, and its knowing was their greatest treasure.

The creator god, the one who claimed in evolving orthodox dogma to have made man, and to own him, the god who would have man contingent upon him, born *ex nihilo* by his will, was a lying demon and not God at all. Gnostics called him by many names -- many of them deprecatory -- names like "Saklas", the blind one; "Samael", god of the blind; or "the Demiurge", the lesser power.

Theodotus, a Gnostic teacher writing in Asia Minor between A.D. 140 and 160, explained that the sacred strength of gnosis reveals "who we were, what we have become, where we have been cast out of, where we are bound for, what we have been purified of, what generation and regeneration are."¹⁰ "Yet", the eminent scholar of Gnosticism, Elaine Pagels, comments in exegesis, "to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God: this is the secret of *gnosis*.... Self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical." ¹¹

The *Gospel of Thomas*, one of the Gnostic texts found preserved in the Nag Hammadi Library, gives these words of the living Jesus:

Jesus said, 'I am not your master.
Because you have drunk, you have
become drunk from the bubbling
stream which I have measured out....

[12](#)

He who will drink from my mouth
will become as I am: I myself shall
become he, and the things that are
hidden will be revealed to him.'[13](#)

He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: What a remarkably heretical image! *The Gospel of Thomas*, from which we take that text, is an extraordinary scripture. Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University notes that though ultimately this Gospel was condemned and destroyed by the evolving orthodox church, it may be as old or older than the four canonical gospels preserved, and even have served as a source document to them.[14](#) This brings us to the third prominent element in our brief summary of Gnosticism: its reverence for texts and scriptures unaccepted by the orthodox fold. The Gnostic experience was mythopoetic -- in story and allegory, and perhaps also in ritual enactments, Gnosticism sought expression of subtle, visionary insights inexpressible by rational proposition or dogmatic affirmation.

For the Gnostics, revelation was the nature of Gnosis: and for all the visions vouchsafed them, they affirmed a certainty that God would yet reveal many great and wonderful things. Irritated by their profusion of "inspired texts" and myths--most particularly their penchant for amplifying the story of Adam and Eve, and of the spiritual creation which they viewed as preceding the material realization of creation[15](#) -- Ireneaus complains in his classic second century refutation of Gnosticism, that

every one of them generates
something new, day by day,
according to his ability; for no one is
deemed perfect [or, mature], who
does not develop...some mighty
fiction.[16](#)

The fourth characteristic that we might delineate to understand classical Gnosticism is the most difficult of the four to succinctly untangle, and also one of the most disturbing to subsequent orthodox theology. This is the image of God as a diad or duality. While affirming the ultimate unity and integrity of the Divine, Gnosticism noted in its *experiential encounter* with the numinous, dualistic, contrasting manifestations and qualities. Consider the Gnostic affirmation that man, in some essential reality, is also God. This is a statement tinged with duality: Man, though not God, is. Another idea, offered by the Manichaean gnostic Faustus, that both matter (*hyle*) and the divine spirit are uncreated and coeternal was violently attacked by Augustine in his essay *Contra Faustum* as heretical, dualistic thinking.[17](#)

In many of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts God is imaged not just as a duality, or diad, but as a unity of masculine and feminine elements. Though their language is specifically Christian and unmistakably related to the Jewish tradition, Gnostic sources continually use sexual symbolism to describe God. Prof. Pagels explains,

One group of gnostic sources claims to have received a secret tradition from Jesus through James and through Mary Magdalene [who the Gnostics revered as consort to Jesus]. Members of this group prayed to both the divine Father and Mother:

`From Thee, Father, and through Thee, Mother, the two immortal names, Parents of the divine being, and thou, dweller in heaven, humanity, of the mighty name...'18

Several trends within Gnosticism saw in God *a union of two disparate natures*, a union well imaged with sexual symbolism. Gnostics honored the feminine nature and, in reflection, Prof. Elaine Pagels has argued that Christian Gnostic women enjoyed a far greater degree of social and ecclesiastical equality than their orthodox sisters. Jesus himself, taught some Gnostics, had prefigured this mystic relationship: His most beloved disciple had been a woman, Mary Magdalene, his consort. The *Gospel of Philip* relates

"...the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended... They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" the Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as I love her?"[19](#)

The most mysterious and sacred of all Gnostic rituals may have played upon this perception of God as "duality seeking unity." The *Gospel of Philip* (which in its entirety might be read as a commentary on Gnostic ritual) relates that the Lord established five great sacraments or mysteries: "a baptism and a chrism, and a eucharist, and a redemption, and a bridal chamber."[20](#) Whether this ultimate sacrament of the bridal chamber was a ritual enacted by a man and women, an allegorical term for a mystical experience, or a union of both, we do not know. Only hints are given in Gnostic texts about what this sacrament might be:

Christ came to rectify the separation...and join the two components; and to give life unto those who had died by separation and join them together. Now a woman joins with her husband in the bridal [chamber], and those who have joined in the bridal [chamber] will not reparate.[21](#)

We are left with our poetic imaginations to consider what this might mean. Orthodox polemicists frequently accused Gnostics of unorthodox sexual behavior. But exactly how these ideas and images played out in human affairs remains historically uncertain.

Classical Christian Gnosticism vanished from the Western world during the fourth and fifth centuries. But the Gnostic world view -- with its affirmation of individual revelation granting certain knowledge; comprehension of humankind's true uncreated nature and inherent affinity or even identity with God; and its perception

of duality, or even in an extreme statement, of masculine and feminine elements seeking union within the divine--was not so easily extinguished. Such perceptions continued in various forms to course through Western culture, though, perforce, often in very occult ways. Gnosticism was, and remains today, a living tradition, a tradition eternally reborn in the *gnosis kardia* of humankind.

-- Lance S. Owens

Notes:

1. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York, 1987), p.9. Hereafter cited as GS.
2. Stephan A. Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung* (Wheaton, Ill., 1982), p.11.
3. Layton, p. 220.
4. Layton, pp. 217-221.
5. Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford, 1990), p. 5.
6. We should here note, given recent extensive discussions about the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the Nag Hammadi find is entirely separate and different from that much publicized discovery of ancient Jewish texts. Discovered beginning in 1947, two years after the Nag Hammadi texts were found, these records now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls were apparently the possessions of Essene communities residing near Qumran in Palestine at a time around the beginning of the Christian era.
7. J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York, 1st ed., 1977; 3rd ed., 1988). Hereafter cited as NHL.
8. An excellent summary of these appears in: Stephan Hoeller, "What is a Gnostic?" *Gnosis: A Journal of Western Inner Traditions* 23 (Spring, 1992), pp. 24-27.
9. Bloom, p. 49.
10. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Exerpta ex theodoto* 78.2.
11. Pagels, pp. xix-xx.
12. *Gospel of Thomas*, 35.4-7, NHL.
13. *Gospel of Thomas*, 50.28-30, NHL.
14. Helmut Koester, "Introduction to The Gospel of Thomas", in NHL, p. 124 f..
15. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1.17.1
16. *ibid.*, 1.18.1
17. Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XXI, 1. Translation from: Willis Barnstone, ed., *The Other Bible: Jewish Pseudepigrapha, Christian Apocrypha, Gnostic Scripture* (San Francisco, 1987), p. 680.
18. Pagels, p. 49.
19. *Gospel of Philip*, 63.32-64.5, in NHL.
20. *Gospel of Philip*, 67.27, in GS.
21. *Gospel of Philip*, 70.12-20, in GS.