

I. Gnosticism

- A. Setting of 1st - 3rd centuries which made gnosticism a viable alternative to Christianity:
 1. Increased Gentiles converted to Christianity lacked background in Jewish faith and teachings.
 2. Gentile Christians would have been exposed to dualistic philosophical thought so they would more readily accept some tenets of dualism.
 3. The concept of Jewish people having been chosen by God and the images of a vengeful God demonstrated in the Old Testament would make Gentile Christians more willing to reject this aspect of God in preference for gnosticism.

- B. Four characteristics which all gnostic groups shared – Gnosticism was an philosophy/religious ideology held by groups in the 1st - 3rd centuries which competed with Christianity:
 1. Dualism - the invisible/spiritual realm was good; matter is evil.
 2. Each system explained creation as the product of a lesser or evil god (Demiurge), e.g. Marcionism said Jehovah, the god of the Old Testament who was vengeful created matter. This creation of human matter was evil.
 3. In the spiritual elite (the *pneumatics*) there is a spark of the original spirit trapped in human flesh. These people can seek liberation/salvation through gnosis.
 4. Mediator/messenger - an individual who brought the secret knowledge through which pneumatics could break beyond the bonds of material flesh. By participating in the gnostic group's rituals, the followers sought to be elevated through levels of gnosis to revive the "spirit" within them and throw off material flesh.

- C. Why Gnosticism held interest for people:
 1. It provided salvation or hope beyond everyday life
 2. It explained the existence of evil
 3. It provided an explanation of creation
 4. It shifted the blame for evil from God by providing alternate deities to blame for its existence.

- D. Ethical implications of Gnosticism:
 1. Because matter was viewed as evil, gnostic groups tended to be either ascetic or libertine.
 2. It reinforced elitism by virtue of the secret knowledge of pneumatics.

- E. The theological threats that Gnosticism posed to Christianity:
 - 1. Since matter was viewed as evil, most Christian gnostics denied Jesus' incarnation and said he only appeared to have been human (docetism).
 - 2. Most Christian gnostics also denied the virgin birth (or even that Jesus was born). Instead they said he appeared as an adult.
 - 3. Gnostics viewed Jesus as spirit but not as equal or one with Father God.
 - 4. Gnostics rejected the biblical view of Creation since it demonstrates God's view of creating humans in the flesh as good.
 - 5. Gnosticism threatened the Christian concept of salvation since it denied that Jesus came in the flesh to redeem humanity or that it was even necessary for God to take on human form. Also, for gnostics salvation did not include the human body, as it did for Christians.

- F. Christian responses to Gnosticism. Irenaeus (c. 180AD). Proposed three remedies to avoid error:
 - 1. A single authoritative leader (bishop) for each Christian community who would make doctrinal decisions based on apostolic tradition.
 - 2. The need for a canon of scripture, an agreed list of authoritative books viewed as revealed scripture.
 - 3. Apostolic tradition – the doctrines, rites, and practices viewed as authentic and transmitted from the original eyewitnesses of Jesus' followers.

II. "The Gospel of Judas" (GOJ):

- A. Theme: Judas - only disciple who understood Jesus' true purpose – to be divested of his human body.
- B. Judas' betrayal advanced purpose of God.
- C. Platonic view that people's fate shaped by their star (astrology). In GOJ, Jesus said Judas' star would lead the way (GOJ 57:44).
- D. Many events traditionally associated w/ other disciples in canonical gospels, portray Judas as hero in GOJ.
- E. Those who belong to the generation of Seth, like Judas, are part of enlightened humanity.
- F. In GOJ, Jesus is teacher & revealer of wisdom.

G. Selected Quotes:

1. “The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot ...”(GOJ 33:19).
2. “When Jesus appeared on earth ...”(GOJ 33:20).
3. “Often he did not appear to his disciples as himself, but he was found among them as a child.”(GOJ 33:20).
4. “But their spirits did not dare to stand before [him], except for Judas Iscariot. ... “Judas [said] to him, ‘I know who you are and where you have come from.’ ” (GOJ 35:22)
5. While Jesus & Judas were in discussion: “And a luminous cloud appeared there.... A great angel, the enlightened divine Self-Generated, emerged from the cloud.” (GOJ 47:34)

III. Selected Representative Gnostic groups

- A. Marcionism - (130 AD) these were Christian gnostics led by Marcion of Pontus. He taught that Jehovah, the god of the Old Testament was the vengeful god who created humans. Jesus was the gnostic messenger. He created the first biblical canon which only included the epistles of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. He rejected any Jewish influences.
- B. Carpocratians - Carpocrates (2nd century AD) - world created by angels. Jesus was son of Mary and Joseph, who had a pure soul. They believed in transmigration of the soul and were libertines.
- C. Saturninus - 2nd century - taught God of the Old Testament was an intermediary (angel) who created the world. Jesus came in human form to redeem pneumatics and to destroy the God of the Jews. They were ascetics, didn't eat meat, and were celibate.
- D. Valentinians - 2nd century - Valentinus considered the most important gnostic teacher of 2nd century. Valentinian myth - the youngest aeon (Sophia = wisdom) fell causing creation of world. Christ came to redeem the pneumatics. Only Valentinians were pneumatics and thus able to be redeemed and reach the higher knowledge.
- E. Ebionites - not a strict gnostic group. They were Jewish Christian believers who believed it was necessary to follow the Jewish law for salvation (judaizers). Many questioned the divinity of Christ.

Further Reading:

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