



## THE HISTORICAL JESUS X:

# The Gnostic Gospels

GNOSTICISM IS BOTH an ancient and a modern heresy that regards the entire created order as fallen. It is seen as the appalling product of a fallen god often identified as the god of the Old Testament. Gnosticism further believes that the higher, true god was captured and imprisoned in the bodies of certain human beings at creation. The true god can only be liberated from imprisonment through the acquisition of true knowledge (*gnosis*) by true believers.

In the Gnostic view, Jesus of Nazareth understood that Christ was the true god hidden within himself. Since Jesus was a true and exemplary believer, he had the “knowledge” (*gnosis*) to liberate the captive god.

Thus, in Gnosticism “Jesus is an enlightened example who ‘realized in himself that he and what he called the Father were one, and he lived out of that knowledge of the Christhood of his nature.’ According to [Joseph] Campbell, anyone can likewise live out his or her Christ nature. . . . Jesus as a Redeemer of those ensconced in materiality . . . comes as one descended from the spiritual realm with a message of self-redemption. . . . The Christ comes from the higher levels of intermediary beings (called aeons) . . . as a Revealer, an emissary from error-free environs. He is not the personal agent of the creator-god revealed in the Old Testament. Rather, Jesus has descended from a more exalted level to be a catalyst for igniting the gnosis latent within the ignorant. He gives a metaphysical assist to underachieving deities (i.e., humans) rather than granting ethical restoration to God’s erring creatures through the Crucifixion and Resurrection. . . .

“Jesus dispenses gnosis [true knowledge] to awaken those trapped in ignorance; the body is a prison, and the spirit alone is good, and salvation comes by discovering the ‘kingdom of God’ within the self. . . . Christ is ‘the

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Paraclete from the Unknown who reveals . . . the discovery of the Self — the divine spark within you.’ . . .

“As in much modern New Age teaching, the Gnostics tended to divide Jesus from the Christ. For Valentinus, Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism and left before his death on the cross. . . .

“[With regard to the Crucifixion,] Jesus says, ‘I did not die in reality, but in appearance.’ Those ‘in error and blindness . . . saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I was rejoicing in the height over all . . . And I was laughing at their ignorance.’ . . .

“Pagels says that rather than viewing Christ’s death as a sacrificial offering to atone for guilt and sin, the *Gospel of Truth* ‘sees the crucifixion as the occasion for discovering the divine self within.’

“A resurrection is enthusiastically affirmed in the *Treatise on the Resurrection*: ‘Do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth! Indeed, it is more fitting to say that the world is an illusion rather than the resurrection.’ Yet, the nature of the post-resurrection appearance differs from the biblical accounts. Jesus is disclosed through *spiritual* visions rather than *physical* circumstances.”<sup>1</sup>

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## Endnote

1. Douglas Groothuis, “Gnosticism and the Gnostic Jesus,” *Christian Research Journal* (Fall 1990), at [www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/crj/crj-jrnl/web/crj0040a.html](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/crj/crj-jrnl/web/crj0040a.html). There are numerous Gnostic Gospels, but none of them have been canonized.