



TITLE:

Gnosticism and the Ephesian Church

TEXT:

1 John 5:19 And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.

INTRODUCTION:

- Gnosticism, with its different branches, is in the background of early churches. The apostles addressed this heresy extensively in their writings.
- Ephesian Church:
 - o 52 AD: The Apostle Paul visited Ephesus during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-21). This was the time when the church was established.
 - o 61 AD: Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. This is a preventive letter written to address the heresy that has already affected the Colossian church.
 - o 64 AD: Paul wrote his first epistle to Timothy who was in Ephesus to organize affairs within the church.
 - o 95 AD: John wrote the books of 1, 2, and 3 John to church at Ephesus where he became a pastor.
- We can't properly understand the New Testament without knowing Gnosticism. For example:
 - o 1 Tim. 1:4 - What is the "endless genealogies" Paul was referring to?
 - o 1 Tim. 4:3 - Why did Paul refute the false doctrines of forbidding to marry, and abstaining from meat (veganism)?
 - o 1 Tim. 2:5, 3:16 - Why did Paul emphasize the humanity of Jesus Christ?
 - o 1 John 1:8 - Why did John highlight the sinful nature of man?
 - o 1 John 2:2 - Who are these people that deny that Jesus is the Christ?
 - o 1 John 1:1; 4:2-3, 2 John 1:7 - Why did John vigorously defend the doctrine of Jesus coming in the flesh?
 - o And others: Acts 17:22-23, Col. 2:18, 21, 23; Jude 1:4, and 2 Pet. 2:14.

WHAT IS GNOSTICISM AND ITS ORIGIN?

- Gnosticism gives an alternative view to God, creation, man, and salvation, contradicting the biblical worldview at every point.
- Gnosticism comes from the Ancient Greek word "ginosko" (γνωστικός – genostikos) meaning knowledge.
 - o According to Gnosticism, there is a Great God that is good and perfect, but impersonal and unknowable.
 - o Gnosticism suggests that the creator of the universe was not the true God but a lesser deity. This deity tried to create a perfect material universe but unfortunately failed. As a result, our world is filled with pain, misery, and spiritual blindness. According to this belief, all matter is now considered corrupt and evil.
 - o When this lesser deity created humans, they accidentally infused humanity with a fraction of the "true" God's spirit. As a result, humans possess an inherently good soul that is trapped within an evil and material body.
 - o Man needs to know the "ginosko" or rather secret knowledge that is necessary to release his divine essence/spark within man from being trapped in the body. Gnostic believes in acquiring special, mystical knowledge as the means for salvation.
- Gnosticism presents a pantheistic view of God. Pantheism is the view that God is everything and everyone and that everyone and everything is God.
 - o A tree is god, a rock is god, an animal is god, the sky is god, the sun is god, you are god, etc.
- Gnosticism originated from Satan. Compare Isa. 14:12-14 and Gen. 3:4-5.
 - o An angel and man have the potential to become a god.
- Gnosticism is based on two false premises.
 - o First, Gnostics believe in a dualistic view of the world where spirit and matter are separate and distinct entities. According to this belief, the matter is considered to be inherently evil while the spirit is good. As a result of this worldview, Gnostics hold the view that actions performed in the physical body, including the most heinous sins, hold no meaning because true life is only found in the spiritual realm.

- Gnostics claim to have access to a higher knowledge which is known only to a select few. This knowledge is not derived from the Bible, but rather acquired through mystical means on a higher plane of existence. Gnostics regard themselves as a privileged group, distinguished by their advanced understanding of God.
- Several ancient manuscripts have been discovered that provide insights into Gnosticism, a diverse religious movement that emerged in the early Christian era. Some of the notable manuscripts include:
 - Nag Hammadi Library: One of the most significant discoveries for understanding Gnosticism was made in 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. These texts include the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth, and the Apocryphon of John, among others. The Nag Hammadi Library provides valuable primary sources for studying Gnostic beliefs, cosmology, and mythology.
 - Gnostic Gospels: These texts often present alternative teachings attributed to Jesus and his disciples and include works like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of Philip. They offer unique perspectives on Jesus, salvation, and spiritual knowledge.
 - The Gospel of Judas: It presents a portrayal of Judas Iscariot that differs from the biblical narrative. In this text, Judas is depicted as a favored disciple who carries out Jesus's secret instructions to facilitate his crucifixion, thus fulfilling a divine plan for salvation.
 - The Secret Book of John (Apocryphon of John): It presents a Gnostic cosmology, including the creation of the world, the origin of evil, and the nature of divine beings.
 - The Gospel of Thomas: This text contains a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. It says in its first saying, "Whoever finds the interpretation of the sayings will not experience death." It says that Jesus comes along and saves them by revealing to them the truth of who they are - divine light beings who belong to another world. This realization frees them from the material body and puts them on their way to acquiring the robe of light.

GNOSTICISM: THE PLEROMA

- Gnosticism brings a message of self-redemption.
- In Gnostic cosmology, the term "Pleroma" refers to the divine realm or fullness of God's being, which exists beyond the material world. The concept of Pleroma is central to Gnostic thought and understanding the nature of existence according to many Gnostic sects.
- The term "Pleroma" comes from Greek and means "fullness" or "abundance." It signifies the totality of divine, spiritual reality. It's the realm of the divine where the ultimate, ineffable Godhead resides along with the divine beings known as Aeons.
- The concept of Pleroma often highlights a dualistic worldview, with the Pleroma representing the realm of light, goodness, and spiritual perfection, while the material world is associated with darkness, ignorance, and imperfection. This dualism underscores the Gnostic view of the world as a battleground between the forces of light and darkness.
- Gnostic teachings often emphasize the importance of knowledge (gnosis) as the means to return to the Pleroma. Humans, according to Gnostic belief, are divine sparks trapped within the material world, longing to return to their true home in the Pleroma (E.g. Egyptian pharaohs). Through spiritual awakening and enlightenment, individuals can come to know their divine origin and escape the cycle of reincarnation or bondage to the material realm.
- It teaches that through the choices one makes in their life, spiritual practices, mystical techniques, personal deeds, and inner awareness, one can initiate an ascent to the pleroma.
 - Practices: self-purification (perfecting oneself and gaining the higher spiritual vibrations of purity, holiness, wholeness, and righteousness. E.g. yoga, fasting, diets, cleansing rituals, incantations, repeating the divine name, and meditation.

GNOSTICISM: ITS FALSE CHRISTOLOGY

- Adoptionism:
 - It teaches that Jesus was a purely human figure, born of natural parents like any other person, and the “Christ Spirit” adopted Him at His baptism and left Him at the Cross.
 - It teaches that the adoption of Jesus as the Son of God is seen as a symbolic or spiritual principle.
- Docetism:
 - It teaches that Jesus Christ only appeared to be human and that his physical body was a mere phantom. Divinity would never take on human flesh because it is evil.
 - It teaches He was a purely divine being who could not be subject to suffering, death, or other limitations associated with human existence. Jesus Christ is a spirit phantom.
 - Docetism fundamentally denies the doctrine of the Incarnation.

GNOSTICISM IN EPHESUS

- 1 Tim. 1:4 - What is the “endless genealogies” Paul was referring to?
 - o It refers to the orders of Aeons (divine beings) in the pleroma in Gnosticism.
- 1 Tim. 4:3 - Why did Paul refute the false doctrines of forbidding to marry, and abstaining from meat?
 - o Gnosticism teaches the flesh is evil and forbids marrying because it would only result in more evil flesh.
 - o It advocates celibacy or strict abstinence, and the prohibition of meat consumption as a means of transcending through the pleroma.
- 1 Tim. 2:5, 3:16 - Why did Paul emphasize the humanity of Jesus Christ?
 - o Gnosticism teaches that Jesus is just a spirit phantom. It is to refute Docetism.
- 1 John 1:8 - Why did John highlight the sinful nature of man?
 - o Gnosticism teaches that the deity locked in flesh has no sinful nature.
- 1 John 2:2 - Who are these people that deny that Jesus is the Christ?
 - o Gnosticism teaches that Jesus was a purely human figure. It is to refute Adoptionism.
- 1 John 1:1; 4:2-3, 2 John 1:7 - Why did John vigorously defend the doctrine of Jesus coming in the flesh?
 - o It is to refute Docetism.
- Johannine Epistles:
 - o 1 John - John dealt with the Gnostic church members at Ephesus.
 - o 2 John - John dealt with the Gnostic missionaries that came to Ephesus.
 - o 3 John - John dealt with Diotrephes, a Gnostic minister, at Ephesus.

GNOSTICISM TODAY

- Works-based salvation: sacramentalism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mormonism, Watch Tower-ism
- Environmentalism: Sacredness of nature
- Entertainment industry: Dualism, deathlessness and the deification of man, time travel, various mystical worlds, and dimensions
- Meditation: Mindfulness meditation, yoga, transcendental meditation
- Karma: Hinduism, and Buddhism