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## Gnostics In The First Century

Gnosticism appears to have crept into the area known to the Romans as Asia beginning in the second century B.C. (depending on which historian you consult). Interestingly, the area most heavily influenced by this thinking was that of the seven churches of Asia who were addressed by John in Revelation. The ideas that coalesced into Gnosticism are believed to have their origin in Persia. The area of Ephesus and the other cities of Asia would have been a ripe seedbed for a new philosophical religion. Paganism, which held to the idea of animism (spiritual energies in animate and inanimate objects) and mysticism (knowledge of the spiritual through subjective experience) were in line with the major tenets of Gnostic thinking. To call Gnosticism a religion is not completely accurate. As we shall see, Gnosticism lends itself well to a religious environment when it is manipulated to fit the particular atmosphere it encounters. More accurately is the description of Gnosticism as a philosophical spirituality. Gnosticism seeks to render a view of the world which offers an explanation for that which is spiritual in abstractions of reality. These abstractions are the result of one's enlightenment and may not necessarily reflect the views of others. Gnostics do however have some consensus in major areas. One of these was the idea of ascendancy. In this the Gnostics taught that over a certain period of time, as one gains knowledge, or gnosis, one could begin to perceive spiritual truths and uncover the "reality" of themselves. The Gnostics believed that this discovery within themselves was a reflection of a higher order, the universe and God, as a whole. If this path was followed, as awareness increased, an individual could ascend to higher orders or degrees of spiritual purity. Gnostic practices of the first century point to what a reasonable person might see as a contradiction. The seat of gnosis is the mind. It was the mind therefore that the Gnostics believed could be trained to perceive their own inner truth and therefore the mystery of the universe. Thought, or intellect, was the sole aim of their purification rendering the body immaterial. The view arose that the body and mind were so separate that it did not matter what the body did, the mind could still be purified and be spiritual. Gnostic Christians of the second century are reported to have engaged in sexual orgies and wife swapping. One historian states that they ate aborted fetuses as a religious practice that may have been done in conjunction with the taking of the Lord's supper. Some historians think that these Gnostic practices were so repulsive to the Romans that they may have brought on the persecution of the Christians. This is more conjecture than fact but the possibility does exist given the history. Purification of the mind, thus the spirit, was seen as not being dependent on the body, nor the body on the mind. This separation today of mind and body in an extreme form manifests in mental illnesses and is referred to as a dissociative state. This separation denies that the mind, a functional aspect of the physical organ the brain, is indeed a reflection of the spirit, but is not only dependent on the health and functionality of the body, but also has an effect on the health and functionality of the body. The scriptures clearly teach the two are inseparable and that evil begins in the mind and manifests as action in the body. For this reason God tells us that we shall receive a reward based on those things that are done in the body (**2 Cor 5.10**). Gnostics proceeded to teach that Christ had not come in the flesh as that would have corrupted his purely spiritual nature. The idea of a higher God was promoted and this was a distinction that was made with Jehovah of the old testament. Modern philosophers and theologians in many ways have subscribed to this notion by denying the virgin birth of Christ (real miracles can't happen can they) and stating that the perceived differences between "the god of the old testament" and Christ represent a developmental maturity in the mind of the Hebrews. Some have even posited that the Hebrews as a culture were not able to conceive of more than one "god" and this why there was a belief in only one. Gnosticism in the first century amounted to just another denial of the authority of God and the sanctity of Christ and the church.

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