

## Eternal Wisdom, Thee We Praise

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Eternal wisdom, thee we praise,  
Thee the Creation sings:  
With thy lov'd name, rocks, hills, and seas,  
And heaven's high palace rings.

Thy hand how wide it spreads the sky!  
How glorious to behold!  
Ting'd with a blue of heavenly dye,  
And starr'd with sparkling gold.

Thy glories blaze all nature round,  
And strike the gazing sight,  
Thro' skies, and seas, and solid ground,  
With terror and delight.

Infinite strength, and equal skill  
Shine thro' the worlds abroad;  
Our souls with vast amazement fill,  
And speak the builder God.

But still the wonders of thy grace  
Our softer passions move;  
Pity divine in Jesus' face  
We see, adore and love.

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## ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Gnosticism: A Christological Heresy

Kevin T. Bauder

The first major heresy to threaten the Christian faith was Gnosticism. This error was developed by mixing Middle Platonic philosophy with Zoroastrian cosmology and Christian terminology. Not all versions of Gnosticism claimed to be Christian, but those that did exerted a powerful influence that continues to the present day. Different groups of Gnostics had different emphases, but they also displayed important similarities. In all its forms, Gnosticism combines several key teachings.

Gnostic teachers of all sorts affirmed a strong dualism between the spiritual and the material. They further affirmed that only the spiritual is good, while the material world is evil beyond recovery. They considered the human body to be particularly evil, especially in its functions of eating and procreating.

This evaluation of the material body as evil led most Gnostics to become severe ascetics. A few reacted in the opposite direction, asserting that the body was so incurably evil that indulging it could do no further damage. These Gnostics became notorious for their libertine practices.

Given their strong dualism, Gnostics wrestled with the question of how a good God could create such an evil world. They concluded that the good God did not create it. In fact, the good God was a hidden being (often named *Bythus*) who was ultimately unknowable. This hidden God gave rise to emanations called *aeons*. An emanation can be described as a thought that takes shape as a separate person. God's thoughts produced many of these aeons.

The aeons were also thinking beings, and their thoughts produced yet further emanations, who in turn produced others. The whole collection of these aeons was called the *Pleroma*. All members of the Pleroma were spiritual and divine, though the higher members were more purely spiritual and divine than the lower members.

At some point, one of the lower aeons (often named *Sophia*) experienced a series of negative feelings. These negative feelings took shape as a base, obtuse, malevolent person called the *Demiurge*. This Demiurge was also the



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Jehovah of the Old Testament. In his ignorance and ill will, the Demiurge created the evil, material world.

Humans are born into the world as material beings, and their bodies are entirely evil. Yet a divine spark also resides in some humans. This divine spark is like a bit of the Pleroma that has broken off and become trapped in the material world. For Gnostics, salvation means liberating this divine spark from the body, which cannot be saved.

People who have this divine spark are called *pneumatics* or *spiritual ones*. Even for them, return to the Pleroma is not automatic. In most versions of Gnosticism, this return depends upon severely disciplining the body. It also depends upon receiving secret, spiritual knowledge—a form of divine revelation called *gnosis*.

This is where Christ comes into the picture. Christ is a pure spirit, one of the higher members of the Pleroma. His job was to bring the secret knowledge (gnosis) to the pneumatics on earth. To do this, Christ needed some way of interacting with human beings.

How could he do that? At this point, Gnostics gave different answers. For some (*Docetists*) Christ projected the appearance or phantom of a human body without ever becoming truly material. For others (*Cerinthians*) he came upon a human being named Jesus, taking temporary possession of his body but then leaving before Jesus was crucified. Many Gnostics mixed these theories together, speaking of Jesus as a phantom at one moment but a dying man in the next.

According to both these views, Jesus is not the Christ. On the one hand, Christ is the heavenly spirit who came down from the Pleroma to bring gnosis to human pneumatics. On the other hand, Jesus is the human being, or perhaps the human appearance, who was used by the Christ spirit but who is separate from him. All Gnostics denied that Christ could possibly have become a human being with a human body.

Christ did not deliver the gnosis publicly, but secretly to only a select few of his followers. Even they were not the ones you might think of. Rather, the recipients of gnosis were more obscure disciples like Philip, Mary Magdalene, or even Judas. They in turn passed the gnosis along through word of mouth. The gnosis was always kept secret from outsiders.

Eventually this supposed gnosis, or some of it, was written down. Documents discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt reproduce Gnostic teachings. It turns out that much of the gnosis was literally gibberish. But the Nag Hammadi documents have confirmed the accuracy of the early church fathers who wrote about Gnosticism—especially the accuracy of Irenaeus.

Gnosticism had no place for a resurrection of the body, neither of Jesus nor of anyone else. Gnostics held false views about God, the world, the nature of reality, the sinfulness of the body, the person and work of Christ, and the nature of salvation. Gnosticism contradicted biblical teaching at almost every point.

As an early heresy, Gnosticism is really a movement of the Second Century. Some of its ideas were percolating in an incipient form by around AD 60, but the first biblical writer to confront anything like a fully-developed Gnosticism was John. The chief opponent of Gnosticism was Irenaeus, who was a spiritual grandson of John.

Still, the New Testament contains initial forays against the gnostic error. Paul confronts proto-gnostic ideas in his Epistle to the Colossians. John argued against key Gnostic concepts in his first two epistles. Even during the New Testament era, Gnosticism was spurring Christian thinkers to revisit and strengthen a biblical doctrine of God and Christ.

Christians have learned to be wary of gnostic ideas, but gnostic sensibilities still swirl in the air. Gnostic influence is felt wherever the material and this-worldly is denigrated as worthless and unimportant. Many forms of asceticism have a bit of Gnosticism lurking in the background. The suspicion with which some Christians view bodily pleasures is partly a holdover from Gnosticism. Even though Gnostic thought has been refuted, we do well to keep our guard up against it.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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