

Introduction to Gnosticism¹

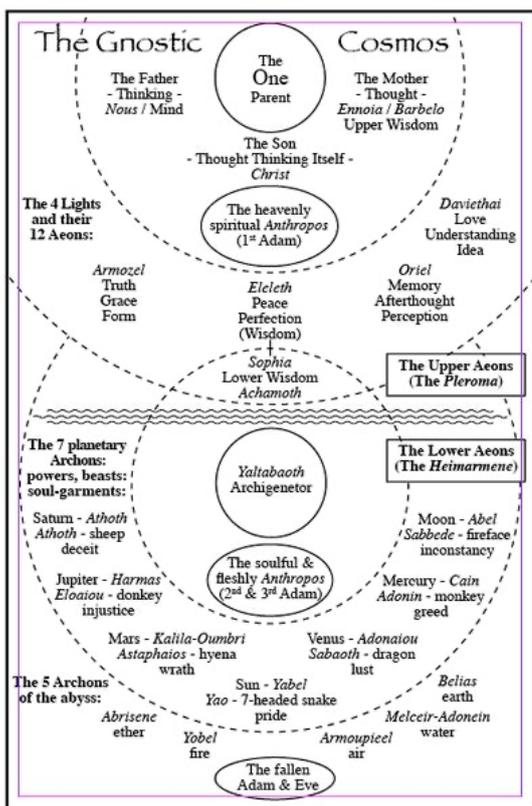
Basic concept:

Gnosticism is a modern umbrella term for a group of teachings that had certain common expressions. Gnosticism and knowledge are etymologically linked words. In Gnosticism **personal, spiritual, and special, knowledge** is understood to be superior to the orthodox teachings.



History/origins:

Gnosticism, being a set of ideas that various groups held in common, is hard to trace to a single origin, although some of the early church fathers suggested Simon Magus (Acts 8) was the source of the ideas. The Nag Hammadi scrolls demonstrate that some of the ideas pre-date Christianity, and could be best expressed as a reaction against Judaism, or a particular narrow expression of apocalyptic Judaism heavily influenced by Platonism and Neo-Platonism. There seems to be no examples of Gnostics using the term self referentially.



Cosmology and Dualism:

The strongest commonality after the 'secret knowledge' the ties together the Gnostic traditions is their cosmology and associated dualism. According to some Gnostic myths, in the beginning there existed one true and omnipotent God composed only of spirit. This God continues to exist but is so superior to humanity as to be incomprehensible. This divine spirit reproduced, forming other divine but lesser spirits in the form of couples sometimes called aeons. According to a text recovered among other Gnostic documents at Nag Hammadi, an aeon, whom the Gnostics called Sophia (Greek for wisdom) or Pistis (faith), wished to create a work alone. And her work became an image of heaven, and a shadow came into being and this shadow became matter? (Nag Hammadi Corpus II 4,94 (142), 5-13 as rptd. in Rudolph 73)².

The essential elements of Gnostic dualism can be seen from this cosmology, which is that matter is fundamentally separate from and less than the divine.

Most Gnostics would have asserted that there was an element of the divine that was retained in the material world, and that divine spark was at the core of the Gnostic

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flammarion_engraving

² https://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/physics/astrocourses/ast203/gnostic_cosmology.html

himself. True Gnosis was the realisation of the divine spark, which would then lead the Gnostic to return, above or beyond the veil, to the one true parent³.

'Christian Gnosticism':

It is easy to see that there would be points of contact between the Gnostic traditions and Early Christianity, and there are many 'Christian Gnostic' texts. These include 'The acts Thomas', 'The Acts of John' 'Pistus Sophia' and others. Translations can be found relatively easily online. <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhlcodex.html>

Gnostic views on Jesus varied widely. Jesus is identified by some Gnostics as an embodiment of the supreme being who became incarnate to bring gnosis to the earth, while others adamantly denied that the supreme being came in the flesh, claiming Jesus to be merely a human who attained enlightenment through gnosis and taught his disciples to do the same. Some taught that Jesus was the counterpart to Sophia who had created the material realm and was attempting to repair the damage. During this time the sayings of Jesus were interpreted as pointers that would lead the special ones to true knowledge.



Certain parts of the New Testament easily support various Gnostic views. John's Gospel is rich in dualism, using light/darkness language (John 1.5, 3.19), Paul speaks about 'The flesh' in very negative terms (Rom 7.5, 1 Cor 15.50) Jesus uses the language of ears and hearing (Mark 4.9, Matt 13.43)

Heretical Gnosticism:

The obvious question then is why Gnosticism was fought against so strongly by the early church, and still today.

⁴Irenaeus (Against Heresies B1, Ch2) argues against the Gnostic Idea that the God of the Old Testament is a different God from the God of Jesus Christ, strongly leaning on Luke's and the prophets. ⁵While the Gnostics offered salvation through secret knowledge available only to a few, Irenaeus also argued that the true doctrines of the Christian faith are the same taught by bishops in different areas.

While many of the Gnostics viewed the material world as flawed and from which believers sought to escape to an eternal realm of spirit, Irenaeus saw creation as good and ultimately destined for glorification.

Christian Gnosticism also relied variously on Jesus being predominantly divine, perhaps even 'The One God', and therefore not human, or human, possibly only possessed of a divine Spark, and both these views faced early problems.

³ <https://magdelene.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/gnostic-cosmology.jpg>

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Against_Heresies_\(Irenaeus\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Against_Heresies_(Irenaeus))

⁵ <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>

Modern Gnosticism:

Where do I see Gnosticism in the church today?

Although there tends not to be the sophisticated cosmology of the early Gnostics, there would be many people who would still teach a fundamentally flawed material universe, which is distinct from a perfect creator God.

There are in my impression many people who teach a secret knowledge as the road to salvation, and some interpretations of pre-destination overlap with this question.

Biblical idolatry, which privileges certain interpretations of scripture, based on inaccessible personal experience clearly overlaps with a classical description of Gnosticism.