

WHO WERE THE GNOSTICS?

Richard Smoley

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In this article, Richard Smoley, one of the world's most distinguished authorities on the mystical and esoteric teachings of Western civilization, introduces us to the history and roots of Gnosticism.



Until fairly recently, if you were to ask about the origins of Christianity, you would hear much the same story no matter whom you asked. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, came down from heaven. He taught the apostles the true faith and commissioned them to preach the Gospel to all nations. He also founded a church and appointed the apostles as its leaders. Sometime in the second century A.D., this organization started to call itself the Catholic Church, from the Greek *katholikos*, or “universal.” All Christian churches today are, in one way or another, its offspring.

Human nature being what it is, however, things did not always proceed so smoothly. Groups of people sprang up who introduced their own distortions into Christ's doctrine. Some said that Christians still had to observe the Jewish Law. Others said that Christ wasn't really divine. Still others said he wasn't really human.

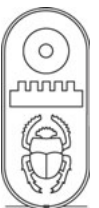
Throughout the centuries, the church, aided by the power of the Holy Spirit, managed to face down these heretics, as they came to be called (from the Greek *hairesis*, or “sect”). To this day, the Christian church has preserved Christ's teaching in its pure form, thanks to the countless Church

Fathers and theologians who fended off the assaults of error.

As I say, this was the standard picture of Christian history until comparatively recently (although, of course, certain details had to be adjusted depending on which denomination was telling the story). And this is the picture in which many sincere Christians still believe. Unfortunately, as modern scholarship has discovered, it's not entirely accurate.

If you read the Gospels carefully, you will notice that Christ does not talk much about theology. He has a lot to say about ethics, about loving your neighbor, and about going to God with inner sincerity. He argues often and heatedly with scribes and Pharisees about sacrificing the spirit of the Law to the letter. But he does not argue with them about the nature of God, nor does he even say who or what he himself is. His disciples keep asking him, but he never gives them a clear answer. If you were to summarize Christ's teaching as found in the Gospels, you might turn to a verse from the prophet Micah: “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Mic. 6:8). Christ says much the same thing in the episode of the Two Great Commandments (Matt. 22:35–40; Mark 12:28–31). There's not much theology in that.

This was the heart of Christ's teaching, and he no doubt had good reasons for stressing the things he stressed. But once Christ himself was no longer on the scene, his disciples began to teach his message in their own ways, and these ways soon began





Roman Emperor Constantine, who first legalized Christianity and then began to turn it into the state religion of the Roman Empire. This statue is in York, England, which was an important Roman city called Eboracum during the time of Constantine.

to diverge. Some stayed close to the Jewish religion; others moved away from it. You can see this in the New Testament, where Paul quarrels with the church leaders over whether Gentile converts need to follow the Mosaic Law. (The dispute is described both in Acts and in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Acts makes the whole affair sound considerably more peaceful and dignified than Paul does: Acts 15:1–31; Gal. 2:1–16.) There were other differences as well. Some emphasized a more external faith; others saw Christ's teaching in a more mystical light.

By the second century A.D., if you were to take a look at the Christian community in the Roman Empire, you would undoubtedly find a number of different, often conflicting, groups who understood the master's teaching in various ways. Some would see Jesus as a great spiritual master and nothing more. Some would resemble early versions of the Catholic or Orthodox churches today, with bishops and sacraments; others would probably look more like philosophical study groups or mystical schools. And although it would be far from true to say that these different bodies lived in perfect harmony, none of them had any special privileges, and so they all had to coexist. This picture would change radically only in

the fourth century A.D., when the emperor Constantine first legalized Christianity and then began to turn it into the state religion of the Roman Empire. At this point the proto-Catholic Church—which was previously only one strain of the Christian tradition—consolidated its power by suppressing its Christian as well as its pagan rivals.

Christian history is, as a result, a sad and often heartbreaking story, where great Church Fathers (some of them later canonized as saints) heaped anathemas upon alleged heretics over points of doctrine that Christ and his disciples would in all likelihood neither have cared about nor even understood. At the same time the essential teaching of Christ—to “love thy neighbor as thyself”—was often sacrificed to this doctrinal squabbling, turning the church itself into a merciless persecutor.

The ancient Gnostics were one of those lost strains of Christianity. Who were the Gnostics, and what were they like? This isn't always easy to figure out, because much of the material we have about them comes from Church Fathers who were writing anti-Gnostic polemics. We are thus somewhat in the position of a future historian who would have to piece together a Democratic Party platform using only Republican campaign commercials as sources (or vice versa).

Fortunately, the situation has improved of late, thanks to the discovery of Gnostic texts at various archaeological sites in the Middle East over the last century. The most celebrated of these took place at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. Two peasants, digging for fertilizer, unearthed a cache of scriptures, many of them previously unknown, that cast an entirely new light on Gnostic teachings. This discovery is so important that it in itself is one of the main reasons for the resurgent interest in Gnosticism. The Nag Hammadi texts were written by different authors at different times and represent the views of a number of sects

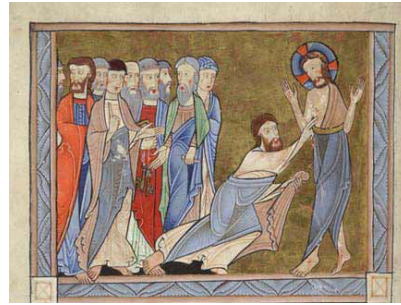
and teachers. But they still offer an extremely valuable window onto a tradition that had previously been known mainly through the words of its enemies.

The First Gospel?

Perhaps the most interesting of the Nag Hammadi scriptures is an enigmatic work called *The Gospel of Thomas*. It is extremely short—in one standard edition, it fills only twelve pages—but it has received more attention than any of the other Gnostic scriptures.¹ This is partly because, although it never found a place in the New Testament, it may be older than the Gospels that did.

The age of *Thomas* is not easy to determine. Many scholars have placed it in the mid-second century A.D., on the grounds that it is a supposedly Gnostic document. But this begs the question, because it assumes that Gnosticism did not arise before the second century.² If *Thomas* is older than that, it would force scholars to push the origins of Gnosticism back to the first century. And there is reason to believe that this Gospel does date from earlier than the second century.

The most compelling argument is the form this Gospel takes. It tells no story and has no narrative beginning or ending. It is simply a collection of sayings, some of them parables, some of them proverbs, “that the living Jesus spoke,” as we read in the opening verse. Remarkably, this makes the *Gospel of Thomas* resemble early sayings collections whose existence had long been postulated by New Testament scholars based on similarities and differences among the canonical Gospels. The most famous of these hypothetical sayings collections is called Q (from the German *Quelle*, or “source”). No text of this document has been discovered yet, and one may never be. Scholars can only infer what Q was like from similarities and differences between Matthew and Luke, both of whom evidently made use of it.

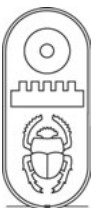


Doubting Thomas, from a page of the York Psalter, produced in the north of England, ca. 1170.

The Gospel of Thomas is not Q. But it bears a striking resemblance to Q in its literary form, which, as a bare collection of sayings, is more primitive than the ordered narratives of the four New Testament Gospels. Scholars generally assume that the simpler a text is, the older it's likely to be, since later versions tend to acquire embellishments and additions that were not in the first versions. To take one example, there is an apocryphal Gospel called the *Protevangelion of James*, which is about Christ's birth and infancy. (It is, by the way, the origin of the idea of Mary's Immaculate Conception.) It has a more elaborate nativity than either Matthew or Luke, and other details indicate that it's based on them. Precisely for this reason, it cannot be older than they are; it's generally dated to around 150 A.D.³

Thomas is not like these apocryphal works. It is not based on the canonical Gospels, it is in a more primitive form than they are, and besides, it takes exactly the form that scholars had long supposed the earliest texts about Jesus had. For this reason, some New Testament scholars go so far as to call it the “fifth Gospel.” It could have been written as early as 50 A.D. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are usually dated to between 70 and 100 A.D.

If so, this is rather troubling to those who believe that Jesus taught a version of Christianity like those of the mainstream



denominations, whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. The *Gospel of Thomas* does not present Jesus as the incarnate Son of God who takes away the sins of the world, or as the second person of the Trinity. In fact, Jesus makes no special claim to divinity or divine authority. At one point, he asks his disciples what he is like. Peter tells him he is like a righteous angel. Matthew says he is like a wise philosopher. Thomas says, “Teacher, my mouth utterly will not let me say what you resemble.”⁴

Jesus chides him, saying, “I am not your teacher. You have become intoxicated from the bubbling wellspring that I have poured out.” So, far from asserting his own divinity, Jesus even balks at being honored with the comparatively humble title of “teacher.” Moreover, *Thomas* never speaks of Jesus as “Christ”—the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Messiah*, or “anointed one.” These facts also point toward an early date for this Gospel, since under most circumstances, the image of charismatic figures grows in status and prestige as their living memory fades. Eventually they may attain divine or semidivine status. (In our own time, this has happened with Mao Zedong in China and even with Elvis Presley in the United States.) The doctrine of Jesus’s divinity was not formulated until the Council of Nicaea, convened by the emperor Constantine in 325.

Just as important as these considerations is the kind of teaching that the Jesus of *Thomas* presents. Many of Jesus’s sayings in *Thomas* resemble those in the New Testament Gospels. Those that don’t are often extremely cryptic: “Be passers-by” (*Thomas*, 42). “I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am watching until it blazes” (10). “When you see one not born of woman, fall upon your faces and prostrate yourself before that one: it is that one who is your father” (15). Most striking, however, is the declaration made at the very beginning

of the Gospel: “Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings will not taste death” (1).

It is this characteristic of *Thomas* that has led scholars to regard it as Gnostic. Here, in essence, is the central difference between Gnosticism and conventional Christianity. “Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings will not taste death.” What is most important in *Thomas* is not sin, repentance, and redemption, but an enigmatic mystical illumination that is somehow encoded in these verses. Jesus’s sayings in *Thomas* are like koans, those unanswerable riddles given by Zen masters to their pupils as a way of cutting through the ordinary mind. They are meant not to convey information but to awaken. The goal of Gnosticism is not salvation, but enlightenment.

This was, no doubt, the main reason conventional Christianity repudiated Gnosticism, for illumination is too hard, too uncertain of attainment, to form the basis for a popular religion. It is much easier to see things in light of sin and atonement or appeasing the wrath of an angry God, particularly in pagan antiquity, which adopted exactly this attitude toward its own deities.

What of Thomas the man? We do not know much about him. His name means “twin” in Aramaic, but that tells us little. Some argue that he was Jesus’s twin brother or resembled Jesus enough to be his twin, but most likely it simply means that he was born as a twin to someone else and had *Thomas* as his nickname. His most famous appearance in the Bible comes in John’s Gospel, where he doubts Christ has risen from the dead and only believes when he sees (John 20:24–29). But scholars have in turn doubted that this story is historical. They say it most likely does not reflect a real incident; instead it was a jab at the Gnostics, followers of Thomas, some of whom did not believe that Christ had suffered and died in the flesh.

Apart from these sketchy details, scholars believe that Thomas most likely preached in

Syria, where he was venerated for centuries by Christians (and where his Gospel may have been written). Afterward he may have gone as far afield as India, where to this day an extremely ancient Christian community traces its origins to his preaching. Thomas left his mark in the East, in areas where mystical enlightenment would find a more congenial home than among the rationalistic Greeks or the hard-headed Romans.

The Roots of Gnosticism

But India was not to prove the central stage for the development of Christianity. The Roman Empire provided this context, and late Roman culture and thought would leave an indelible mark on Christianity in all its forms. This was a world similar to our own in many respects. It was vast, far-flung (encompassing the entire Mediterranean basin), and remarkably unified. During the first two centuries of the Christian era, wars were rare, and the empire's inhabitants "enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury," in the words of the historian Edward Gibbon.⁵ Trade and commerce flourished, and as usually happens, along with goods and money, there also flowed ideas, philosophies, and religions. New cults and sects burgeoned in a generally tolerant pagan culture. (The Christians were persecuted not because they believed in a different god but because they refused to honor the others—a slight that pagans believed ran the risk of bringing on divine wrath.)

This religious culture helped shape the infant Christian faith. Its first and greatest influence was, of course, Judaism, the mother faith. From Judaism, Christianity took its sacred scripture as well as its view of a single, monotheistic God. At the same time, from the outset Christianity has always had a problematic relationship with Judaism. One of the key problems has to do with the nature of God himself. The God of the Hebrews is not always good; he is capable

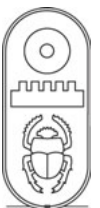
of wrath and vengeance and is unapologetic about it. "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil; I the Lord do all these things" (Isa. 49:7). "Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good?" (Lam. 3:38). This was not always easy to reconcile with the good, loving God preached by Jesus.



God in "The Last Judgment" by Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

In addition to Judaism, there were also the philosophical schools, which did not occupy themselves with philosophy as we know it today, but explained the nature of the gods and the universe and taught their pupils how to live in harmony with them. Of these the most important for Christianity and Gnosticism was the school of Plato. Although Plato himself lived in the fourth century B.C., he left an institution of higher education called the Academy in Athens, where his doctrines were taught and continued to evolve in the following centuries. It would be hard to overestimate his influence. In fact, it's sometimes said that all Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato.

Plato explains reality in a way that could be described as *esoteric*. This word does not refer to the difficulty or obscurity of his thought. Originally it meant that many of his teachings were given only to relatively advanced pupils, people who were "further in" the circle (the word comes from the Greek



esotero, which means “further in”). But it points to another meaning as well: it indicates that these teachings are essentially about inner experience. Unlike modern thought, which views the invisible and internal dimensions of life and thought as purely subjective (and hence unreal), esotericism says these inner dimensions have a genuine reality and can be known and intelligently described. Plato even went so far as to flip conventional wisdom on its head and say that the world we see is itself unreal. The solid objects of ordinary reality are merely copies or imitations of ideal entities that he called “forms”—abstract images that exist in the realm of thought. The forms alone are real, Plato said, because they are eternal and unchanging, unlike the ceaselessly shifting world here below.⁶

Plato’s influence on Gnosticism was profound, but it’s often overlooked. The most important of Plato’s works from this point of view is a late dialogue called the *Timaeus*. It is the book that introduced the myth of the lost continent of Atlantis. (According to Plato, who said these records had been preserved in Egypt, Atlantis was destroyed around 9600 B.C.) After talking about Atlantis, the *Timaeus* goes on to paint an esoteric portrait of the creation of the universe. God is good, Plato says, and “the good can never envy anyone anything.” Consequently, “God wanted everything to be good, and nothing bad, insofar as this was possible.”⁷ So he created a world that was as perfect—as like himself—as it could be.

As part of this project, God creates the seven planets, which (in accordance with Greek myth) are also gods. He then charges these gods with making the human race. God does not make them himself, because, he says, “If I created them and gave them life, they would be equal to the gods.”⁸ Nonetheless, God says, he himself will sow the seed of divine consciousness in them. They will be a mixture of mortal and immortal.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato sometimes refers to God—and he *does* speak of one true God, who is above all the others and who in fact created them—metaphorically as the “craftsman.” The Greek word for this is *demiourgos*, which has been anglicized into “demiurge.” The later Gnostics would adopt this name for the creator. But they changed Plato’s system by saying that this demiurge was a second-rate deity who created the visible world. They added the idea of another God—a true, good God who remained above, unmoved and aloof from this degenerate piece of cosmic handiwork. Plato’s philosophical descendants objected to these views; Plotinus, the great Neoplatonic philosopher of the third century A.D., even wrote a treatise refuting them! Despite these crucial alterations, it’s easy to see how Plato’s ideas fed into Gnostic currents.

Finally, there were the mystery cults, which introduced their followers to higher states of consciousness through secret rituals devoted to such gods as Demeter, Dionysus, and Isis, the beloved Great Mother of the Egyptians (from whom the Virgin Mary would later take many of her attributes).



Plato. Photo © aviewoncities.com.

Initiates swore to remain silent about what they had learned and done in their rites, and they kept their oaths so well that we have only a vague idea of what went on. We do know, however, that a common theme had to do with death and resurrection. Some said the chief benefit of initiation into the mysteries was that you would no longer have a fear of death.

Even this brief picture shows some of the roots out of which Gnosticism grew. We see themes of hidden knowledge, mystical experience, and the greatest mystery of all—death and rebirth. Then there is the nature of God himself. Is he good? If so, why is the world in such terrible shape? Maybe, as Plato said, the world is not real—and maybe it's

not all that good either. If this is true, what does it say about the God who created it?

The Gnostic teachers turned these questions into a system of thought that remains powerful and compelling. It's not always a cheerful picture, nor is it always easy to understand. But it has a strange allure for the modern—or rather postmodern—mind, obsessed with texts that mean the opposite of what they say on the surface, with realities that drop away from us under our feet, with forces that shape our lives and fates beyond our ken. Most importantly, it speaks to the nagging need inside many of us for awakening, for recollecting a lost truth that is central to our existence but which we have somehow mislaid.

ENDNOTES

¹ See *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 117–31. There are other works attributed to Thomas, but for the sake of simplicity, when I speak of *Thomas*, I will be referring to this Gospel.

² For one example of this argument, see Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70.

³ *The Protevangelion of James*. See *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McLachlan Wilson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 1:285–99.

⁴ *Gospel of Thomas*, saying 14, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 119. Hereafter references to the *Gospel of Thomas* will be to this edition and will use its verse enumeration.

⁵ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Harper & Bros., n.d.), chapter 1, 1:214.

⁶ Plato, *Republic* 476c–d.

⁷ Plato, *Timaeus* 29e–30a; my translation.

⁸ Plato, *Timaeus* 41c; my translation.

