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What is Gnosticism

Gnosticism is a term that many have heard recently in regard to the **National Geographic Society's** report on the gospel of Judas. Gnosticism is confusing to many and remains a mystery. Gnosis is a Greek word that refers to the act of knowing, or knowledge. It describes a body of thought and practice that incorporates elements of religion, philosophy, mysticism, superstition and paganism. Gnostics believe that within each individual lies a hidden well of knowledge that can be discovered by following a path toward awareness, a process referred to as enlightenment, achieved as one realizes their part of a greater reality of the universe and the energies which form it. The gnostic worldview is such that all aspects of life are interpreted through internal mechanisms. The result is reliance on oneself as guidance is acquired through subjective interpretation. Sound familiar? Gnostic ideas began to influence the church in the latter part of the first century presenting a danger to early Christians. Based on passages in the scriptures, this threat was second only to the confusion over the role of the Law of Moses and its relationship to Jewish and Gentile Christians (**Acts 15**). Gnostic ideas are believed to have originated in the area of Persia. Some place the origins around 300 B.C. However, many of the ideas found in Gnosticism appear to predate this period. The pagan belief that the entrails of animals could be used to tell the future, the idea of spirit energies dwelling in animals, rocks and trees, the elements and all things as well as the belief that the stars could influence the outcome of human behavior are all ideas that may have contributed to a more consolidated view of the universe and the role of mankind. Gnostic thinking appears to be a coordinated attempt to put all of these things together in a cohesive manner without a strict dogma or consensual doctrine. Gnostics in the first century believed that the spirit, and the spiritual realm, are so pure that the physical can neither affect nor come into contact with that which is spiritual. This thinking may have been influenced by a number of factors, some of which will be covered in later articles. The first century gnostics believed it was not possible for the body to sin in such a way that the spirit could be lost. This differs from what we find in the scriptures and it is not hard to understand why Paul and others were concerned about heretics who taught such things. Other gnostics believed it was through the experience of the physical that the spirit could be ascertained. Paul mentions those who taught a "neglect" of the body in order to purge oneself of impurities and thus be more sensitive to one's spiritual aspects as a path toward enlightenment (**Col 2.23**). Paul indicates this has no effect on the spirit, nor merit in the sight of God. Today there are still those who teach asceticism; spirituality through denial of the physical. Gnostics in the first century are denoted as denying that Christ had a physical presence on the earth but simply appeared as a manifestation of himself while the actual being of the Lord remained in Heaven. Once again this denies the scriptural teaching that Christ indeed was made flesh and dwelt among men (**John 1.14**). The gnostics of the first century believed that the warlike God of the Old Testament was a lesser god, due to the violence that was commanded, and held that Christ was a true manifestation of a higher God as he was more benevolent and compassionate (**Heb 1.3**). The spread of Gnosticism was insidious often being present in an area before Christians knew of it. This concealment was a habit of the gnostics as they sought to recruit followers and were inclined to seek out the weakest in a group and therefore the easiest to influence. This subtle approach would draw away many followers before showing up as a problem in a congregation (**2 Tim 3.6, Jude 1.4**). A comparison of many of these ideas with contemporary religious thought reveals their pervasive nature and similarities with the gnostics.

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