

CODE 4: DO THE SO-CALLED SECRET, GNOSTIC GOSPELS HELP US UNDERSTAND JESUS?

- DVC p. 231 – Sir Leigh Teabing (the historical “expert” of the book) says that there were “more than 80 gospels” considered for the NT. This is perhaps the most misleading statement of “fact” in the book.
- There were not more than 80 gospel documents. Here are several of the definitive listings of Gnostic texts.
 - o *The Nag Hammadi Library* was a jar of texts discovered in an Egyptian cave in 1945 by Muhammad Ali. Before this discovery, we only knew of the Gnostic writers through the writings of the Church Fathers. With this discovery, however, we could now actually read their own words. *Nag Hammadi* (published in English in 1977) contained 45 titles – not all were gospels. In fact it names only 5 – *Gospel of Truth, Thomas, Philip, Egyptians, and Mary*.
 - o *The Gnostic Scriptures* by Bentley Layton lists just shy of 40 titles, only 3 of which are gospels and overlap with the 5 above.
 - o Helmut Koester’s *Introduction to the New Testament* lists 60 works. Again, most of these were not gospels.
- The Church Fathers (particularly Irenaeus (2nd cent.), Hippolytus (2nd-3rd cent.), and Tertullian (2nd-3rd cent.)) were very critical of the Gnostics, insisting that their teachings were at odds with Apostolic teachings. Again, before Nag Hammadi, all we knew of the Gnostics was from secondary sources.
- Here are some titles of some Gnostic texts: *Gospel of Thomas; Philip; Mary; Acts of John; Testimony of Truth; Wisdom of Jesus Christ*. The dates range from the 2nd to 3rd centuries AD, although a few are alleged to be older (this is a very small minority). Nearly all of the texts are at least several generations removed from Jesus.

We now turn to some specific views that they espoused...

- The 4 main issues center on one fundamental premise. These were the main issues and premise that drove the ancient debate between the Church Fathers and Gnostics. The premise is 1) that all of these texts reveal new mysterious/secret gnosis or knowledge. The four issues that stem from this new knowledge have to do with the following: 2) the way God relates to the created world and who God is in general, 3) the person of Jesus, work on the cross, and salvation, 4) the role of revelation, authority, and spirituality in defining faith, and 5) to a lesser degree, the role of women. Let’s unpack these...
 - o *Central Issue of secret knowledge*: The basic understanding in the Gnostic world was that certain Christians had access to mysterious knowledge. It was secret, only given to the most spiritual people.

“And he [the Savior] said to me [Peter], “Be strong, for you are the one to whom these mysteries have been given. To know them through revelation, that he whom they crucified is first-born, and the home of the demons, and the stoney vessel in which they dwell of Elohim, of the cross which is under the Law. But he who stands near him is the living Savior, the first in him, whom they seized and released, who stands joyfully looking at those who did him violence, while they were divided among themselves. Therefore he laughs at their lack of perception, knowing that they are born blind. So then the one susceptible to suffering shall come, since the body is the substitute. But what they released was my incorporeal body. But I am the intellectual Spirit filled with radiant light. He whom you saw coming to me is our intellectual Pleroma, which unites perfect light with my Holy Spirit.” *Apocalypse of Peter 82:17-83:15 p. 66.*

From this quote we learn that 1) dualism is present as the immaterial *pleroma* is the source of all knowledge. We see 2) a distinction between the Savior’s corporeal body and His immaterial aspect (“pure light”) with only the latter being the true Jesus. 3) His entire

teaching is a mystery. This differs with true orthodoxy which argues that the Bible is the revelation of God. It is laid bare for all to see and work to understand. In fact, it is meant to be understood by children. It's not about being an "insider" or somehow attaining to any insider knowledge.

- *Issue 2 on how God relates to this world:* Dualism is a concept which states that everything falls into one of two categories, material and immaterial. The material world is evil while the immaterial is good. The Gnostics argued that God (immaterial and good) was opposed by the "Demiurge." It was the demiurge, being evil, that created the material realm (note *Hypostasis 86:20-87:11* –

[Speaking of the heavenly authorities "Their chief is blind; [because of his] Power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said with his [Power], 'It is I who an God; there is none [apart from me].' When he said this, he sinned against [the *Pleroma*]. And this speech got up to Incorruptibility; then there was a voice that came forth from Incorruptibility, saying, 'You are mistaken, Samuel' – which is 'god of the blind.' His thoughts became blind. And, having expelled his Power – that is, the blasphemy he had spoken – he pursued it down to Chaos and the Abyss, his mother, at the instigation of Pistis Sophia (Faith-Wisdom). And she established each of his offspring in conformity with its power – after the pattern of the realms that are above, for by starting from the invisible world the visible world was invented." on p. 69).

According to this text, deity existed in a series of worlds and there was conflict among the numerous heavenly authorities (cf *87:11-26*). Also note this description from the Eastern Orthodox scholar Frederica Mathewes-Green,

"...The problem wasn't the insistence that we can directly experience God. It was that the Gnostics' schemes of how to do this were so *wacky*. Preposterous stories about creation, angels, demons, and spiritual hierarchies multiplied like mushrooms...The version attributed to Valentinus, the best-known Gnostic, is typical. Valentinus supposedly taught a hierarchy of spiritual beings called 'aeons.' One of the lowest aeons, Sophia, fell and gave birth to the Demiurge, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. This evil Demiurge created the visible world, which was a bad thing, because now we pure spirits are all tangled up in fleshly bodies. Christ was an aeon who took possession of the body of the human Jesus, and came to free us from the prison of materiality" (Bock, p. 71-73).

There is a giant gap between the orthodox understanding of God and that of the Gnostics. Valentinus also believed that God existed as a "dyad." He was both Ineffable, the Depth, and Primal Father; and Grace, Silence, the Womb, and "Mother of the All" (p. 74). This understanding of the "divine feminine" is another distinguishing feature of Gnosticism that differentiates it from Orthodoxy. This is ironic given the fact that they did not necessarily value women (cf *Gospel of Thomas* text)

"Simon Peter said to them [the disciples], 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.' Jesus said, '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.'" p. 75).

To sum up: The Gnostic view of God is that He is too transcendent to bother with creation and humanity. The NT view of God is that He loved humanity so much that He became incarnate and died in order to save it (**Philippians 2:5-9**). That's a big difference.

- *Issue 3 on Jesus:* The Gnostics taught that Jesus was actually 2 beings: the living Lord and Savior Jesus and the human substitute Jesus. In *The Apocalypse of Peter 81:4-24*

"I saw him apparently being seized by them. And I said, 'What am I seeing, O Lord? Is it really you whom they take? And are you holding on to me? And are they hammering the feet and hands of another? Who is this one above the cross, who is glad and laughing?' The Savior said to me, 'He whom you saw being glad and laughing above the cross is the Living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they

are driving the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute. They put to shame that witch remained in his likeness. And look at him, and [look at] me!” (p. 75-7)

we see that the Savior is spiritual and from the Father (God) and had nothing to do with the flesh. The earthly Jesus only represented the spiritual Jesus...He wasn't actually Him. In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth 56:6-19*

“It was another...who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height...over their error...And I was laughing at their ignorance.” (p. 77-8)

it was not the spiritual Jesus who died, but the earthly representative. *Acts of John 93*

“I will tell you another glory, brothers, sometimes when I meant to touch him I encountered a material, solid body; but at other times again when I felt him, his substance was immaterial and incorporeal...as if it did not exist at all.” (p. 78)

argues that Jesus' humanity was a phantom. So, the portrait we see of Jesus in the Gnostic literature is more divine and separate from humanity; NOT more human as suggested by the DVC. Consider these biblical passages: **John 20** – Mary clung to a physical Jesus and He showed Thomas the nail prints in His hands; **Luke 24** – Jesus eats a meal with His disciples following His resurrection. Rather, the divine/human Jesus endured death and suffering (**John 1:1-18; Romans 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 John 1:1-4; Hebrews 4:14-10:18; Acts 2:16-40; 1 Corinthians 15:3-11; Titus 2:11-14**). This is important because, for Gnostics, salvation does not depend on the substitutionary death of a divine Jesus but on the attainment of special knowledge of the immaterial world – ie, it's up to us.

- *Issue 4 on authority and revelation:* Jesus is merely a conduit to higher knowledge, and no one can challenge anyone who claims to have received some special revelation from God. In other words, there is no authority structure – anything goes when it comes to revelation. This is why the Gnostic literature can even teach contradictory things (perhaps that's why it is so popular in these days?). They believed in direct access to continued divine revelation. This is a classic case of the “haves vs. the have-nots”. Again, the major subject was the inner being, not God, as it tried to connect to the immaterial world. In the *Gospel of Thomas 45:30-33*
“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you” (p. 83),

spirituality is internal and personal and has nothing to do with Jesus. Contrast that to the NT understanding where spirituality has everything to do with a connection to Jesus. Note the difference between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of John* from p. 84.

“Now we can see how John's message contrasts with that of Thomas. Thomas's Jesus directs each disciple to discover the light within (“within a person of light there is light”); but John's Jesus declares instead that “I am the light of the world” and that “whoever does not come to me walks in darkness.” In Thomas, Jesus reveals to the disciples that “you are from the kingdom and to it you shall return” and teaches them to say for themselves that “we come from the light”: but John's Jesus speaks as the only one who comes “from above” and so has rightful priority over everyone else: “You are from below; I am from above...The one who comes from above is above all.” – Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The secret Gospel of Thomas*

- *Issue 5 on the place of women:* The Gnostics held that anyone could receive special revelation, even women. In fact they encouraged women to lead in places when they had received such revelation. But, at the same time, other Gnostic texts demeaned women (*Gospel of Thomas 114*,

“Simon Peter said to them [the disciples], ‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.’ Jesus said, ‘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’” (p. 75).

Remember too, that this is a minor issue in the light of the previous 4!

The Current Appeal to the Gnostics

- Why are the Gnostics making such a comeback?
- Some people would like to suggest that the rediscovery of the Gnostic heritage shows how truly diverse the Christian culture was in the 2nd century. This is only partially true. They definitely considered themselves to be Christian, and they definitely elicited a strong response from orthodox Christians. BUT!!!! Their views were decidedly different from those of orthodox Christianity (that is in keeping with the apostolic tradition). The fact is that each side claimed that the other was not Christian. These were not simply 2 expressions of the same faith...they were 2 different faiths.
- It is important to note that proponents of this view also use the language of “history is written by the winners” to argue that orthodox Christianity merely subverted these otherwise legitimate views of early Christians. Note that people who use this rhetoric always have an agenda behind their words (see Pagels’ quote on p. 86-8,

“The concerns of Gnostic Christians survived only as a suppressed current, like a river driven underground...Now that the Nag Hammadi discoveries give us a new perspective on this process...All the old questions – the original questions, sharply debated at the beginning of Christianity – are being reopened...” [On the Nag Hammadi finds in the 20th century] “Today we read them [the Gnostic texts] with different eyes, not merely as ‘madness or blasphemy’ but as Christians in the first century experienced them – a powerful alternative to what we know as orthodox Christian tradition.”).

They reject the Christian faith as a historically unified set of core beliefs held over the centuries from the earliest point (which is what we see). They ignore the earliest apostolic tradition which had emerged contrary to the Gnostics (NB the example of Paul. We know that his letters were written within 30 years of Jesus death, many even earlier, and he gives us an orthodox understanding completely contrary to the Gnostics.).

- Note the quote on p. 89 by Bock,
“Interestingly and ironically perhaps this view is asking for something that neither of the early Christian alternatives in its time would have accepted as a viable option. The lesson of history is that these two approaches to Christianity were so very different from each other as to be incompatible from the view of each school.”

Both groups can’t be Christian in the same way both Christianity and Islam can’t both be Christian. cf **Tertullian, Against Marcion 4:4**, p. 90, “**I say that my Gospel is the true one; Marcion, that his is. I affirm that Marcion’s Gospel is adulterated; Marcion, that mine is...**”

Tertullian goes on to defend this by claiming that errors only arise from the truth; therefore the Apostolic truth that he possesses is earlier in time than Marcion’s distortions of it.

- That leaves us with 2 key points: 1) each side did not recognize the other as legitimate, and 2) The issue, as far as the orthodox Church Fathers were concerned, had to do with the timing, or age of the Gnostic writings. ie, they were late and non-Apostolic.

Why is this important?

- We are seeing the revision of history on a bad foundation.
- Again, this is fringe Christianity AT BEST. It’s really totally different. We’re not getting the full story from these writers today. Most only pick and choose what they want to consider as it best fits their agendas.

Final Conclusions

- The “secret” refers to the fundamental principle within Gnosticism – the discovery of new revelation, or knowledge, which results in salvation.
- Each side in the ancient debate rejected the other side as an aberration of Christianity. They are not the same thing. As the **Apocalypse of Peter 79:30** declares of orthodoxy in calling them

“empty channels” (p. 97). The *Testimony of Truth 34:26* claiming of the traditionalists, “They do not have the Word which gives [life].”