

# ***GNOSTICISM***

The common characteristics of nearly all the Gnostic systems are (1) Dualism; the assumption of an eternal antagonism between God and matter. (2) The demiurgic notion; the separation of the creator of the world or the demiurgos from the proper God. (3) Docetism; the resolution of the human element in the person of the Redeemer into mere deceptive appearance.

We will endeavor now to present a clear and connected view of the theoretical and practical system of Gnosticism in general, as it comes before us in its more fully developed forms, especially the Valentinian school.

- 1. The Gnostic Theology.** The system starts from absolute primal being. God is the unfathomable abyss, locked up within himself, without beginning, unnamable, and incomprehensible; on the one hand, infinitely exalted above every existence; yet, on the other hand, the original aeon, the sum of all ideas and spiritual powers. Basilides would not ascribe even existence to him, and thus, like Hegel, starts from absolute nonentity, which, however, is identical with absolute being.<sup>1</sup> He began where modern Agnosticism ends.
- 2. Kosmology.** The abyss opens; God enters upon a process of development, and sends forth from his bosom the several aeons; that is, the attributes and unfolded powers of his nature, the ideas of the eternal spirit-world, such as mind, reason, wisdom, power, truth, life. These emanate from the absolute in a certain order, according to Valentine in pairs with sexual polarity. The further they go from the great source, the poorer and weaker they become. Besides the notion of emanation,<sup>2</sup> the Gnostics employed also, to illustrate the self-revelation of the absolute, the figure of the evolution of numbers from an original unit, or of utterance in tones gradually diminishing to the faint echo.<sup>3</sup> The cause of the procession of the aeons is, with some, as with Valentine, the self-limiting love of God; with others, metaphysical necessity. The whole body of aeons forms the ideal world, or light-world, or spiritual fullness, the Pleroma, as opposed to the Kenoma, or the material world of emptiness. The one is the totality of the divine powers and attributes, the other the region of shadow and darkness. Christ belongs to the Pleroma, as the chief of the aeons; the Demiurge or Creator belongs to the Kenoma. In opposition to the incipient form of this heresy, St. Paul taught that Jesus Christ is the whole pleroma of the Godhead (Col. Ch. 1 & 2), and the church the reflected pleroma of Christ (Eph. Ch. 1).

The material visible world is the abode of the principle of evil. This cannot proceed from God; else he were himself the author of evil. It must come from an opposite principle. This is Matter, which stands in eternal opposition to God and the ideal world. The Syrian Gnostics, and still more the Manichæans, agreed with Parsism in conceiving Matter as an intrinsically evil substance, the raging kingdom of Satan, at irreconcilable warfare with the kingdom of light. The Alexandrian Gnostics followed more the Platonic idea of the Matter, and conceived this as Emptiness, in contrast with the divine, vital fullness, related to the divine being as shadow to light, and forming the dark limit beyond which the mind cannot pass. This Matter is in itself dead, but becomes animated by a union with the Pleroma, which again is variously described. In the Manichæan system there are powers of darkness, which seize by force some parts of the kingdom of light. But usually the union is made to proceed from above. The last link in the chain of divine aeons, either too weak to keep its hold on the ideal world, or seized with a sinful passion for the embrace of the infinite abyss, falls as a spark of light into the dark chaos of Matter, and imparts to it a germ of divine life, but in this bondage feels a painful longing after redemption, with which the whole world of aeons sympathizes. This weakest aeon is called by Valentine the lower Wisdom, or Achamoth, and marks the extreme point, where spirit must surrender itself to matter, where the infinite must enter into the finite, and thus form a basis for the real world. The myth of Achamoth is grounded in the thought, that the finite is incompatible with the absolute, yet in some sense demands to account for itself.

Here now comes in the third principle of the Gnostic speculation, namely, the world-maker, commonly called the Demiurge, termed by Basilides "Archon" or world-ruler, by the Ophites, "Jaldabaoth," or son of chaos. He is a creature of the fallen aeon, formed of physical material, and thus standing between God and Matter. He makes out of Matter the visible sensible world, and rules over it. He has his throne in the planetary heavens, and presides over time and over the sidereal spirits. Astrological influences were generally ascribed to him. He is the God of Judaism, the Jehovah, who imagines himself to be the supreme and only God. But in the further development of this idea the systems differ; the anti-Jewish Gnostics, Marcion and the Ophites, represent the Demiurge as an insolent being, resisting the purposes of God; while the Judaizing Gnostics, Basilides and Valentine, make him a restricted, unconscious instrument of God to prepare the way for redemption.

3. **Christology and Soteriology.** Redemption itself is the liberation of the light-spirit from the chains of dark Matter, and is effected by Christ, the most perfect aeon, who is the mediator of return from the sensible phenomenal world to the supersensuous ideal world, just as the Demiurge is the mediator of apostasy from the Pleroma to the Kenoma. This redeeming aeon, descends through the sphere of heaven, and assumes the ethereal appearance of a body; according to another view, unites himself with the man Jesus, or with the Jewish Messiah, at the baptism, and forsakes him again at the passion. At all events, the redeemer, however conceived in other respects, is allowed no actual contact with sinful matter. His human birth, his sufferings and death, are explained by Gnosticism after the manner of the Indian mythology, as a deceptive appearance, a transient vision, a spectral form, which he assumed only to reveal himself to the sensuous nature of man. Reduced to a clear philosophical definition, the Gnostic Christ is really nothing more than the ideal spirit of man himself, as in the mythical gospel-theory of Strauss. The Holy Ghost is commonly conceived as a subordinate aeon. The central fact in the work of Christ is the communication of the Gnosis to a small circle of the initiated, prompting and enabling them to strive with clear consciousness after the ideal world and the original unity. According to Valentine, the heavenly Soter brings Achamoth after innumerable sufferings into the Pleroma, and unites himself with her--the most glorious aeon with the lowest--in an eternal spirit-marriage. With this, all disturbance in the heaven of aeons is allayed, and a blessed harmony and inexpressible delight are restored, in which all spiritual (pneumatic) men, or genuine Gnostics, share. Matter is at last entirely consumed by a fire breaking out from its dark bosom.
4. **The Anthropology of the Gnostics corresponds with their theology.** Man is a microcosm, consisting of spirit, body, and soul, reflecting the three principles, God, Matter, and Demiurge, though in very different degrees. There are three classes of men: the spiritual, in whom the divine element, a spark of light from the ideal world, predominates; the material, bodily, carnal, physical, in whom matter, the gross sensuous principle, rules; and the psychical, in whom the demiurgic, quasi-divine principle, the mean between the two preceding, prevails.

These three classes are frequently identified with the adherents of the three religions respectively; the spiritual with the Christians, the carnal with the heathens, the psychical with the Jews. But they also made the same distinction among the professors of any one religion, particularly among the Christians; and they regarded themselves as the genuine spiritual men in the full sense of the word; while they looked upon the great mass of Christians as only psychical, not able to rise from blind faith to true knowledge, too weak for the good, and too tender for the evil, longing for the divine, yet unable to attain it, and thus hovering between the Pleroma of the ideal world and the Kenoma of the sensual.

Ingenuous as this thought is, it is just the basis of that unchristian distinction of esoteric and exoteric religion, and that pride of knowledge, in which Gnosticism runs directly counter to the Christian virtues of humility and love.

## Ethics of Gnosticism.

All the Gnostic heretics agree in disparaging the divinely created body, and over-rating the intellect. Beyond this, we perceive among them two opposite tendencies: a gloomy asceticism, and a frivolous antinomianism; both grounded in the dualistic principle, which falsely ascribes evil to matter, and traces nature to the devil. The two extremes frequently met, and the Nicolaitan maxim in regard to the abuse of the flesh<sup>5</sup> was made to serve asceticism first, and then libertinism.

The ascetic Gnostics, like Marcion, Saturninus, Tatian, and the Manichæans, were pessimists. They felt uncomfortable in the sensuous and perishing world, ruled by the Demiurge, and by Satan; they abhorred the body as formed from Matter, and forbade the use of certain kinds of food and all nuptial intercourse, as an adulteration of themselves with sinful Matter; like the Essenes and the errorists noticed by Paul in the Colossians and Pastoral Epistles. They thus confounded sin with matter, and vainly imagined that, matter being dropped, sin, its accident, would fall with it. Instead of hating sin only, which God has not made, they hated the world, which he has made.

The licentious Gnostics, as the Nicolaitans, the Ophites, the Carpocratians, and the Antitactes, in a proud conceit of the exaltation of the spirit above matter, or even on the diabolical principle, that sensuality must be overcome by indulging it, bade defiance to all moral laws, and gave themselves up to the most shameless licentiousness. It is no great thing, said they, according to Clement of Alexandria, to restrain lust; but it is surely a great thing not to be conquered by lust, when one indulges in it. According to Epiphanius there were Gnostic sects in Egypt, which, starting from a filthy, materialistic pantheism and identifying Christ with the generative powers of nature, practiced debauchery as a mode of worship, and after having, as they thought, offered and collected all their strength, blasphemously exclaimed: "I am Christ." From these pools of sensuality and Satanic pride arose the malaria of a vast literature, of which, however, fortunately, nothing more than a few names has come down to us.

1 So in the old Hindu philosophy, absolute Being is regarded as the ground of all existence. It is itself devoid of qualities, incapable of definition, inconceivable, neither one thing nor another thing, yet containing in itself the possibilities of all things; and out from its dark depths the universe was evolved through some mysterious impulse. The Vedas describe it thus: "It is neither Brahma, nor Vishnoo, nor Sivan, but something back of these, without passion, neither great nor small, neither male nor female, but something far beyond."

2 A putting forward, a projection.

3 Basilides and Saturninus use the former illustration; Marcos uses the latter.

4 A term used by Plato in a similar sense.

5 The flesh must be abused to be conquered.

Schaff's History of the Christian Church, Volume II, pp. 452-457 (see our book list)

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## Early Christians Respond

**Iranæus.** (120-202 A.D.) "The apostles teach that it was neither Christ nor the Saviour, but the Holy Spirit, who did descend upon Jesus. The reason for this descent. It certainly was in the power of the apostles to declare that Christ descended upon Jesus, or that the so-called superior Saviour [came down] upon the dispensational one, or he who is from the invisible places upon him from the Demiurge; but they neither knew nor said anything of the kind: for, had they known it, they would have also certainly stated it. But what really was the case, that did they record, [namely,] that the Spirit of God as a dove descended upon Him; this Spirit, of whom it was declared by Isaiah, "And the Spirit of God shall rest upon Him,:" as

I have already said. And again: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me." That is the Spirit of whom the Lord declares, "for it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you." And again, giving to the disciples the power of regeneration into God, He said to them, "Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." For [God] promised, that in the last times He would pour Him [the Spirit] upon [His] servants and handmaids, that they might prophesy; wherefore He did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of Man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with Him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ." Against Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 17

**Hippolytus.** (170-236 A.D.) "There are, however, among the Gnostics diversities of opinion; but we have decided that it would not be worth while to enumerate the silly doctrines of these (heretics), inasmuch as they are (too) numerous and devoid of reason, and full of blasphemy. Now, even those (of the heretics) who are of a more serious turn in regard of the Divinity, and have derived their systems of speculation from the Greeks, must stand convicted (of these charges). But Nicolaus has been a cause of the wide-spread combination of these wicked men. He, as one of the seven (that were chosen) for the diaconate, was appointed by the Apostles. (But Nicolaus) departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of both life and food. And when the disciples (of Nicolaus) continued to offer insult to the Holy Spirit, John reproveth them in the Apocalypse as fornicators and eaters of things offered unto idols."

The Refutation of All Heresies, Book 7, Chapter 24

**Apostle John.** "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of anti-christ, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world." I John, Ch. 4, vs. 1-3

**Apostle Paul.** "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power." Colossians, Ch. 2, vs. 8-10

**Apostle Peter.** "Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction." 2 Peter, Ch. 3 vs. 13-16