

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Chapter 7

Heresies: Gnosticism

There is something tantalizing about “secret” knowledge.

Our now thirty-year-old son Will was about 13 when the book, *The Bible Code* first came out. He quickly devoured it. He came to me as an inquisitive young teenager and asked me, “Dad, what do you think about this book?”

The book was written by a journalist who claimed to have found secret hidden messages in the Hebrew Old Testament. These messages were supposedly prophetic of future events. The way the book did it was by taking all the Hebrew letters in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and putting them in succession (removing the spaces between the words). Then a computer would take every *nth* letter to see if there were any secret words revealed.

The theory was that God gave Moses those exact letters with no spaces between them, so the code was secret knowledge from God.

I told Will to always be suspicious of such “secrets.” God is in the revealing business, not generally in the secret business! Further, this is something that just statistically happens with anything. We can do the same with the English Bibles. Consider Genesis 31:28 in the King James Version:

And hast not suffered me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Thou hast now done foolishly in so doing.

We can take a section of that verse starting with “daughters,” and use the Drosnin Bible code technique to get:

daughtersthouhastnowdonefoolishlyinsodoing

Now start with the “r” in daughters and use every fourth letter. You get: “R-O-S-W-E-L-L.” Ahhh...

Now Drosnin doesn’t end there. He then takes the number used and sets up a matrix by rearranging the letters into what looks like a modern “Find-a-word” puzzle. After this he looks for vertical insights to the message. Here we do it with our KJV passage:

S A N D M Y D A U G H T E R S T H O U H
M Y D A U G H T E R S T H O U H A S T N
U G H T E R S T H O U H A S T N O W D O
E R S T H O U H A S T N O W D O N E F O
H O U H A S T N O W D O N E F O O L I S
A S T N O W D O N E F O O L I S H L Y I
O W D O N E F O O L I S H L Y I N S O D
N E F O O L I S H L Y I N S O D O I N G
O L I S H L Y I N S O D O I N G I T I S
H L Y I N S O D O I N G I T I S I N T H

Now the task of the analyst is to find the word vertically and look for other key words around it. We can do it below, marking the four-letter box in a dashed line around “ROSWELL” only to discover the next key words to the right!

S A N D M Y D A U G H T E R S T H O U H
M Y D A U G H T E R S T H O U H A S T N
U G H T E R S T H O U H A S T N O W D O
E R S T H O U H A S T N O W D O N E F O
H O U H A S T N O W D O N E F O O L I S
A S T N O W D O N E F O O L I S H L Y I
O W D O N E F O O L I S H L Y I N S O D
N E F O O L I S H L Y I N S O D O I N G
O L I S H L Y I N S O D O I N G I T I S
H L Y I N S O D O I N G I T I S I N T H

In truth, with thanks to Dave Thomas for the above example, “hidden messages can be found anywhere, provided the seeker is willing and able to harvest the immense field of possibilities.”¹

¹ Thomas, Dave, “Hidden Messages and the Bible Code,” *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 21.6, Nov./Dec. 1997. He goes on to find “Hitler” and “Nazi” in *War and Peace*, along with a lot of other combinations.

Secrets tickle something within humans. Something in me *wants* to believe in such mysteries, even when my mind knows better.

What is it that makes secret knowledge so alluring? Whatever it is, it has been around for a long time! One of the earliest Christian heresies involved the idea of “secret knowledge.” Today we call this heresy “Gnosticism.”

WHAT WAS GNOSTICISM?

“Gnosticism” is a label scholars attach to a broad area of heresy in the early church. It comes from a Greek word γνωστικός (*gnostikos*) that means “capable of attaining knowledge.” At its core, Gnosticism taught that there was secret knowledge (γνῶσις - *gnosis*²) held by a select few, which was not available or known to the church at large. The Gnostics were, literally, those “in the know.” They claimed to be the ones with true insight for their day, the true knowledge that explained the cosmos, God and man. This true insight was distinct from the apostolic faith taught by the ordinary Church to the ordinary person.

At its root, Gnosticism was dualistic. People were not whole in what we would call body, mind, soul, etc. Instead, people were seen as a composite of two distinct wholes, that of the body or flesh, and that of the soul or spirit. This meant that people were made up of a physical feature that contained within it a spiritual/soulful feature that was often seen to be purer and even entrapped in the physical. This radical dualism found roots in teachings from Plato as well as other religious thought.

Gnosticism took a number of different forms, depending on whose secret insights one might ascribe as truth.³ But, most of the teachings taught similar basic core ideas:

² In Greek, there are two different words for knowledge. This word, (γνῶσις - *gnosis*) means an acquaintance, as when two people have met each other. The other word, (οἶδα - *oida*) meant what we would call propositional knowledge, as in Acts 24:22, “But Felix, having a rather accurate *knowledge* of the Way, put them off, saying, ‘When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.’” Gnostics were those capable of attaining, and in fact actually attaining acquaintance, with a previously unknown god. In fact, certain Gnostics would use Paul’s sermon about the unknown god to the Athenians (Acts 17:23) as a text supporting their special knowledge.

³ There are a number of Gnostics’ writings available today. These writings include those discovered across the river from Nag Hammadi, Egypt, as well as numerous other scraps and fragments. Frequently, some set of these writings gets published as “hidden” or “lost” books of the Bible when, in reality, they never had anything to do with Orthodox Christianity. One might read, for example, *The Secret Book According to John*, but the book was never written by John, and the secrets have nothing to do with our Biblical truth! This book gives a creation account

- There is more than one “god.”
- Our spirits are eternal and good while the earth and our physical bodies are temporal and evil (or at least, lesser in goodness than our spirits).
- Our need in life is to free ourselves from the physical and get our spirits through the heavens back home where they belong. Salvation is seen as the liberation of the spirit and its return through the heavens.
- Jesus was the messenger to teach the spirit’s liberation and the keys to return.
- As a holy messenger, Christ was not flesh and blood himself. Some taught he was an apparition. Others taught that Christ was a spirit that descended upon the man Jesus at or near his baptism, removing himself in liberation before the man Jesus was crucified.⁴

The first Christian reference to Gnosticism is found in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. As we read it in the English Standard Version, 1 Timothy 6:20-21 says,

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” (*gnosis* - γνῶσις) for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.

Scholars have more recently determined that much of Gnosticism is found emanating from Jewish roots as well as Greek roots. The Dead Sea Scrolls illustrate a number of ideas that can be seen as roots of gnostic thought. The ideas of a “God of Knowledge” warring against a “God of Ignorance,” present terms and concepts that can be seen to evolve into some of the dualism prominent in later Gnostic heresies.⁵

Different “schools” of Gnosticism bore the names of their originators or major teachers. Three Gnostic schools are worth looking at in a bit more detail. These schools followed their progenitors: Cerinthus, Marcion (some do not consider Marcion in the group of pure gnostics), and Valentinus.

that allegedly predates the Genesis account. Genesis is then retold in this book. The differences are compelling. In *The Secret Book According to John*, the creator of the material world from Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth”) is not the true god, but is actually Satan himself whose true name is given as “Ialdabaoth” and “Saklas” (BJn 10:19f, 11:15f). This mystic truth was claimed to have been told by Jesus after his resurrection when he was supposedly hanging around earth for another 18 months teaching the secret truth!

⁴ *The Story of Christian Theology*, Roger Olson (IVP 1999), p. 37.

⁵ “Gnosticism,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (Doubleday 1992), Vol. 2, at 1036.

We will look at Gnosticism from multiple sources, with emphasis on the writings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-202). However, we also gather good insights from the writings of a number of church fathers including Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165), Tertullian (c.150-c.225), Hippolytus of Rome (c.170-c.235), Clement of Alexandria (c.140-c.211); Origen (c.184-c.253), and Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403).

Irenaeus was born in Polycarp's bishopric of Smyrna⁶ around 130AD (25 years or so before Polycarp's death). Polycarp mentored Irenaeus when Irenaeus was a young man. Thus Irenaeus learned the apostolic doctrine Polycarp had received from the apostle John and he probably had access to Polycarp's collected works of Paul and others.

Around 150 or so, Irenaeus moved to Lugdunum (today this town is Lyon, France) and became a Christian leader at the church there. In Roman parlance, Lyon was a part of Southern Gaul, an area that was still inhabited by "barbarians" (people who by definition spoke neither Latin or Greek).

Later in the second century, Irenaeus went to Rome to aid in the fight against heresies coming out of Rome and into Gaul.⁷ While in Rome, Irenaeus focused on the Gnosticism taking hold there. Upon his return to Gaul, Irenaeus found the Gnostic heresy growing in his own church's community. Subsequently, Irenaeus became Bishop at Lyon and wrote up his expose and refutation of Gnostic heresy, five books that set out the heretical teachings as well as the Christian response. Those books are still available for study today.

Irenaeus wrote against the teachings of Valentinus around 180AD. His five books took a number of years to complete,⁸ but they offer not only insight into the Valentinian school of Gnosticism, but also into the mindset of the late second century church. Irenaeus entitled his work: *Expose and Overthrow [or*

⁶ For information on Polycarp, see lesson 7 on his martyrdom.

⁷ While in Rome, Irenaeus missed a major persecution and purging of Christians in Gaul where hundreds, and maybe thousands, were martyred. Irenaeus would ultimately be martyred in Lyon in 202.

⁸ We do not know the exact years Irenaeus wrote. We can tell from reading that the composition took a number of years spanning from before 180 through perhaps as late as 189. See, Dominic Unger's Introduction at pages 3-4, Volume 55 of the Ancient Christian Writers Series, published by Newman, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against the Heresies Book 1*.

“*Refutation*”] of *What is Falsely Called Knowledge*.⁹ The work had a shorter title that was simply, *Against the Heresies*.

Most scholars agree that Irenaeus was the first great post-apostolic theologian of the church. As he wrote against the heresies of Valentinus, he also defined the real orthodoxy of the church. He wrote on the Trinity, on Creation, on the theology of salvation and the atoning work of Christ as well as the church and the Christian resurrection. Irenaeus’s writings are distinct from those we have already covered in that he is not merely recording historical events (like *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*), nor is he writing letters of encouragement to the church (like the letters of Ignatius, Clement, or Polycarp). He is not writing an instruction manual (like *The Didache*). He writes fairly clear theology setting out the Christian belief system in response to that of the Gnostics who *claimed* to be “Christian,” but in fact were heretics.¹⁰

Irenaeus had a two-fold authority he used in his writings: scripture and apostolic tradition. While there was not yet a “Bible” put together for the church’s use, most of what we consider the New Testament was well attested and well known by Irenaeus. Irenaeus references or quotes every book in our New Testament except Philemon and 3 John. His failure to reference those works does not mean he didn’t know them or consider them inspired. They are both very small and had nothing in them that he saw of import in his writing. Reading Irenaeus shows that he considered these New Testament writings as inspired and divine as the Old Testament (3.24:1).¹¹ Irenaeus believed in the inerrancy of these New Testament writings, noting that they were “perfect,” and the “mainstay and pillar of our faith” (2.28:2 and 3.1:1, 5:1, 14:2-4).¹²

Part and parcel of Irenaeus’s authority was apostolic tradition. It was this tradition that validated the scriptures. In other words, the tradition proceeded from the same Spirit that produced the scriptures. Because this Spirit was behind the

⁹ The section of the title, “of what is falsely called knowledge” is a word for word quotation from Paul’s first letter to Timothy (6:20). Paul told Timothy to “guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas *of what is falsely called knowledge*.” Irenaeus uses these words in his title setting out the propriety of his work as called for by apostolic command.

¹⁰ A word here about “heretics” and “heresy.” We get our word from the Latin *haereo*. It means, “to be in doubt.” Heresy is doctrine contrary to orthodoxy. A heretic is one who has the beliefs that are contrary to orthodoxy.

¹¹ Our references are to his work, *Against the Heresies*. The book number (1-5) is given first, then the chapter, a colon and the verse. The translation used for quoting is from Unger.

¹² Irenaeus even argued that punctuation would matter in the scriptures (2.10:1).

apostolic teaching, that teaching was right, whether written (scriptures) or oral (tradition). The accurate oral tradition depended upon a clear link of bishops from the apostles to his present time (3.2:2, 3.3:1ff). That tradition was to be consistent in all churches (1.9:4; 1.10:1-2; 3.1:1; 3.4:1-2; 3.24.1). Irenaeus also believed the Roman church had the ultimate authority over the tradition (3.3:2).

Irenaeus recognized he was not a great writer.

From us who live among the Celts and are accustomed to translating practically everything into a barbarous tongue, you cannot expect rhetorical art...or the craft of writing...or elegant style and persuasiveness (1 Preface: 3).

But, Irenaeus's humility undercut his own skill. He wrote with good, biting irony. He also showed great flourish at times. Consider, for example, what Irenaeus says about truth:

Error, in fact, does not show its true self, lest on being stripped naked it should be detected. Instead, it craftily decks itself out in an attractive dress, and thus, by an outward false appearance, presents itself to the more ignorant, truer than Truth itself" (1 Preface: 2).

Irenaeus started his Gnostic refutation by stripping the actual Gnostic doctrine to its core teachings to show its absurdity and lack of any foundation. Irenaeus then showed the illogic of believing the Gnostic school had any link to the apostles or Jesus' teaching. Irenaeus also used a great deal of scripture to show the fallacies of Gnostic doctrine.

His approach is equally useful today when confronted with strange doctrine:

- (1) What is the doctrine? Flesh it out!
- (2) What is the basis or authority for the doctrine?
- (3) What does scripture say on the issue?

As noted before, Irenaeus gives us information on multiple schools of Gnostic teaching. We focus on three schools using not only Irenaeus, but other sources as well as we examine each.

CERINTHUS

One of the earlier known Gnostics was Cerinthus. Although we are uncertain about his origin or date of birth, he received training from Egypt and lived and taught in the later days of the Apostle John in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). We

do not have any of his writings today, but know about him through the writings of others, notably Irenaeus and Eusebius.

Cerinthus taught a heresy that blended aspects of Gnosticism with his perception of the gospel. For example, Cerinthus believed in one Supreme God, but taught that he was unknown until the time of Jesus Christ. The world and the law (Old Testament) were made and given by lesser angels who themselves did not know or understand the Supreme God. Jesus was born, not miraculously of the Virgin Mary, but through common relations between Mary and Joseph. Jesus was a holy man, but not in any way divine. That status, however, changed with his baptism. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit, or what some would call the “Christ,” was sent by the Supreme God in the shape of a dove and dwelt within Jesus the man. This indwelling Christ taught Jesus about the Supreme God in ways and with secrets not known by even the angels of creation. When the passion came, Christ bailed out from Jesus leaving Jesus alone to suffer (hence the cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”), but Cerinthus assured his students that while Jesus the man died and was buried, he either was resurrected or will be resurrected with all men on the coming resurrection day.¹³

This major deviation from the work of God in Christ brought about strong reaction within the church. Some scholars believe that John wrote his gospel, at least in part, to dispel any suspicion of truth about this story. Irenaeus would record later a story from Polycarp, John’s disciple. Irenaeus wrote,

But Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by Apostles in Asia, appointed Bishop...whom I saw in my early youth, for he lived a very long time, and, when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffered martyrdom [see last week’s lesson!], departed this life. There are those that heard from him [Polycarp] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within’ (Against Heresies, 3.4).

MARCION

Marcion was born in Sinope, Asia Minor somewhere toward the end of the first or beginning of the second century. A wealthy ship owner and merchant, he moved to Rome around 135 A.D. Some early authorities indicate that Marcion’s home

¹³ These teachings come from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, 26:1).

church (where his father was Bishop!) had already expelled him for heresy or moral misdeeds. Arriving in Rome, Marcion became a major player in the Roman church (and donating a large sum of money.) The Roman church eventually returned the money and also expelled Marcion for his heretical teachings and ideas.

Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna whom we studied earlier, reportedly had run into Marcion in Asia Minor.¹⁴ As Irenaeus reports the account, Marcion asked Polycarp, “Do you recognize me?” Polycarp responded, “I recognize you for the firstborn of Satan!”¹⁵ What would cause such a blunt response from as devout and caring a man as Polycarp? The fact that Marcion was teaching doctrine that denied the work of God and Jesus, deceiving multitudes from the truth.

Marcion taught that the church wrongly used and supported the Old Testament. For Marcion, the God of the Old Testament was clearly different than the God of the New Testament and Jesus. Using Luke 5:36-38 (the parable of the wineskins) and Luke 6:43 (“no good tree bears bad fruit nor does a bad tree bear good fruit”), Marcion argued that Jesus’ message was totally new and apart from Judaism and the Jewish scriptures. Marcion wrote a listing of proofs that the Old Testament God was different from that of the New Testament.¹⁶ For example, The God of Genesis could not find Adam and Eve, having to call out, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9), whereas Jesus knew even the thoughts of man (Luke 5:22). A similar “proof” for Marcion was the God of the Old Testament saying, “an eye for an eye” (Ex. 21:24) where Jesus said, “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also” (Lk 6:29).

Marcion considered the God of the Old Testament as a vengeful and hateful God contrasted to the loving God of the New Testament. Similarly, the Old Testament God was centered on legal-minded justice while the New Testament God and father of Jesus was merciful. The Old Testament God worked through his faulty creation; the New Testament God came into that creation to save mankind.

Marcion put together his own set of acceptable scriptures. Marcion’s “Bible” or “canon” consisted of Luke edited to his liking, and ten of Paul’s letters again edited and explained by the peculiarities of Marcion’s beliefs in introductions to the books. Marcion sought to distance the true teachings of Paul and Luke (and thereby of Jesus) from that of the other apostles. Marcion believed that Paul,

¹⁴ Some scholars believe this encounter came in Rome rather than Asia Minor.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, 3:4

¹⁶ This publication was called, *Antithesis*, and is lost. What we know of it today comes mainly from Tertullian’s writings against Marcion from about 200 A.D.

Jesus, and Luke had supported his belief that the Old Testament God was a vengeful, hateful, harsh, and judgmental God distinct from the God of the New Testament. Similarly, Judaism was a corrupt and wicked faith that promised an earthly Messiah to set up an earthly kingdom. That anticipated event was pre-empted by the loving God of the New Testament who sent Jesus (not a man, but an apparition!) to destroy the Old Testament and Judaism by revealing it for what it was.

So when Marcion put together his scriptures, he used the gospel of Luke, and none of the other three. Even the gospel of Luke required revisions, however. So, Marcion left off the first two chapters that linked Jesus to the Old Testament by birth and teaching. Similarly, Marcion left out the temptation narrative in Luke 4:1-3 because Jesus quotes Deuteronomy three times in response to Satan's temptations. Luke 4:16-30 where Jesus claims to fulfill the Old Testament was also booted from Marcion's Bible. Paul's writings also suffered editing from the hand of Marcion. Much of Romans 9-11 was removed, as were the critical verses from Romans 3:21-4:25. In Galatians, Paul's usage of Abraham as an example of faith was excised.

Marcion taught an ethic that was very impressive. No doubt many converts were won over to his system simply by his lifestyle. Again, there are impressive lifestyle examples found in heresies of orthodoxy today, but that doesn't change the issues of truth in belief and understanding. Marcion was celibate and required the same of his followers. He taught people that morality was important and urged people to live, denying the pleasures of this world and dedicating themselves to the next world.

The effect of Marcion on the church was significant. He spread his heresy far and wide (Tertullian would say he planted churches the way wasps do nests!). Marcionism grew so much that the movement lasted several hundred years. Not a small feat when you consider that it taught celibacy, so growth only occurred through conversion!

To defeat this heresy, the church had to grow in several areas. The church was forced to address issues of canon, or scriptural authority. What writings were authoritative? Only Paul? The church and orthodoxy set forward once and for all that the Spirit inspired not only Paul, but also all the apostles. So, the proper scriptures were not merely Paul's epistles, but also the writings of Matthew, John, Peter, James, and Jude, as well as those affiliated with apostles (Mark with Peter, Luke with Paul and others). The church also addressed the role of Judaism and the Old Testament, confirming its authority and relationship to Jesus as Messiah.

VALENTINUS

Irenaeus begins his explanation of the Gnostic beliefs of Valentinus with a chapter he titled: “The Valentinians’ Absurd Explanation of the Origin of the Aeons [gods].”¹⁷ In its essence, this Gnostic branch taught that there were 30 Aeons, or divine beings of note. Among the first generation of Aeons was the “First-Father” who begat the others with the help of another first generation Aeon named “Silence.” They gave birth to “Mind” and “Truth.” “Mind” gave birth to “Word” and “Life” who conjugally produced “Man,” “Church,” and ten other lesser Aeons with quite impressive names! (“Profound,” “Mingling,” “Ageless,” “Union,” “Self-producing,” “Pleasure,” “Immobile,” “Blending,” “Only-begotten,” and “Happiness.”) Not to be outdone, “Man” and “Church” emitted 12 Aeons of their own: “Advocate,” “Faith,” “Paternal,” “Hope,” “Maternal,” “Love,” “Praise,” “Understanding,” “Ecclesiastic,” “Blessedness,” “Desired,” and “Wisdom.” A grand total of 30 Aeons!

Now, we get a bit of the special knowledge that made the Gnostics “super Christians in the know!” These are the 30 Aeons Jesus hinted to in his parables of the laborers given in Matthew 20:1-7! Remember that parable? “The *kingdom of heaven* [Gnostics read this as the heavens and the Aeons dwelling there] is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.” He sent out some at the first hour, others at the “third hour.” Still more were sent at the “sixth,” “ninth,” and “eleventh” hours.

How does this relate? Well, the Gnostics would tell you that it is a secret code whose meaning they understood. This was part of their special “knowledge.” If you add up the hours Jesus enumerated, then you get the first (1) plus third (3), plus sixth (6) plus ninth (9) plus eleventh (11), and $1 + 3 + 6 + 9 + 11 = 30!$ Thirty Aeons in the Kingdom of Heaven! Because these Aeons exist in silence, unknown but by the privileged few, Jesus had no ministry, but was silent for his first 30 years on earth. This was an homage Jesus paid as well as a subtle sign for the knowing few, that there were 30 Aeons silent in the heavens.

Absurd? Absolutely, if one follows scripture. Yet, the deviations are not so hard to believe if we consider them apart from our 2000 years of orthodoxy. The Mormons teach that the God of the Bible has produced Jesus as offspring through conjugation with a “Heavenly Mother.” In fact, they believe all humans are the

¹⁷ “Aeon” is an unusual word that was common in Gnostic writings. It is unclear where the word came from, although there are a number of theories. The Gnostics used the word to designate their deities or divine beings (lower case “gods”). The Old and New Testaments use the term “Aeon” frequently, but it never was in a personified sense except in Ephesians 2:2 where it is used for demons.

offspring of this heavenly union and exist prior to coming to live in earthly bodies. The time here on earth is seen as a gaining of experience and a probation of sorts. Heavenly rewards and destinies depend on how one navigates and lives this earthly life.

The Mormons teach that much of this information is missing from the Bible because it has come in as secret knowledge to certain prophets of the church. Other aspects of Christian scripture supposedly hint at these teachings, but the meanings are obscure without the interpretation given through Mormon writings.

While there are certainly distinctions between Valentinus and Mormonism (notably the Gnostic view of the material world as evil), the similarities cannot be missed. The similarities compel a response that starts with a bedrock foundation of scripture. Is it no wonder that Irenaeus manages to quote or reference 90% of the Bible's books in dealing with this heresy!

But, Irenaeus does not rely on scripture alone to answer the premises of Valentinus. He uses logic as well. And, his logic comes with a bite! Consider this passage where Irenaeus argues against the panoply of 30 gods with their "names:"

“Woe, woe! Alas, alas! Indeed such...a concoction of names, and such boldness to add the names [to his belief system] without blushing.... [He has given the names to his gods] Nothing, therefore, prohibits anyone else from proposing names for the same system as follows: ... There exists a power, which I call a Squash; with this Squash coexists a Power to which I give the name Utter-Emptiness. Now this Squash and Utter-Emptiness brought forth a fruit...which we call Cucumber. With this Cucumber there coexists a Power to which I give the name Pumpkin...”

Simply by renaming the Aeons/gods of Valentinus, Irenaeus is able to show that this supposedly deep secret knowledge is actually silly.

Valentinus, like most of the Gnostics, believed that the human problem calling for salvation was not sin but ignorance, and that the means of attaining salvation was therefore not the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but the secret "knowledge" possessed by the Gnostics themselves.

His "gospel" was a-historical, outside time and space, in the realm of cosmic speculation and esoteric "gnosis." Irenaeus contrasted this teaching with the apostolic gospel which reported a historical flesh-and-blood Savior who lived during the reign of specific emperors and lesser kings and governors, who died on

a Roman cross and rose from a specific tomb on a certain calendar day.

CONCLUSION

So, why does this history matter? Many reasons. First, while Gnosticism itself is not prevalent in the world today, many of the elements that brought it about are easily found: disdain for the Old Testament, an improper appreciation of the Old Testament and how it relates to the New Testament, unusual explanations of Scriptures that breed unusual theology, the idea that some people possess certain keys of understanding that stand them and their teaching apart from orthodoxy and core Christian doctrine, the separation of the human into body and soul, etc.

We worship the one God. He is the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. He came to earth in Jesus Christ, born of a virgin. Jesus suffered and died not because the law was wrong, but to fulfill the law. In him, we have forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.”* (1 Tim 6:20-21).

Truth matters. Wolves parade in sheep’s clothing for a reason. Wolves want to devour and wreak havoc without their true nature being discerned. The road to heresy doesn’t always involve a U-turn. A slight deviation in the road traveled can easily lead to a place far from truth. (think of driving as we read Paul referencing a “swerve” from the faith!) We need to be diligent in our study and live in God’s truth, and be wary of goofy interpretations of scripture that seem to stand apart from historic orthodoxy and straightforward interpretations.

2. The apostles *“did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (2 Pet 1:16).

We read Scripture as CAPITAL S – Scripture. It is not some religious wanderings of the devout minds of the ancients. It is an accounting of what happened when Jesus Christ walked on earth – died, was buried, and rose again. It is real history. That is why it transforms, in this life and afterwards!

3. *“Your BODY is the temple of the Holy Spirit.”* (1 Cor 6:19).

Jesus did not come to set us free *from* our bodies. He came to save us – period! He saves us as real people, body, minds, hearts, souls. We do not divide ourselves into “parts” beyond recognizing that God is at work restoring our minds, even while our bodies waste away. But this means our redemption is not as a soul for eternity, but as real people, body and soul, in God’s eternity. God expects us to be concerned about our whole lives, not simply what we feel and think!

HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-2:4. This week we add 1 John 2:5-6. We provide all verses below for your help!

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. **3** And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. **4**Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, **5** but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: **6** whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.