

The Gospel of Thomas – A Christian Evaluation

Don Closson looks at the Gospel of Thomas, considering its relationship to the four gospels included in the New Testament. His Christian evaluation of this text demonstrates that it is a later work written in the fourth century after Christ and inconsistent with the original first century writings. Some of the ideas presented in this document were rejected by the early church of the first century.

What Is It, and Why Is It Important?

Anyone who has visited the Wikipedia web site, the online encyclopedia with almost two million entries, knows that while the information is usually presented in a scholarly style, it can be a bit slanted at times. So when I recently read its entry for the “Gospel of Thomas,” I was not surprised to find it leaning towards the view that this letter is probably an early document, earlier than the other four Gospels of the New Testament, and an authentic product of the apostle known as Didymus or Thomas. The two Wikipedia sources most mentioned in support of this position are Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, and the group of scholars known as the [Jesus Seminar](#). Both are known for their distaste for evangelical theology and traditional views on the [canon](#) in general.



What I found more interesting, though, is the background discussion on the article. Wikipedia includes a running dialogue of the debates that determine what actually gets posted into the article, as well as what gets removed,

and here the discussion can be a bit more emotional. One contributor argues that no Christian should be allowed to contribute because of their bias and commitment to the canon of the New Testament. He adds that only atheists and Jews should be allowed to participate (no bias here). The discussion also reflects the idea that as early as the beginning of the second century, the Catholic Church was conducting a massive conspiracy to keep certain texts and ideas out of the public's hands and minds.

For those who have never heard of the Gospel of Thomas, let me provide some background. A copy of the Gospel of Thomas was found among thirteen leather-bound books in Egypt in 1945 near a town called Nag Hammadi. The books themselves are dated to be about A.D. 350 to 380 and are written in the Coptic language. The Gospel of Thomas contains one hundred fourteen sayings that are mostly attributed to Jesus. Parts of Thomas had been uncovered in the 1890s in the form of three Greek papyrus fragments. The book opens with a prologue that reads, "These are the secret words that the living Jesus spoke and Judas, even Thomas, wrote," which is followed by the words "the Gospel according to Thomas."[\[1\]](#)

Why should Christians take the time to think about this book called by some "the fifth gospel"? Mainly, because the Gospel of Thomas is one of the oldest texts found at Nag Hammadi, and because it is being offered by some scholars as an authentic form of early Christianity that competed with the traditional Gospels but was unfairly suppressed.

Dating and Canonicity

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University argues that there was an early competition between the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas, and that it was mishandled by the early Church Fathers. As a result, Christianity may have adopted an incorrect view of who Jesus was and what his message actually

taught.

A key component in this debate is the question of when the Gospel of Thomas was written. Pagels defends a date earlier than the Gospel of John, which would put it before A.D. 90. She and others support this idea by arguing that Thomas is different in both form and content than the other gospels and that it has material in common with an early source referred to as Q. Many New Testament scholars argue that there existed an early written text they call Q and that Matthew and Luke both drew from it. Since Q predated Matthew and Luke, it follows that it is earlier than John's Gospel as well.

However, most scholars believe that Thomas is a second century work and that it was written in Syria.^{2} Thomas may contain sayings going back to Jesus that are independent of the Gospels, but most of the material is rearranged and restated ideas from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

An argument against an early Thomas is called the *criterion of multiple attestations*.^{3} It goes something like this. The many early testimonies that we have regarding the teachings of Jesus contain material on the end times and a final judgment. These early testimonies include Mark, what is common to Matthew and Luke (i.e., what is in Q), what is unique to Matthew, and what is unique to Luke. All include end times teaching by Jesus. Thomas does not. Instead, Thomas seems to teach that the kingdom has already arrived in full and that no future event need occur. The Gospel of Thomas shows the development of later ideas that rejected Jewish beliefs and show the inclusion of pagan Greek thought.

Craig Evans argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not written prior to A.D. 175 or 180.^{4} He believes that Thomas shows knowledge of the New Testament writings and that it contains Gospel material that is seen as late. Evans adds that the structure of Thomas shows a striking similarity to Tatian's Diatessaron which was a harmonization of the four New

Testament Gospels and was written after A.D. 170. This late date would exclude Thomas from consideration for the canon because it would be too late to have a direct connection to one of the apostles.

Gospel Competition

Was there a marketplace of widespread and equally viable religious ideas in the early church, or was there a clear tradition handed down by the apostles and defended by the Church Fathers that accurately and exclusively communicated the teachings of Jesus Christ?

A group of Scholars sometimes known as the “New School” believe that the Gospel of Thomas is an alternative source for understanding who the real Jesus is and what he taught. As noted earlier, Elaine Pagels and the Jesus Seminar are two of the better known sources that defend the authenticity and early date of the Thomas letter. They believe that orthodoxy was up for grabs within the early Christian community, and that John’s Gospel, written around A.D. 90, was unfairly used by Irenaeus in the late second century to exclude and suppress the Thomas material.

Pagels writes that Irenaeus, in his attempt to “stabilize” Christianity, imposed a “canon, creed, and hierarchy” on the church in response to “devastating persecution” from the pagan and Jewish population, and in the process he suppressed other legitimate forms of spirituality.[{5}](#) Pagels admits that by A.D. 200 “Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the one ‘true faith’.”[{6}](#) But it is not entirely clear to Pagels that the right people and ideas won the day; we could be missing an important aspect of what Jesus taught.

Because of this she believes that we need to rethink what

orthodoxy and heterodoxy mean. Just because Irenaeus labeled a set of ideas as heretical or placed a group of writings outside of the inspired canon of the New Testament doesn't necessarily mean that he was right. Pagels adds that Christianity would be a richer faith if it allowed the traditions and ideas that Irenaeus fought against back into church.

Evangelicals have no problem with the idea that there were competing beliefs in the early church environment. The biblical account mentions several: Simon the magician in Acts, Hymenaeus and Philetus in 1 Timothy, and the docetists, who believed that Jesus only "appeared to be in the flesh," are referred to in John's epistles. However, they do not agree with Pagels' conclusions.

The various religious ideas competing with the traditional view were rejected by the earliest and most attested to sources handed down to us from the early church. They were systematically rejected even before Irenaeus or the emergence of the canon in the third and fourth centuries.

Contents

Attempts to classify the contents of the Gospel of Thomas have been almost as controversial as dating it. Those who support it being an early and authentic witness to the life and ministry of Jesus argue that it offers a form of Christianity more compelling than the traditional view. For instance, in her book *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels explains how she discovered an unexpected spiritual power in the Gospel of Thomas. She writes, 'It doesn't tell you what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.'^[7] This statement comes after a time in her life when she had consciously rejected the teachings of evangelical

Christianity. It also coincides with the height of the self-actualization movement of psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow which would have made the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas seem very modern. Pagels argues that just because Thomas sounds different to us, it is not necessarily wrong, heretical, or Gnostic.

So what does Thomas teach? On a spectrum between the traditional gospel on one end and full blown Gnosticism of the late second century on the other, Thomas is closer to the four traditional Gospels of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. It includes comments about the kingdom of God, prophetic sayings, and beatitudes, and doesn't contain Gnostic elements regarding the creation of the world and multiple layers of deity. However, its one hundred fourteen sayings portray Jesus as more Buddhist than Jewish.

According to Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, "the bulk of the gospel seems to reflect recastings of the synoptic material, that is, a reworking of material from Matthew, Mark, and Luke." In doing so, Jesus comes across more as a wise sage turning his followers inward for salvation rather than towards himself as a unique atonement for sin. For instance, Saying Three includes the words, 'When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that you are sons of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.'" Bock concludes that 'In Thomas, the key to God's kingdom is self-knowledge and self-understanding. Spiritual awakening produces life.'[\[8\]](#)

Even if the Gospel of Thomas is a first century document, it is offering a different gospel. Early church leaders compared the teachings of Thomas with the oral tradition handed down from the apostles and with the traditional gospels and rejected Thomas.

Summary

Although the focus here has been the Gospel of Thomas, our discussion is part of a larger debate. This larger question asks which ideas and texts present in the first and second century should be considered Christian and included in what we call the canon of Scripture. In other words, are there ideas and texts that were unfairly suppressed by individuals or the organized church in the early days of Christianity?

In his book *The Missing Gospels*, Darrell Bock lists three major problems with the view held by those who think that we should include the Gospel of Thomas and other so called “missing gospels” into the sphere of orthodox Christianity.

First, this group undervalues the evidence that the traditional sources are still “our best connection to the Christian faith’s earliest years.”^{9} Elaine Pagels and others work hard to show that all religious ideas during this time period are human products and have equal merit. They also claim that we know little about who wrote the four Gospels of the NT, often implying that they too could be forgeries.

While there is a healthy debate surrounding the evidence supporting the traditional works, Bock asserts that, “the case that the Gospels are rooted in apostolic connections either directly by authorship or by apostolic association is far greater for the four Gospels than for any of the other alternative gospels,” including Thomas.^{10} He adds that “the Gospels we have in the fourfold collection have a line of connection to the earliest days and figures of the Christian faith that the alternatives texts do not possess. For example, the Church Father Clement, writing in A.D. 95 states, ‘The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. . . . Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the

Word of God, they went forth.”[\[11\]](#)

Secondly, supporters of these alternative texts fail to admit that the ideas taught by the “missing gospels” about the nature of God, the work and person of Christ, and the nature of salvation were immediately rejected from the mid-first century on.[\[12\]](#)

Finally, those who support Thomas are wrong when they claim that “there simply was variety in the first two centuries, with neither side possessing an implicit right to claim authority.”[\[13\]](#) Instead, there was a core belief system built upon the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures and the life of Jesus Christ.

As Bock argues, Irenaeus and others who rejected the ideas found in the Gospel of Thomas were not the creators of orthodoxy, they were created by it.

Notes

1. Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 61.
3. Ibid., 62.
4. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 67.
5. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, (New York: Random House, 2003), inside front cover.
6. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xxiii.
7. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 32.
8. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, 166.
9. Ibid., 202.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 204.
12. Ibid., 207.
13. Ibid., 211.

See Also:

[The Jesus Seminar](#) by Jimmy Williams

[A Brief Overview of The Gospel of Judas](#) by Patrick Zukeran

[Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip](#) by Michael Gleghorn

[Probe Articles Answering The Da Vinci Code](#)

“Body Building”: Edifying Thoughts about Our Bodies

Why Should I Care About This?

Our culture is obsessed with the human body. Have you turned on the television or stood in the supermarket checkout line recently? Images and information about the human body bombard our senses from almost every direction. And what we believe about the body can make a huge difference for our daily life, and for the life beyond! That’s why we need to think carefully about a Christian view of the body. For when our ideas about the body go wrong, a lot of related Christian beliefs can also be affected.



For example, in the early centuries of the Christian church there were some religious groups called

Gnostics. Their name derived from the Greek term *gnosis* which means “knowledge,” because they thought that salvation came through secret knowledge. In their view, reality consisted of two primary components: matter (which was evil) and spirit (which was good).[{1}](#) Since matter was evil, the human body was likewise viewed as “intrinsically degenerate.”[{2}](#)

The Gnostics’ negative beliefs about the human body influenced their thinking in other areas as well. Their ideas about the incarnation, the afterlife, and human sexuality, were all affected. Consider the incarnation. Christians believe that God the Son became a real human being with a real human body. But this view was repulsive to some of the Gnostics. While some believed that the divine Christ temporarily assumed a human body, they did not think this state was permanent. And others denied that Jesus had a physical body at all. They believed that Jesus only *appeared* to be human.[{3}](#) In reality, he was a completely spiritual being. This was especially true after his resurrection, which Gnostics generally held to be a purely spiritual (and not physical) event.[{4}](#)

The Gnostic view of the afterlife was similar. After death, Gnostics believed, they would be reunited with God in the spiritual realm. Unlike Christians, they had no desire for the resurrection of the body. The body was a prison from which they would gratefully escape at death.

Consider finally their views about human sexuality. Although some Gnostics may have lived a sexually immoral lifestyle, the majority seem to have rather been ascetics.[{5}](#) They treated the body harshly and rejected sexual activity and procreation as earthly, physical, and unspiritual. Such activities kept one in bondage to this evil material world.

Unfortunately, these Gnostic beliefs about the body influenced Christianity to some degree. But if we look at what the Bible teaches, what we find is much more interesting and exciting.

The Goodness of the Human Body

What do you believe about your body? Is it something good—or evil?

In striking contrast to the Gnostics, who believed both the material world and human body were intrinsically evil, the biblical writers present a positive conception of both.

The first verse of Genesis declares, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). A few verses later we learn that God created human beings in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). And at the end of chapter one we’re told that everything God made “was very good” (Gen. 1:31). So unlike the Gnostics, who believed the material world was the work of an evil, inferior deity, the biblical writers viewed the physical universe and human body as part of the good creative work of the one true God.

Moreover, in the biblical view humanity occupies a very special place in the created order. Having been made in God’s image, men and women are viewed as the crown of creation. But what does it mean to say that we are made in God’s image? As one might expect, this is a question that has been given extensive consideration throughout the history of the church.

On the one hand, we probably shouldn’t think of the divine image primarily in *physical* terms, for God is a *spiritual* being. Still, it’s probably also a mistake to think that our bodies aren’t *in any sense* made in God’s image. Genesis 1:27 says that God created man in His image. Reflecting on this statement, some scholars have noted that it’s “not some part of a human or some faculty of a human, but a human in his or her wholeness [that] is the image of God. The biblical concept is not that the image is *in* man and woman, but that man and woman *are* the image of God.”^[6] Since God created man in His image as an embodied personal being, it seems quite natural to suppose that the material (as well as immaterial) aspects of

our being are *both* included in what it means to be made in God's image.

In Genesis 2 we have a more detailed account of the creation of man and woman. In verse 7 we read that "the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." This verse indicates that there are both material and immaterial components of man's being—and each *in some sense* bears God's image. This is why in the Christian view human beings have inherent worth and dignity. It's also why in contrast to the Gnostics we believe in the goodness of the human body.

The Importance of the Incarnation

Did you know that your beliefs about the human body can affect your view of Jesus and why He came? As we've seen, the biblical writers saw the human body as God's good creation (Gen. 1-2). Naturally enough, such radically different views of the body influenced how Gnostics and Christians understood the doctrine of the incarnation as well.

The term "incarnation" means "'to enter into or become flesh.' It refers to the Christian doctrine that the pre-existent Son of God became man in Jesus." [\[7\]](#) Our first hint that something like this would happen comes shortly after man's fall into sin. In Genesis 3:15 God tells the serpent, the agent of temptation in the story, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." The verse promises a coming Champion or Deliverer, who would be born of a woman, and who would deliver the decisive death-blow to Satan. Later we learn that this Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ, redeems humanity from the tragic consequences of sin and death by giving His own life as a substitute in our place (1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10). The death of God's Son for the sins of the world was possible because of the incarnation. By becoming a

real man, with a real body, He experienced a real death on the cross.

One of the clearest statements of the incarnation is found in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:1, 14). This Word made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, told His followers that He had come "to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). While Gnostics generally regarded the death of Jesus as irrelevant for salvation, Christians see it as absolutely essential.

In Revelation 5:9 a song is sung in praise of Christ, who through His death "purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." In the early church, some theologians said that what Christ did not assume, neither did He redeem. They meant that if Christ did not really have a human body, then neither did He redeem our bodies. This is why the incarnation is so important. By becoming fully human and dying for our sins, Christ secured the complete redemption of all who put their trust in Him.

Human Sexuality

Those unfamiliar with the Bible might be surprised to learn how much it has to say about sex. And what it says is neither prudish nor out of date. On the contrary, its counsel is both supremely wise and eminently practical. {8}

In fact, unlike the ancient Gnostics, the Bible has a very positive view of human sexuality. An entire book of the Bible, the Song of Solomon, is largely devoted to extolling the beauty and wonder of sexual love within the God-ordained covenant of marriage. Sex was God's idea and is rooted in His original creation of man and woman as sexual beings (Gen. 1:27). While one of God's purposes in creating us this way was for procreation (Gen. 1:28), it certainly wasn't His only

purpose. God also intended sex to be a pleasurable and meaningful expression of intimacy and love between husband and wife (Prov. 5:18-19).

According to Jesus, the biblical ideal of marriage is a lifelong, exclusive commitment of one man to one woman (Mk. 10:2-9). Citing the Genesis creation account He says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Mk. 10:7-8; cf. Gen. 2:24). As one writer has observed, "Here we have a blueprint for human sexual love: through the sexual act the man and woman have a wonderful new kind of intimacy. This is called being 'one flesh,' and it is designed to be exclusive and faithful." [\[9\]](#)

Unfortunately, man's fall into sin brought about the misuse and abuse of God's good gift. And as one might expect, the Bible doesn't shy away from addressing such things. Essentially, the biblical view is that sex is to be fully enjoyed as a wonderful gift from God, but *only* within the sacred bonds of marriage between one man and one woman. Every other kind of sexual activity is lumped into the category of "sexual immorality." And this we are told to flee, for as Paul told the Corinthians, "he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (1 Cor. 6:18).

But Paul then went even further. He called the believer's body "a temple of the Holy Spirit." He said that Christians have been "bought at a price" and should "honor God" with their bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20). This reveals something of the value which God places upon the human body. And He encourages us to do the same.

Bodily Death and Resurrection

Did you know that your view of the human body affects your view of eternity?

Throughout history humanity has entertained a variety of ideas about what happens after death. Some think that physical death is the end of our personal, conscious existence. While we might “live on” in people’s memories, we don’t live on in any other sense. Others believe that while the body dies, the human soul or spirit continues to exist—perhaps on a higher spiritual plane, perhaps in a spiritual heaven or hell, or perhaps somewhere else. According to this view, our bodily existence is only temporary. Once we die our bodies are discarded, but our souls go on living forever.

In the early years of the church, many Gnostics believed that people would experience different fates at death. Some would just cease to exist. For them, death was the end. Others could enjoy some sort of afterlife through faith and good works. From a Gnostic perspective, these people were the Christians. Only a few, however, namely, the Gnostics themselves, could expect a truly fantastic afterlife in which they would be reunited with God in the divine realm.[{10}](#) In other words, the Gnostics anticipated being liberated from this evil material world, including their bodies, and being reunited with God in a completely spiritual existence. Interestingly, although there are differences, many Christians seem to expect an afterlife that’s very similar to that envisioned by the Gnostics.

But what the Bible teaches is really quite different. Although it comforts Christians with the reminder that to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), this is not the believer’s final state. Instead, we’re told to eagerly await the resurrection of our bodies, which will be modeled after Jesus’ resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:20-23, 42-49). As Christians, we don’t look forward to a purely *spiritual* (in the sense of *non-physical*) afterlife. Instead, we await a *bodily* existence in a new heaven and new earth which is completely free from the presence and power of sin (2 Pet. 3:10-13)! Just as Christ was raised *physically* from the

dead, so one day He will likewise raise all men from the dead. Some will enjoy His presence forever; others will be shut out from His presence forever (Matt. 25:46; Jn. 5:28-29). Which experience shall be ours depends entirely upon our relationship to Christ (Jn. 3:36; 2 Thess. 1:8-10). So why not put your trust in Him and enjoy forever the new heavens and new earth in a new, resurrected body? You're invited, you know (Rev. 22:17).

Notes

1. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles Over Authentication, Course Guidebook, Pt. 1* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2002), 20.
2. Mary Timothy Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 9.
3. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2006), 200.
4. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 29.
5. Ibid., 21.
6. *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, eds. Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), s.v. "Image of God."
7. *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (1st ed.), ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), s.v. "Incarnation" by Frank J. Matera.
8. A number of ideas in this section were informed by the article "Sex, Sexuality," in *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*.
9. Amy Orr-Ewing, *Is the Bible Intolerant?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 113.
10. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 21.

Are the Essene Gospels Real?

Are the Essene gospels (Gospel of Peace) real? How can you witness to someone who believes these are truer than the Bible? I have a father who says he believes in Jesus, but not the Bible. He says a loving God will not condemn man as long as he does mostly good. He also rejects that Christ is the only way. I know we are saved by grace not works and that Jesus is the way, but how do I explain and share the truth without arguing? My referring to the Bible only aggravates him since he rejects it as one of religion and man's creation.

There are certainly many ancient "Gospels" that never made it into the Bible.

You can find out more about these on sites like the following: wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/index.htm and www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl.html.

A search on the latter site for the "Gospel of Peace" produced no matches and I've actually never heard of this one. Regardless, however, the real questions we must ask are:

1. Who wrote these documents?
2. When were they written?
3. Are they historically reliable or trustworthy sources of information about Jesus and the early church?

Many of these documents were written by groups (like the Gnostics) who were later declared heretical by church councils and synods. They were written AFTER the time of the New Testament Gospels – sometimes by hundreds of years, sometimes by decades. And with the exception of certain portions of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, they're generally regarded as late, legendary, and historically unreliable sources of information

about Jesus and His early followers.

If your father doesn't believe that the Bible is reliable, you might see if he's willing to read some books which give evidence that it is. A very good general introduction is "A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded" by Norman Geisler and William Nix. A book on the Old Testament is "The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable & Relevant?" by Walter Kaiser. And F.F. Bruce wrote, "The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?" Many other good books exist, but if your father would be willing to carefully read any of these, it would be a great start.

Regardless of whether he's willing to read such books or not, however, the best thing you can do is pray for him and model Christlike love toward him. The Lord can work wonderfully to soften men's hearts toward Christ and the Bible. Speak a good word for the Lord as you have opportunity, but mainly just pray for him and show him God's love. It's a powerful combination.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

The Gnostic Matrix

In the wake of the mega-hit movie The Matrix, which features gnostic themes, Don Closson examines gnosticism and the influence this philosophy has on our culture.

When The Matrix came out in 1999, it became an instant hit movie and a trend setter for the science fiction genre. The story takes place in a future dystopia where intelligent

machines have taken over and are farming humans to generate electrical power. The matrix itself is a computer program that gives humans the illusion that they are living in a late twentieth century world when, in reality, they are existing in womb-like pods that provide nutrients while siphoning off the natural electrical current that human bodies create. The movie is known both for its visual style and its references to many postmodern and religious ideas. The writers used a biblical motif throughout their story. The main character of the movie Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is called the "one." He dies and comes to life again after being kissed by a love interest named Trinity. In this resurrected state he is able to destroy the evil agents within the matrix and appears to ascend into the heavens at the end of the movie. A ship called the Nebuchadnezzar is used by the rebel humans to hide from the intelligent machines and to search for the lost city of Zion. However, in spite of its use of many biblical terms, this is not a Christian movie.

In fact, *The Matrix* is syncretistic; it uses ideas from a number of religious traditions that are popular in American culture. Along with Christian notions, the authors have incorporated ideas from Zen Buddhism and Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a belief system named after the Greek word "gnosis" or knowledge. If the authors had been attempting to portray a Christian view of the human condition, they would have focused on sin and the need for a savior. Instead, the movie's characters find a kind of salvation in discovering secret knowledge and in realizing that the world is not what it appears to be. Neo becomes a Gnostic messiah, one chosen to be a way-shower out of the illusion of the matrix.

Gnostic gospels began to compete with Christianity in the second century after Christ. Our first clue to their existence is found in the writings of early Church Fathers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus who defended Christian orthodoxy from these heretical ideas. The popularity of Gnosticism began to

decline by the end of the third century and lay largely dormant until the recent discovery of Gnostic texts in Egypt in 1945. Now known as the Nag Hammadi Library, this remarkable find was made available in English in 1977 and has been used by both religious leaders and secular scholars to argue that a Gnostic gospel should be considered alongside the orthodox Christian message.

In this article we will consider both the content of Gnosticism and influence Gnostic ideas are having on our culture.

The Birth of Gnosticism

In December 1945, an Arab named Muhammad Ali found a jar buried in the ground near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, that contained thirteen leather-bound codices or books dating from around 350 A.D. For the first time modern scholars had access to early copies of Gnostic writings which had previously been known only through derogatory references made by early Christians.

The core beliefs of the Gnostic gospel begin with the assertion that the world in its current state is not good, nor is it the creation of a good god. In fact, the cosmos is seen as a mistake, the action of a minor deity who was unable to achieve a creation worthy of permanence. The result is a world of pain, sorrow and death filled with human beings that long to be freed from a material existence. Deep within each person is a divine spark that connects humanity with the ultimate spiritual being who remains hidden from creation. The only hope for humanity is to acquire the information it needs to perfect itself and evolve out of its current physical state. The Gnostic Jesus descended from the spiritual realm to show the way for the rest of humanity, not to die as an atonement for sin, but to make available information necessary for self-perfection.

Although a common core of ideas is found within Gnostic

writings, a variety of religious ideas were popular among its leaders. There are four second century Gnostic teachers who have contributed to our current understanding of Gnosticism. Two consist of mythical reinterpretations of the Old Testament. The *Apocryphon of John* claims to possess a vision of John, the son of Zebedee. It offers a hierarchy of deities based on the names of Yahweh, ultimately concluding with a minor god named Ialdabaoth who is the angry and jealous god of the OT who falsely claims there is no other god beside him. The second writer named Justin authored *Baruch*, a work that mixed together Greek, Jewish and Christian ideas. Again, it portrays OT characters as minor deities, but both Hercules and Jesus have a role in this system. Gnostics baptized into this cult claimed to enter into a higher spiritual realm and swore themselves to secrecy.

The other two second century forms of Gnosticism were more philosophically developed. Basilides of Alexandria and Valentinus, who wrote in Rome about 140 A.D., brought together secular Greek thinking with New Testament concepts. Basilides' starting point of absolute nothingness indicates that he may have encountered Indian Hindu ideas in Alexandria. He also regarded the God of the Old Testament as an oppressive angel. But the most important Gnostic concepts are those of Valentinus. It is his system that has been borrowed from by today's New Age followers.

The Gnosticism of Valentinus

Valentinus claimed to have learned his gospel message from a student of the apostle Paul named Theodas. At the center of this Gnostic system is the notion that something is wrong, that the human condition and experience is defective. Orthodox Christianity and Judaism both point to human rebellion as the source of this flawed existence; however Gnosticism blames the creator. Valentinus' version of creation begins with a primal being called Bythos who, after a long period of silence,

emanates 30 beings called “aeons” (also known as the “pleroma”). Eventually, one of the lowest aeons, Wisdom or Sophia, becomes pregnant and gives birth to a demiurge, Jehovah, who in turn creates the physical world. The world is not “good” as indicated by the Genesis account. It is flawed and a barrier to humanity’s redemption.

Valentinus argued that the fallen nature of the cosmos was not our doing, and that we each have the capacity to transcend the physical creation to achieve redemption. The key is to possess correct knowledge about reality. Like the humans suffering in the movie *The Matrix*, he believed that “the human mind lives in a largely self-created world of illusion from whence only the enlightenment of a kind of Gnosis can rescue it.”[\[1\]](#) Valentinus taught that both body and soul are part of the corrupt creation and that redemption is only for the spirit or inner man. His view of personal redemption has more in common with Hinduism and Buddhism than with orthodox Christianity. To the Gnostics, Jesus is significant only because of the knowledge he possessed and the example that he set, not for being God in the flesh or for being a sacrifice for sin. Because the illusion presented to us by the world can only be corrected by the right knowledge, any guilt we feel for our rebellion against an all-powerful holy God is false guilt; for such a God doesn’t exist.

The teachings of Valentinus had considerable impact on his world. Modern day Gnostics, however, don’t teach all of his ideas. Let’s see why.

Modern Day Gnostics

World religion scholar Joseph Campbell writes that, “We are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, or Christ consciousness...,” and that our main problem is that we have merely forgotten this truth. He admonishes us to wake up to this awareness, which he adds, “is the very essence of Christian Gnosticism and of the Thomas Gospel.”[\[2\]](#)

The concept of a “Christ consciousness” is common in New Age literature. The origin of this idea can be traced back to Gnostic ideas that competed with the traditional teachings of the Apostles in the early church.

As New Age thinking has progressed in its many forms, the use of Gnosticism as a theoretical underpinning has grown. Since English translations become widely available in the late 1970s, Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *First Apocalypse of James* have been used in conjunction with Eastern religious writings to support both New Age radical environmentalism and neo-pagan feminist religion. Gnostic writings have motivated scholars like Elaine Pagels and Joseph Campbell to find parallels between Buddhism and Christianity. They have also lent support to the belief that it was a Christ (or Buddha) consciousness that made Jesus a powerful example of how humans can experience enlightenment. But are the Gnostic scriptures faithfully represented in these modern ideas?

Author Douglas Groothuis argues that the Gnostic worldview is often misrepresented by its modern adherents. For instance, Pagels and psychologist Carl Jung translate the teachings of the Gnostics into general psychological truths while rejecting their teachings regarding the origin and operation of the universe. It seems inconsistent at best to adopt the supposed outcomes of the Gnostic faith while rejecting its core teachings.

Neither does Gnosticism affirm current attitudes towards the environment found among many New Agers. Gnosticism teaches that all matter, including mother Earth, is seen as a deterrent towards reaching our true spiritual state. In fact, Gnosticism holds that all matter is a mistake. It is certainly not to be worshipped or revered as many of our pantheistic friends do.

Although female divinities are part of the Gnostic hierarchy

of emanations and the New Age journal *Gnosis* devoted an entire issue to the Goddess movement, the Gnosticism of the early church era was decidedly not feminist. The divinity Sophia is at the heart of the problem facing humanity; her offspring brought into existence the physical world from which the Gnostic must escape.

Women in general do not fair well in the Gnostic texts. The *Gospel of Thomas* quotes Peter as saying, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus supposedly adds, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."[\[3\]](#) Jesus shows no sign of Gnostic influence in the New Testament. He never demeans women for being female, nor does he suggest that they become men.

Finally, Gnostic texts are used to support the New Age doctrine of tolerance for those on a different spiritual journey, and the popular belief in reincarnation. But Groothuis notes that "several Gnostic documents speak of the damnation of those who refuse to become enlightened, particularly apostates from Gnostic groups."[\[4\]](#) It's interesting that these passages aren't often taught by New Age followers.

The Reliability of Gnostic Texts

Is the *Gospel of Thomas* a more reliable witness to the real teachings of Christ than the New Testament? Is it factually more trustworthy? Famed Bible scholar F. F. Bruce is pretty blunt regarding the competing truth claims. He writes, "There is no reason why the student of this conflict should shrink from making a value judgment: the Gnostic schools lost because they deserved to lose."[\[5\]](#) Few would question the historical record that Gnosticism was rejected by the church in the second and third centuries. But what about today? Are there valid reasons to reevaluate the legitimacy of the Gnostic

writings?

First, a decision must be made between the two conflicting depictions of Christ. The content and the literary style of the Gnostic writings compared to the biblical record are so different that they cannot both be accurate.

It's significant to note that the Gnostic texts do not offer a recounting of the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Much of what is attributed to Jesus is detached from any historical setting. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* depicts Jesus "more as a lecturer on philosophy than a Jewish prophet."[\[6\]](#) The Apostles supposedly ask Jesus, "Lord, we would like to know the deficiency of the aeons and of their pleroma."[\[7\]](#) Jesus responds with Gnostic teachings about God the Father and a female deity whose disobedience results in the physical cosmos. This is not the Jesus of the New Testament.

Another question regarding Gnostic texts is their date of origin. The documents found at Nag Hammadi are quite old, probably dating from A.D. 350-400. The original writings are even older, but not prior to the second century A. D. Thus, the consensus of most scholars is that they appeared after the New Testament had been completed. *The Gospel of Truth*, which is attributed to Valentinus, actually quotes the New Testament at length. It would be odd to accept its authority over the New Testament.

Unfortunately, the documents have also experienced considerable physical deterioration. The English translation of The Nag Hammadi Library exhibits many ellipses, parentheses, and brackets that point to gaps in the text due to this deterioration. Since most of the texts have no other manuscript copies available, their accuracy is questionable.

There is also the question of authorship. *The Letter of Peter to Philip* is usually dated at the end of the second century or

possibly into the third.^{8} Since this is long after Peter's death, it is considered to be pseudepigraphic, falsely attributed to a noteworthy individual for added credibility.

Finally, the most popular and ardently defended text, the *Gospel of Thomas*, was not mentioned in the early church until the early third century.

The Gnostic view of Jesus was rejected by the early church and should be rejected today.

Notes

1. >Stephan A. Hoeller, *Valentinus: A Gnostic For All Seasons*, <http://www.gnosis.org/valentinus.htm> on 12/20/2002
2. Douglas Groothuis, *Jesus In an Age of Controversy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 74.
3. *Gospel of Thomas*, 114.
4. Groothuis, 100.
5. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon Of Scripture*, (InterVarsity Press, 1988), 277.
6. Groothuis, 104.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 107.

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