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Gnosticism emerged in the early centuries of the Common Era, particularly during the 1st and 2nd centuries. The term "Gnosticism" is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." In the context of Gnosticism, this knowledge is often understood as esoteric or mystical knowledge of the divine, which is considered essential for salvation.

Key Concepts of Gnosticism

1. **Dualism:** Gnosticism is characterized by a strong dualistic worldview, where the material world is often seen as corrupt or evil, created by a lesser deity known as the Demiurge. In contrast, the spiritual world, created by the true, unknowable God, is seen as pure and good. Humans are considered divine sparks trapped in a material body.
2. **The Demiurge:** In Gnostic cosmology, the Demiurge is a false god who created the physical universe. This figure is often associated with the God of the Old Testament, portrayed as ignorant or malevolent. The true God is usually considered to be beyond the Demiurge and is only accessible through Gnosis.
3. **Salvation through Gnosis:** Gnosticism emphasizes personal spiritual knowledge (gnosis) over orthodox faith or ritual. This knowledge involves understanding one's divine origin and the nature of the cosmos. Salvation, in Gnosticism, is the liberation of the divine spark within humans from the material world and the return to the spiritual realm.
4. **Sophia and the Fall:** Many Gnostic texts feature the figure of Sophia (Wisdom), who plays a central role in the creation of the material world. Her fall from the spiritual realm and her involvement in the creation of the Demiurge are key elements in Gnostic mythology.
5. **Variety of Texts:** Gnosticism is not a single, unified belief system but rather a collection of sects with various interpretations and texts. The Nag Hammadi library, discovered in Egypt in 1945, contains a treasure trove of Gnostic writings, including the *Gospel of Thomas*, *The Secret Book of John*, and *The Gospel of Truth*.
6. **Rejection of the Physical World:** Gnostics generally view the physical world with disdain, seeing it as a prison for the spirit. This contrasts with mainstream Christianity, which sees the world as created by a benevolent God.

Gnosticism and Early Christianity

Gnosticism emerged around the same time as early Christianity, and there were significant interactions between the two. Some early Christian leaders, such as the Apostle Paul, were aware of Gnostic ideas and opposed them. The early Church Fathers, like Irenaeus and

Tertullian, wrote extensively against Gnosticism, viewing it as a heretical distortion of Christian teachings.

Despite its opposition from orthodox Christianity, Gnosticism has continued to influence various religious and philosophical movements throughout history, including modern spiritual movements that emphasize personal enlightenment and the esoteric understanding of divine truths.

Legacy

Today, Gnosticism is studied both as a historical religious movement and as an influence on modern spirituality. Some contemporary spiritual movements, such as the New Age movement, draw on Gnostic ideas, particularly the emphasis on personal spiritual knowledge and the critique of mainstream religious institutions.

For more detailed exploration, you might want to check out books such as *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels or *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* by Kurt Rudolph.

Origins and Early Promoters of Gnosticism

Gnosticism as a distinct religious movement appears to have developed in the early centuries of the Common Era, likely after the life of Jesus. The exact origins are somewhat obscure, but it is generally believed that Gnosticism arose in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, in the same period as early Christianity. It was influenced by a mixture of Hellenistic (Greek) philosophy, Jewish mysticism, and early Christian thought.

Earliest Promoters of Gnosticism

1. **Simon Magus:** Often considered one of the earliest Gnostic figures, Simon Magus was a Samaritan magician mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 8:9-24). He is sometimes identified as the father of Gnosticism, although this claim is debated. Early Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Hippolytus linked him with Gnostic teachings.
2. **Valentinus:** One of the most prominent early Gnostic teachers, Valentinus lived in the 2nd century CE. He developed a complex theological system that blended Gnostic cosmology with Christian themes. He was influential in Alexandria and later in Rome, and his followers, the Valentinians, formed one of the most significant Gnostic sects.
3. **Basilides:** Another influential early Gnostic teacher, Basilides was active in Alexandria during the 2nd century CE. He developed a Gnostic cosmology that involved a hierarchy of divine beings and the concept of a remote, unknowable God.

4. **Marcion of Sinope:** Although not strictly Gnostic, Marcion, who was active in the mid-2nd century CE, shared some Gnostic ideas, particularly the rejection of the material world and the belief in a higher, unknown God distinct from the creator God of the Old Testament. Marcion was eventually declared a heretic by the early Church.
5. **Mani:** The founder of Manichaeism, a 3rd-century Gnostic religion that combined elements of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. Mani claimed to be the final prophet in a lineage that included figures like Zoroaster and Jesus.

Gnosticism and Christianity

Gnosticism did not begin before Jesus but emerged in the same period as early Christianity. Some Gnostic sects considered themselves Christian and viewed Jesus as a divine figure who brought gnosis (knowledge) to humanity. However, their interpretation of Jesus and his teachings was very different from what became orthodox Christianity.

Gnostic Influence on Early Christian Thought

- **Gospel of Thomas:** This text, discovered in the Nag Hammadi library, is an example of a Gnostic gospel. It consists of sayings attributed to Jesus and reflects Gnostic themes, such as the idea of secret knowledge and the inner light within each person.
- **Gospel of Mary:** Another Gnostic text, it presents Mary Magdalene as a prominent disciple who received special teachings from Jesus, highlighting the theme of hidden knowledge.

Were Any Apostles or Saints Gnostics?

No, none of the apostles or recognized Christian saints were Gnostics. The early Church Fathers, who shaped Christian orthodoxy, strongly opposed Gnosticism. Figures like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen wrote extensively against Gnostic teachings, viewing them as heretical and a distortion of true Christian doctrine.

Important notes:

Gnostics and Early Christianity: Gnosticism was a diverse and influential religious movement in the early centuries of Christianity. Gnostics were indeed a sect that existed alongside early Christians, and they had their own interpretations of Jesus' teachings. Gnosticism often emphasized esoteric knowledge (gnosis) as the path to salvation and typically viewed the material world as flawed or corrupt.

Gnostics as Original Christians: Some Gnostics believed they represented the true teachings of Jesus and considered their interpretations as closer to the original message of Christianity. They often viewed the mainstream (proto-orthodox) Christian teachings, which would later form the basis of Roman Orthodox Christianity, as deviations from what they saw as the true, hidden knowledge.

Gnostics' View of the Roman Orthodox Church: Many Gnostics saw the developing orthodox Christianity, particularly the version that gained prominence with the establishment of the Roman Church, as a distortion of Jesus' teachings. They often accused orthodox Christians of misrepresenting or corrupting the original message.

Marcion and Tatian:

- **Marcion:** Marcion (c. 85-160 CE) was an early Christian theologian who developed a distinctive form of Gnosticism. He rejected the Old Testament and believed that Jesus brought a new, higher understanding of God, distinct from the creator god of the Hebrew scriptures. Marcion's teachings were seen as a threat to the developing orthodoxy, and his ideas were eventually deemed heretical. He did not set up what you might call "historic Christianity," but rather offered a radical alternative.
- **Tatian:** Tatian (c. 120-180 CE) was a disciple of Justin Martyr and later became associated with the Encratites, a group with Gnostic tendencies. He is known for his work *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the four Gospels. Tatian's later views diverged from orthodox Christianity, and he criticized the church for what he saw as its corruption. His critique and departure contributed to his reputation as a heretic.

Constantine and Heresy: In 325 CE, the First Council of Nicaea was convened by Emperor Constantine. This council was a significant moment in the history of Christianity because it aimed to address various theological disputes, including those involving Gnosticism. The Nicene Creed established a unified Christian doctrine, and Gnosticism was labeled as heretical. Constantine and subsequent emperors supported the orthodox church and sought to suppress Gnostic and other dissenting groups.

Gnostic Gospels: The term "Gnostic Gospels" refers to a collection of early Christian texts discovered primarily in the 20th century. Some of the most notable Gnostic Gospels include:

- **Gospel of Thomas:** A collection of sayings attributed to Jesus, many of which focus on personal spiritual knowledge.
- **Gospel of Mary:** Attributes teachings and revelations to Mary Magdalene, highlighting her role as a prominent disciple.

- **Gospel of Philip:** Discusses the nature of Jesus, the sacraments, and the relationship between the divine and the material world.
- **Gospel of Truth:** A poetic and theological text emphasizing the nature of truth and the role of knowledge in salvation.
- **Gospel of Judas:** Provides a perspective on Judas Iscariot's role in the passion narrative, presenting him in a more favorable light.

These texts were not included in the canonical New Testament and were often suppressed by orthodox authorities due to their divergent views.

Agnostos Theos and the Monad

- **Agnostos Theos ("Unknown God"):** In Gnostic belief, the term Agnostos Theos refers to the "Unknown God" or the ultimate, transcendent deity that is beyond human comprehension. This deity is often described as being absolutely unknowable and ineffable, transcending all attributes and distinctions. This concept aligns with the Gnostic view that the ultimate divine reality is beyond the grasp of ordinary human understanding.
- **The Monad:** In Gnostic cosmology, the Monad is the ultimate, singular source of all existence. It is often equated with the Agnostos Theos. The Monad is the beginning of all creation, from which everything else emanates. It represents the highest, most abstract level of reality, from which a series of emanations, or "Eons," arise. The Monad itself is characterized by its unity and simplicity, and it is distinct from the created, material world.

The Apocryphon of John

- **Apocryphon of John (also known as the Secret Book of John):** This is one of the key Gnostic texts discovered in the Nag Hammadi library in 1945. The Apocryphon of John presents a detailed Gnostic creation myth and cosmology. Here are some key elements:
 - **Revelation:** The text is framed as a revelation given by Jesus to John, the son of Zebedee. In this vision, Jesus provides John with esoteric knowledge about the nature of the divine realm and the origins of the universe.
 - **Creation Myth:** The text describes the process of creation and the role of various divine entities. It outlines how the Monad, or the ultimate God, emanated a series of divine beings known as Eons.
 - **Sophia and the Demiurge:** One of the central figures in the Apocryphon of John is Sophia, an Eon who, in her attempt to create independently, produces the Demiurge, a lower, often imperfect deity who creates and governs the material world. This Demiurge is often depicted as ignorant or malevolent in Gnostic texts.

Eons

- **Eons:** In Gnostic cosmology, Eons are divine beings or emanations that originate from the Monad. They are part of the divine pleroma (fullness) and exist in a higher, spiritual realm. The Eons are often arranged in pairs known as "syzygies," representing complementary aspects of the divine nature. Some key points about Eons:
 - **Roles:** Eons are involved in the process of creation and the maintenance of the divine order. They play various roles in the spiritual hierarchy and in the transmission of divine knowledge.
 - **Sophia:** One of the important Eons in Gnostic texts is Sophia, whose actions lead to the creation of the material world and the Demiurge. Her story is central to many Gnostic narratives.
 - **The Divine Pleroma:** The realm where the Eons reside is called the Pleroma, a state of fullness and unity in the divine realm. The Eons collectively represent different aspects of the divine and contribute to the fullness of the divine presence.

These concepts are central to Gnostic thought, highlighting a complex and symbolic understanding of the divine and the cosmos that contrasts with more mainstream Christian views.

Gnosticism, a diverse set of religious beliefs and practices, was indeed labeled as heretical by the early Christian Church, particularly during and after the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. However, the formal condemnation of Gnosticism had already begun well before this council, as early Church Fathers like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus of Rome wrote extensively against Gnostic teachings, which they viewed as a significant threat to orthodox Christianity.

Persecution of Gnostics After Nicaea

After the First Council of Nicaea, the persecution of Gnostics and other heretical groups became more organized and systematic. The council established a precedent for the Church's authority in defining orthodox belief and marginalizing or condemning what was considered heretical. While the Council of Nicaea primarily addressed the Arian controversy (the nature of Christ and his relationship to God the Father), it also reinforced the Church's stance against other heresies, including Gnosticism.

Forms of Persecution

1. **Theological Repression:** Gnostic texts were condemned, and efforts were made to destroy them. The famous discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, a collection of Gnostic writings, is a testament to the lengths Gnostics had to go to preserve their teachings secretly.
2. **Social Marginalization:** Gnostics were increasingly marginalized within the Christian community. They were excluded from ecclesiastical positions, and their teachings were banned from being discussed or propagated in Christian circles.
3. **Legal Persecution:** As Christianity became more intertwined with the Roman state, particularly after the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 AD, which made Nicene Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, heretical groups, including Gnostics, faced legal sanctions. This could include confiscation of property, exile, and in some cases, execution.
4. **Exile and Execution:** While specific records of mass executions of Gnostics are limited, certain leaders and prominent figures identified as heretics faced severe punishments, including death. The suppression of heretical movements, such as the Cathars in the 12th and 13th centuries, which were influenced by Gnostic ideas, often involved brutal military campaigns and executions.

Decline of Gnosticism

Over time, the combination of theological, social, and legal pressures led to the decline of Gnosticism as a significant religious movement within the Roman Empire. The destruction of texts and the suppression of Gnostic communities meant that much of their teachings were lost, only to be rediscovered centuries later.

In summary, after the First Council of Nicaea, Gnostics faced increased persecution, primarily through theological condemnation, social marginalization, and legal actions, leading to the eventual decline of Gnosticism as an influential movement within the Roman Empire.

Gnosticism produced a variety of texts, many of which were central to the beliefs and practices of different Gnostic sects. These texts often present alternative views on creation, the nature of the divine, and the role of knowledge (gnosis) in salvation. Here are some of the most well-known, important, and early Gnostic writings:

1. The Nag Hammadi Library (c. 3rd-4th Century)

- **The Gospel of Thomas:** Perhaps the most famous of the Gnostic texts, this is a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. Unlike the canonical Gospels, it does not include a narrative of Jesus' life but focuses on his teachings, emphasizing direct, personal experience of the divine.

- **The Gospel of Philip:** This text focuses on the sacramental and mystical aspects of Gnostic Christianity, including an emphasis on the concept of the “bridal chamber” and the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.
- **The Gospel of Truth:** Often attributed to Valentinus, a prominent Gnostic teacher, this text is a poetic meditation on the nature of divine truth, error, and redemption.
- **The Apocryphon of John (Secret Book of John):** This work is a foundational text for many Gnostic groups, presenting a detailed cosmogony and theology. It describes the creation of the world by an ignorant and malevolent deity (the Demiurge) and the role of Christ as a revealer of true divine knowledge.
- **The Hypostasis of the Archons:** This text expands on the myth of the creation and the role of the Archons (rulers) in entrapping human souls in the material world.
- **The Gospel of Mary:** This text, associated with Mary Magdalene, portrays her as a prominent disciple who receives special revelations from Jesus. It emphasizes inner spiritual knowledge and has been interpreted as challenging the authority of male apostles.

2. The Pistis Sophia (c. 3rd-4th Century)

- **Pistis Sophia:** This is a complex and lengthy text that explores the journey of the soul, the cosmology of Gnostic thought, and the figure of Sophia (Wisdom) who falls from grace and is eventually restored. It includes dialogues between Jesus and his disciples, where he explains these mysteries.

3. The Gospel of Judas (c. 2nd Century)

- **The Gospel of Judas:** Discovered in the 1970s and published in 2006, this text presents a radically different view of Judas Iscariot, portraying him as the only disciple who truly understands Jesus' mission. It challenges orthodox views and offers a Gnostic interpretation of Jesus' relationship with his disciples.

4. The Apocalypse of Peter (c. 2nd Century)

- **The Apocalypse of Peter:** This text offers a Gnostic perspective on the afterlife and the fate of souls. It presents visions of heaven and hell, emphasizing the distinction between the spiritual and material worlds.

5. The Trimorphic Protennoia (c. 2nd-3rd Century)

- **Trimorphic Protennoia:** A mystical text that speaks in the voice of a divine being who reveals the nature of the universe, the origin of the divine, and the process of salvation. It reflects Gnostic themes of hidden knowledge and the fall of divine entities into the material world.

6. The Acts of Thomas (c. 3rd Century)

- **The Acts of Thomas:** This text narrates the missionary journey of the Apostle Thomas to India. While not entirely Gnostic, it contains strong Gnostic elements, particularly in its hymns and teachings on asceticism, celibacy, and the rejection of the material world.

7. The Valentinian Corpus (c. 2nd Century)

- **The Valentinian Expositions:** These writings are attributed to Valentinus and his followers, offering a sophisticated and systematized version of Gnostic theology. They include commentaries, letters, and homilies that explore the nature of God, creation, and the role of Christ in Gnostic salvation.

Importance of These Texts

These writings are crucial for understanding the diversity and depth of Gnostic thought. They provide insights into the Gnostic worldview, which often contrasts sharply with orthodox Christian teachings, emphasizing knowledge (gnosis) as the path to salvation and offering alternative narratives about the origins of the universe and humanity's place within it.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945 was particularly significant, as it brought many of these texts to light after being lost for centuries, greatly enhancing modern understanding of Gnosticism.

The creation story

The creation story

1. The Monad and the Pleroma

- **The Monad:** At the highest level of Gnostic cosmology is the Monad, the absolute, transcendent source of all existence. The Monad is beyond all attributes and is completely unknowable and ineffable.
- **The Pleroma:** The Monad emanates a series of divine beings known as Eons, who populate the divine realm called the Pleroma. This realm is a state of fullness and unity where the divine beings reside.

2. The Emergence of Sophia and the Demiurge

- **Sophia:** Among the Eons, Sophia (meaning "Wisdom") is a prominent figure. In some Gnostic traditions, Sophia is depicted as an Eon who, in her desire to create

independently and without the consent of the Monad or her divine counterpart, initiates a process of creation that leads to unintended consequences.

- **The Demiurge:** Sophia's actions result in the creation of the Demiurge, a lower, often imperfect deity. The Demiurge is typically portrayed as a craftsman or creator who, ignorant of the higher divine realms, creates the material world. In many Gnostic narratives, the Demiurge is seen as flawed or malevolent, as he is a product of Sophia's flawed attempt at creation.

3. The Creation of the Material World

- **The Material World:** Under the influence of the Demiurge, the material world is created. The Demiurge and his subordinate beings, the Archons, govern this world. The Gnostic view often portrays the material world as flawed or corrupt, contrasting with the pure, spiritual realm of the Pleroma.
- **The Archons:** These are lower divine beings or rulers who assist the Demiurge in administering the material world. They are often depicted as oppressive or malevolent forces that maintain control over the material realm and hinder spiritual enlightenment.

4. The Creation of Adam

- **Adam:** According to some Gnostic texts, the Demiurge creates Adam as the first human being, but this creation is a part of the flawed material world. In some accounts, Adam is endowed with a divine spark or soul, which connects him to the higher, spiritual realm. This divine spark is seen as a remnant of the Pleroma's true, spiritual nature within the material body.

5. The Role of Sophia and Redemption

- **Sophia's Repentance:** Realizing the flawed nature of her creation and the suffering it has caused, Sophia seeks redemption. In some traditions, she attempts to rectify the situation by sending a divine emissary or savior to guide humanity back to the Pleroma.
- **The Savior:** The savior, often identified with Jesus in Gnostic texts, comes to impart secret knowledge (gnosis) that reveals the true nature of the divine realm and offers a path for the soul to escape the material world and return to the Pleroma.

6. Salvation and Return

- **Gnosis:** The goal of human existence, according to Gnosticism, is to attain gnosis—esoteric knowledge of the divine truth. Through this knowledge, individuals can transcend the material world, escape the influence of the Archons, and reunite with the divine source.

The creation story

The Origin of All

In the beginning, there was the **Monad**, the ultimate, transcendent deity who existed beyond all attributes and distinctions. The Monad is absolute and unknowable, representing the source of all existence and the fullness of divine reality, known as the **Pleroma**. The Pleroma is a realm of divine fullness and unity where a series of divine beings, known as **Eons**, emanate from the Monad. These Eons exist in harmonious pairs called **syzygies**, each representing different aspects of the divine nature.

The Emergence of Sophia

Among the Eons, **Sophia** (meaning "Wisdom") emerges as a significant figure. In some traditions, Sophia, driven by a desire to create and express her own divine nature, acts independently. This act of creation, however, is done without the consent or cooperation of the Monad or her divine counterpart, resulting in unintended consequences.

The Creation of the Demiurge

Sophia's independent act of creation produces the **Demiurge**, a lower, imperfect deity who is ignorant of the higher, divine realms. The Demiurge, unaware of the Pleroma's true nature, creates the material world. This world is flawed and inferior compared to the spiritual Pleroma, reflecting the imperfections of the Demiurge's own nature. The Demiurge and his subordinate beings, known as **Archons**, are responsible for maintaining and ruling over the material world.

The Creation of the Material World

Under the Demiurge's influence, the material world is formed. The Demiurge, with the help of the Archons, creates the physical universe, including Earth and all its inhabitants. The material world is characterized by its imperfection and is often portrayed as a place of suffering and ignorance.

The Creation of Adam and the Garden of Eden

The Demiurge creates **Adam**, the first human, as part of his flawed creation. Adam is fashioned from the material elements of the world, but within him is a divine spark, a remnant of the higher, spiritual realm. This divine spark connects Adam to the Pleroma, even though he is physically bound to the material world.

To give Adam a home, the Demiurge creates the **Garden of Eden**. This paradise is designed as a perfect environment within the material world, but it remains under the control of the Demiurge and his Archons.

Sophia's Redemption and the Role of the Savior

Sophia, recognizing the flaws in her creation and the suffering it has caused, seeks to make amends. She desires to restore the divine order and to help those trapped in the material world. In her attempt to rectify the situation, Sophia sends a divine emissary or savior to guide humanity.

In Gnostic traditions, this savior is often identified with **Jesus**. He arrives to impart **gnosis**, or secret knowledge, which reveals the true nature of the divine realm and the path to spiritual liberation. Jesus teaches that the material world is a flawed creation of the Demiurge and that salvation lies in transcending this world and returning to the Pleroma.

The Garden of Eden and the Fall

In some Gnostic accounts, the Garden of Eden is not only a paradise but also a place where the divine spark within Adam can be awakened. However, the Demiurge and the Archons aim to keep Adam and Eve ignorant of their true divine nature.

The **Fall** occurs when Adam and Eve eat from the **Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil**. This act, contrary to the Demiurge's command, symbolizes the awakening to a higher spiritual knowledge. The Demiurge, perceiving this as a threat, expels Adam and Eve from the Garden, reinforcing their separation from the divine realm.

The Path to Redemption

Following their expulsion, Adam and Eve live in the material world, struggling with its imperfections. The divine spark within them remains, however, and the teachings of the savior offer a way to rediscover their true nature and return to the Pleroma.

The Gnostic Journey

The ultimate goal for Gnostics is to achieve gnosis—esoteric knowledge of the divine truth. This knowledge allows individuals to transcend the material world, escape the influence of the Archons, and reunite with the divine source. Through spiritual enlightenment and liberation, the divine spark within each person can return to the higher, spiritual reality from which it originated.