

October 2, 2011

THE DAWN OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

The Second Century (Continued II)

Rev. Karel Coppock

Introduction

We are looking today for a second time at the second century of the Church. Last week we discussed some of the reasons Ignatius and the early church fathers began to call that teaching which was universally acknowledged throughout churches of the Mediterranean, “**Catholic**”: or “universal” namely, the arrival upon the scene of heretical, fictional Gnostic teaching attributed to Jesus and the Apostles that was invading and threatening the integrity of the Church. This teaching more often than not arose from within the Church community but was borrowed from the surrounding Greek philosophical context. It was already on the scene during the time of the Apostles. We read a text from 2 John in which the apostle, who lived to a great old age, condemned teaching that claimed that Jesus had only *appeared* to come in the flesh and only *appeared* to suffer and die on the cross. This teaching we call today, “**Docetism**” from the Greek “to seem or appear” and Docetism soon evolved into a large amorphous collection of teachings to which we've given the name over-all name **Gnosticism**.

We also had a chance to look at the **Gospel of Thomas**, one of 52 Gnostic writings discovered at Nag Hammadi, in Egypt in 1945. This Book, we discovered, was not written by the Apostle Thomas, but was falsely attributed to him by a writer who collected true sayings of Jesus and mixed them in with his personal inventions in order to give his Gnostic teachings credibility, and was probably written somewhere between 50 and a 100 years after the death of Thomas. Just reading the unfamiliar sayings of the book is enough to show their fictional character and how unlike they are to anything Jesus would say.

We also looked at some of the characteristics of Gnosticism generally, a teaching with which the early church had to do battle which went on for some 300 years and whose beginning premise is that matter is evil and that the means to salvation is found in escaping the material world and entering the realms and spheres of the spiritual world by means of the secret “passwords” of Gnosis, or “knowledge” that Gnostic teaching provides. The spiritual guide who leads us thus heavenward—Gnosticism taught—is Jesus whose *secret* teachings provide us the means to experience rapture, true knowledge of the eternal world, and salvation. We also saw that such religions as Buddhism, Hinduism, and New Age teaching in the West is Gnostic as well.

Today I'd like to do several things. We are going to:

- ^ Look at some other examples of Gnostic *and other* writings that challenged the early church or, if not Gnostic, circulated in the Church.

October 2, 2011

GNOSTIC AND OTHER NON-CANONICAL WRITINGS OF THE 2ND TO 5TH CENTURIES

Let's look at a list of some of the “books” which circulated in the early centuries. Not all are Gnostic. There are a few which were either fictional stories about Jesus' childhood (The Infancy Gospel of Thomas); allegorical teachings (The Shepherd of Hermas); or summaries of doctrinal teachings with an anti-Jewish bias (The Letter of Barnabas). At least one, possibly two were modifications of the Gospel of Matthew in Aramaic from Jewish-Christian sects (The Gospel of the Nazareans; the Gospel of the Ebionites); Most of the rest were Gnostic treatises. Their sources are varied. Some of the works have been entirely lost except for bits that have been pieced together and published from quotes by Irenaeus, Tertullian, or Jerome who wrote books refuting the Gnostics; others were discovered in hermits' caves or in collections of Egyptian papyri; still others were discovered at Nag Hammadi. **Here's a list of what we have. None, except possibly fragments of quotations coming from the *Gospel According to the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, comes from the First Century.** Many of these can be found online.

The Gospel of the Nazareans
The Gospel of the Ebionites
The Gospel According to the Hebrews
The Gospel According to the Egyptians
The Coptic Gospel of Thomas
The Book of Thomas
The Unknown Gospel
The Gospel of Peter
The Gospel of Mary
The Gospel of Philip
The Gospel of Truth
The Gospel of the Savior
The Infancy Gospel of Thomas
The Proto-Gospel of James
The Epistle of the Apostles
The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter
The Second Treatise of the Great Seth
The Secret Gospel of Mark

The Acts of John
The Acts of Paul
The Acts of Thecla
The Acts of Thomas
The Acts of Peter

The Third Letter to the Corinthians
Correspondence of Paul ad Seneca
The “letter of Peter to James” and its “Reception”
The Homilies of Clement

October 2, 2011

Ptolemy's Letter to Flora
The Treatise of the Resurrection
The Letter of Barnabas
The Preaching of Peter
Pseudo-Titus
The Shepherd of Hermas
The Apocalypse of Peter
The Apocalypse of Paul
The Secret Book of John
On the Origin of the World
The First Thought in Three Forms
The Hymn of the Pearl

EXCERPTS

Now let's look at some of the writings. As I say, not all were Gnostic; some were simply fictional accounts which the writers tried to pass off as true. We'll look at one of these first for the entertainment value.

1. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (early second century) from Lost Scriptures

1. Thomas the Israelite, make this report to all of you, my brothers among the Gentiles, that you may know the magnificent childhood activities of our Lord Jesus Christ—all that he did after being born in our country. The beginning is as follows:
2. “When this child Jesus was five years old, he was playing by the ford of a stream; and he gathered the flowing waters into pools and made them immediately pure. These things he ordered simply by speaking a word. He then made some soft mud and fashioned twelve sparrows from it. It was the Sabbath when he did this. A number of other children were also playing with him. But when a certain Jew saw what Jesus had done while playing on the Sabbath, he left right away and reported to his father, Joseph, 'Look, your child at the Sabbath has taken mud and formed twelve sparrows. He has profaned the Sabbath!' When Joseph came to the place and saw what had happened, he cried out to him, 'Why are you doing what is forbidden on the Sabbath?' But Jesus clapped his hands and cried to the sparrows, 'Be gone!' And the sparrows took flight and went off, chirping. When the Jews saw this they were amazed; and they went away and reported to their leaders what they had seen Jesus do.”
3. “Now the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph; and he took a willow branch and scattered the water that Jesus had gathered. Jesus was irritated when he saw what had happened, and he said to him: 'You unrighteous, irreverent idiot! What did the pools of water do to harm you? See, now you also will be withered like a tree, and you will never bear leaves or root or fruit.' Immediately that child was completely withered. Jesus left and returned to Joseph's house. But the parents of the withered child carried him away, mourning his lost youth. They brought him to Joseph and began to accuse him, 'What kind of child do you have who does such things?'”
4. “Somewhat later he was going through the village, and a child ran up and banged into his shoulder. Jesus was aggravated and said to him, 'You will go no further on your way.' And right away the child fell down and died. Some of those who saw what happened said, 'Where was this child born? For everything he says is a deed accomplished?' The parents

October 2, 2011

of the dead child came to Joseph and blamed him, saying 'Since you have such a child you cannot live with us in the village. Or teach him to bless and not to curse—for he is killing our children!'"

5. "Joseph called to the child and admonished him privately, 'Why are you doing such things? These people are suffering, they hate us and are persecuting us!' but Jesus replied, 'I know these are not your words, and so I also will keep silent for your sake. But those others will bear their punishment.' and immediately those who were accusing him were blinded. Those who saw these things were frightened and disturbed: they began saying about him, 'Everything he has said, whether good or bad, has become an amazing reality.' when Joseph saw what Jesus had done, he rose up, grabbed his ear, and yanked hard. The child was irritated and said to him, 'It is enough for you to seek and not find; you have not acted at all wisely. Do you not know that I am yours? Do not grieve me.'"

cf fascination with Jesus' youth coupled with a desire to be published: **The Life of Christ, Ann Rice**

[Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt](#) (2005)

[Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana](#) (2008)

2. **The Gospel of Truth** "*One of the real treasures of the Nag Hammadi Library...many are convinced that it was authored by the most famous Gnostic Christian of the second century, Valentinus himself.*" (*Lost Scriptures, ed. By Bart Ehrman, page 45*). The principle Gnostic teachers of this period were: **Basilides**, who taught in Egypt from 117-138. He imposed a five year silence on his disciples. The second, more important, founded a school in Egypt, then moved to Rome. His name was **Valentinus**. He taught in Rome from 136 to 160. Here is what Tertullian said about him: "*Valentinus had expected to become a bishop, because he was an able man both in genius and eloquence. Being indignant, however, that another obtained the dignity by reason of a claim which confessorship had given him, he broke with the church of the true faith. Just like those (restless) spirits which, when roused by ambition, are usually inflamed with the desire of revenge, he applied himself with all his might to exterminate the truth; and finding the clue of a certain old opinion, he marked out a path for himself with the subtlety of a serpent.*" The following, then, is thought to be by Valentinus.

"The gospel of truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the grace of knowing him, through the power of the Word that came forth from the *pleroma* (*ideal forms, cf Plato*), the one who is in the thought and the mind of the Father, that is, the one who is addressed as the Savior, that being the name of the work he is to perform for the redemption of those who were ignorant of the Father, while in the name of the gospel is the proclamation of hope, being discovery for those who search for him."

"When the totality went about searching for the one from whom they had come forth—and the totality was inside of him, the incomprehensible, inconceivable one who is superior to every thought—ignorance of the Father brought about anguish and terror; and the anguish grew solid like a fog, so that no one was able to see. For this reason error became powerful; it worked on its own matter foolishly, not having known the truth. It set about with a creation, preparing with power and beauty the substitute for the truth."

"This was not, then, a humiliation for him, the incomprehensible, inconceivable one, for

October 2, 2011

they were nothing, the anguish and the oblivion and the creature of deceit, while the established truth is immutable, imperturbable, perfect in beauty. For this reason, despise error.”

“Thus it had no root; it fell into a fog regarding the Father, while it was involved in preparing works and oblivions and terrors, in order that by means of these it might entice those of the middle and capture them.”

“The oblivion of error was not revealed. It is not a [...] from the Father. Oblivion did not come into existence from the Father, although it did indeed come into existence because of him. But what comes into existence in him is knowledge, which appeared in order that oblivion might vanish and the Father might be known. Since oblivion came into existence because the Father was not known, then if the Father comes to be known, oblivion will not exist from that moment on.”

“Through this, the gospel of the one who is searched for, which was revealed to those who are perfect through the mercies of the Father; the hidden mystery, Jesus, the Christ, enlightening those who were in darkness through oblivion. He enlightened them; he showed them a way; and the way is the truth which he taught them.”

“For this reason error grew angry at him, persecuted him, was distressed at him (and) was brought to naught. He was nailed to a tree (and) he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father. It did not, however, cause destruction because it was eaten, but to those who ate it it gave cause to become glad in the discovery, and he discovered them in himself, and they discovered him in themselves.” (Bart Ehrman, page 45-46). cf. Paul: 1Timothy 6.20-21

3. **The Secret Book of James:**

(page 5, chapter 2.10-16 of The Secret Teachings of Jesus, Marvin W. Meyer.)

“For this reason I tell you: be filled, and let there be no empty space within you, for otherwise the one who is to come can laugh at you.”

Then Peter answered, “Behold, three times you have told us to be filled, but we are already filled.”

The Savior answered and said,

“I have told you to be filled so that you may not lack anything since those who are lacking will not be saved.

Thus, to be filled is good and to lack is bad.

Yet, it is also good for you to be lacking, but bad for you to be filled.

For those who are filled are also lacking,

and one person who is lacking is not filled in the same way as another.

The one who is filled, though, becomes sufficiently perfect.

Hence, you should be lacking when you can be filled,

and filled when you can be lacking,

because then you can be filled even more.

So be filled with spirit but lacking in human reason,

for human reason is only human reason,

and the soul, too, is only soul.”

3. **The Book of Thomas** (a Dialogue arranged in chapters and verses; from Marvins W.

October 2, 2011

Meyer, Chapter 4:13-5:7, pages 45-6)

“The Savior answered and said,

'Blessed is the wise person who seeks truth.

When one find it, one rests upon it forever,

and is not afraid of those who want to disturb one.'

“Thomas answered and said, 'Is it good for us, Lord,
to find rest among our own people?'

“The Savior answered and said,

'Yes, it does help. It is good for you, since what is visible in human existence will pass away.

For the fleshly body of people will pass away, and when it disintegrates, it will find its place in
what is visible and can be seen.

Then the fire that those people see will make them suffer, because of their love for the faith
they once had. They will be brought back to the visible realm. Moreover, those people who
can see in the invisible realm will be consumed, without that first love, in their concern about
life and the raging of the fire. There is but a little time before what you can see will pass away.

Then shapeless ghosts will come and live in the tombs among the corpses, forever bringing
pain and destruction of soul.'

“Thomas answered and said,

'What can we say in the face of these things?

What shall we say to people who are blind?

What instruction shall we give to these miserable mortals?

They say, 'We have come to do good, not to curse,'

but add, 'If we had not been born in the flesh, we would not have known about sin.'”

The Savior said, 'This is true: do not think of them as human beings, but consider them as
animals. For as animals devour each other, so also people like this devour each other.

Moreover, the kingdom is taken from them, since

they love the delights of fire,

they are slaves of death,

and they revel in filth.

They fulfill the lust of their parents. These people will be thrown down into hell, and will be
beaten as their bitter, wicked natures deserve. They will be whipped to drive them down to the
unknown and will leave the limbs of their bodies behind, not with courage but with despair.”

4. **The Secret Book of John** (arranged in chapters and verses, the longest at 32 pages.
Excerpted from Meyer).

“The throng of angels stood by and received these seven psychical substances from the
authorities. Then they could create a network of limbs and trunk, with all the parts properly

October 2, 2011

arranged. The first angel began by creating the head:

Eteraphaope-Abron created the head,

Meniggesstroeth created the brain,

Asterechme the right eye,

Thaspomocha the left eye,

Yeronumos the right ear,

Bissoum the left ear,

Akioreim the nose,

Banen-Ephroum the lips,

Amen the teeth,

Ibikan the molars,

Basiliademe the tonsils,

Achchan the uvula,

Adaban the neck,

Chaaman the vertebrae,

Deracho the throat,

Tebar the right shoulder ...

Abitrion the right palm,

Euanthen the left palm, Kurs the right hand... “ (This goes on for four pages.)

cf. Colossians 2:18 *“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.”*