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## **Gnosis and Christos**

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*C.M. Kempton Hewitt, writing for the Fall seminar series of the Westar Institute, sponsors of the "Jesus Seminar", spoke of his period as a student of the Christian myth with Rudolph Bultmann.<sup>1</sup>*

"While I joyfully embraced Bultmann's rejection of a particular story as having a legitimate place in my quest (for the authentic Jesus), I was saddened to find that bad old stories, learned in my youth, continued to exercise more force in my thoughts than did the courageous world of *Daseins* that Bultmann described. And in the intervening decades, it has finally dawned on me that the creation of better, new stories is a more practical means of dealing with bad old stories than is the rejection of the story itself. It is simply a fact that humans live by their stories; without them, life's experiences are chaotic and random - a condition of consciousness few are willing to embrace, even if it is to be preferred."

This is not meant to suggest that we should not look for a new plot for a more credible Jesus and to include in our search materials not presently in the canon of the church but which, it is now being argued, should be. But though we do all of this, we cannot escape that fact that what we are doing is exchanging one myth for another. As each change occurs, it will bring with it social and psychological changes which we may not wish and cannot foresee.

The Jesus myth originated from a Jewish trajectory into a Hellenistic world ruled by Roman Law. It was a time of great economic prosperity. Octavian, re-named Augustus, celebrated the supremacy of the empire and world peace in 17 BCE with a set of games and public displays unrivalled in their magnificence in the ancient world. Religious syncretism was the politically correct language of the day with the emperors, beginning but not ending with Augustus, proclaiming themselves as gods in a pantheon of cosmic others. They seem to have been comfortable with Zeus, as long as Zeus was comfortable with them.

To the Jews, all of this was heresy. Religiosity, politicized by the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE, paid lip service to Yahweh and strangled him with the Torah while internecine warfare tore at the heart of the tradition of the Jewish Kings until, once again, the hated Seleucids were reincarnated by the equally hated Romans. This was accomplished with the complicity of a Temple priesthood happy to regain its control of Judea. Galilee did not come under Roman control until after the decline of the Samaritan Herodians. Jesus did not live in a Roman province. Galilee was Jewish. (Albeit, ruled by Herodian kings who never overcame the status of interloper in the minds of the ruling families of the day.)

Into this world came Jesus, whoever he was.

To the Christian Jews in Egypt, Christ and his mother both existed before their appearance on earth in human form. The "Gospel" of Hebrews addresses Jesus at his baptism as son, not by God, but by the spirit which turns out to be his mother. He is not merely led by the spirit, He is united with her.<sup>2</sup>

To the Ebionite Jews, Jesus became God's son at baptism. He was thus not divine by nature, or at birth, but only by "adoptionism". It remains unclear whether Jesus remained human throughout his life or was transformed to a semi-divine status after his "adoption".<sup>3</sup>

To the Nazorean Jews, writing in Aramaic, Jesus is presented in much the same terms as in the canonical Matthew, although with "corrections". Thus, as reported by Jerome in *Against Pelagians*, the following story is told.

"The mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him, "John the Baptist baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Let's go and get baptized by him.

"But he said to them, "How have I sinned? So why should I go and get baptized by him? Only if I don't know what I am talking about."<sup>4</sup>

The canonical Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. But was he?

A consensus view, represented by the scholars of the "Jesus Seminar" has emerged which, in my view, places the "historical" Jesus in much more remarkable light than Christian orthodoxy is willing to accommodate. It is also my view that "mainline" Christianity is experiencing substantial and unnecessary trauma in its reluctance to embrace the new reality which is also, of course, a new myth.

The following points emerge: <sup>5</sup>

*Jesus was an artisan.*

*Jesus was part of the "expendable" class.*

*Jesus associated with unclean or "disreputable" persons.*

*Jesus did not observe the purity protocol.*

Jesus understood his ministry as presaging not the end of the world but as its transformation and the establishment of God's "imperial rule". This was to happen in his lifetime.

Jesus used language to engage in dialogue with imperial Rome and the Temple priests. He had a political agenda.

He saw the world as he imagined God saw it. It was an alternative reality which he called the "Kingdom of God".

His parables were intended to show God at work, ie. a "New World Order".

Jesus did not have a doctrine of God. He had an "experience" of God.

His only purpose was to give expression to his view of the new reality of "God's Imperial Rule".

Jesus believed that God's reign was a present reality although not discernible to everyone.

Jesus' followers were "insiders" only to the extent that they were "outsiders".

The crucifixion was a political act of the State and not an act of the Temple priests. Priestly executions were conducted by stoning and in the subsequent history of Jewish-Christian relations, this point matters. James the Just was probably ecclesiastically murdered. Certainly, Stephen was.

Barbara Thiering proposes additional points to complete the new consensus.<sup>6</sup> The crucifixion was designed to satisfy the law but not to result in a death.

Jesus established a church in Corinth in conjunction with the Apostle Paul and broke with the Jerusalem Church which had transferred its leadership to his brother, James the Just.

Jesus, with the assistance of Luke, wrote the Gospel of John. The language of the Gospel was in peshet form, an insiders' code, to record the events of his life. The Revelation of John was a later historical document, also in the peshet form, to complete the history of the church to about 125 CE.

This is a view of Jesus, demythologized to suit the linguistic and archaeological scholarship of the last half of this century. The new "myth" that is beginning to emerge casts the role and the impact of Jesus in a light not unlike that of Martin Luther.

Both had a theological agenda with powerful political overtones. Both lived at a period of history in which events were overwhelming traditional religious and political orthodoxies. Both foresaw the establishment of a "new world order".

Both would have been aghast at the results of their efforts. Yet, each of them came to symbolize a cataclysmic point of change.

In the case of Jesus, the Jewish trajectory impelled him to action. While he was a member of an "expendable" class, he was of a lineage that carried with it both religious authority (the Davidic line) and political entitlement. His family was not without political influence. His father was a member of the Herodian council which oversaw a reaching out to Jews in Asia, Egypt and Rome. Herod saw the program as a means of giving expression to the need to preserve the faith among those in foreign lands. It was also a means of obtaining enormous revenues which were used for the maintenance of the Temple and other public works.<sup>7</sup>

The "tithes" this program imposed for annual membership, not only enhanced a cohesive identity amongst diaspora Jews, the corruption which came in its wake was not unlike the corruption of papal indulgence against which Luther rebelled.

In Jesus' case, his movement's religious purity was appropriated by gnostic groups which grew up during the same period as the Herodian Council was reaching out to the diaspora communities. The world view embraced by gnostics was not unlike that of Jesus himself. It was Hellenistic in origin and was enhanced by influences from Persia and beyond in the east. In the west, Coptic elements tempered the worship of Yahweh and, had the great Library of Alexandria not been destroyed by third century Christians, we would undoubtedly have a much richer historical inventory than we have.

It is interesting to observe that there does not appear to have been a proselytising element to the work of the Herodian mission to the diaspora. The emphasis was on retaining the identity of Judaism and faithfulness to the law in the diaspora communities. Not everyone had to "keep kosher" but it was better if one did. It was the tithe that mattered most. Nevertheless, the ease with which these same communities became centres of gnostic teaching, following the destruction of the Temple and the eventual dispersal of Jews from Israel in the second century, begs the question of doctrinal orthodoxy.

There never was a gnostic "movement" and there never was an identifiable school of "gnosticism". There were rather only gnostics.

Who were they? They were not Jews. They had no interest in the Jewish leadership of James the Just and the Jerusalem "fathers" of the faith. Paul himself was from modern-day Turkey and a Roman citizen, probably a relative of Herod the Great. His decision to establish a church in Asia (i.e. Corinth) rather than in the west is of critical interest.

The supremacy of "faith" over law was a gnostic element and the imagery of blood, death and bodily resurrection, and access through faith to "light" and the godhead, fitted comfortably into the world view of the Asian communities. Mithraism, Zoroastrianism and other Greek elements are freely intermingled in the schools of Christian faith which grew and were it not for the unfortunate politics of Nicea, and church politicians such as Eusebius, might not have prevailed.

What were the gnostics about? First, they were concerned with the totality of human experience. Who or what was God? Who or what was man? How does one define the good, and how does one define evil?

Free of the tradition of Yaweh, the quest was for a universal God who combined ALL in his own being. Man, as the supreme creation of God, must surely be capable of reflecting the greatness of God. Greeks knew well the principle of opposites and the principle of harmony in nature. Man, as the centrepiece of nature, by definition was a centrepiece of God. Clearly too, evil was a present reality both in man and in society, with a power to confound and to corrupt that its source had to be cosmic in nature. If not created by God, it must surely exist within the totality of His being.

Dualism is a term most frequently applied to gnostic thought. God as High God, exists in a realm sufficient unto Himself. Sophia, or Wisdom, was sent forth into the world but returned to Himself. Lesser gods, of whom Yahweh was only one, created man in their lesser image, and were it not for the corruption of the body, eternal life might have been granted by the creator to mortal men.

The cosmology and cosmogony of gnostics was not very different from the prevailing view of the ancient world. But gnostics interpreted it differently.

Kurt Randolph<sup>9</sup> describes it thus: "The earth, set according to the geocentric system at the centre of the cosmos, is surrounded by the air and eight heavenly spheres.

"The eight spheres consist of the seven planets and the fixed stars which close them off. Beyond them lies the realm of the unknown God, the Pleroma with its own graduated worlds, or aeons ... The world of the planetary spheres is the kingdom of fate, which frequently controls earthly affairs.

"... in mythological fashion (this world) is inhabited by demons, gods or spirits who often bear the name "rulers" or "commanders" (or archons). They sometimes form entire kingdoms with such an "archon" at its head.

"The chief archon, or real ruler of the world, is enthroned either in the seventh heaven or above it in the eighth, and is usually identical with the creator of the world, the Demiurge. The sphere of the eighth is variously evaluated: either it is still a part of the powers which rule the world and then the seat of the Demiurge

... occasionally it is also the realm of the twelve signs of the Zodiac which belong to the same category as the tyrannical planets. This sphere is an intermediate kingdom which already provides a transition to the real kingdom of light."

And here we have a problem. Interpreted too narrowly, the historical influence of gnosticism on the early church would lead us into doctrinal debate and a new fanaticism to rival that of the "religious right". Interpreted too broadly and we will find elements of Valentinianism and certain other gnostic writers in all of the religious revolutionaries, both sacred and secular, during the past two thousand years. Luther's "faith syndrome" is gnostic, and so is historical "determinism" gnostic and the working out of the "laws" of history would lead us through Nazism, Marxist-Leninism and Ayn Rand.

Within the early church, we must look for the concept of Demiurge as world creator, faith or wisdom as female, and salvation through "gnosis" and denial of the body by asceticism.

Evil for the Jews was the worship of false gods, of whom there were many. Evil for Gnostics was carnal desire or its opposite, for both released the spirit from bondage to the corruption of physical existence. For the Jews, the ruler of the world was the "law" and adherence to its code would find favour in God's eyes. Evil, to the gnostic, was a lower god, an archon who could strike without will and against which there was little if any protection.

As portrayed in the Christian canon, Jesus' theology sees God as a present reality Who can be known directly by anyone who has "ears to hear" or "eyes to see". His kingdom is already present and will be made manifest immediately, ie. within his lifetime.

Clearly, Jesus was not a gnostic but was descended from a common tradition. He was a Hellenic Jew rather than an Orthodox. Hellenism had prevailed over the prophets. His vision of the world and the law may have found favour amongst pacifist Essenes. He was a threat both to Rome and the Temple. His execution was inevitable. His movement split in two. The orthodox church in Jerusalem established a new centre of power in Rome under Peter, and the followers of James moved to the east.

The attraction of Jesus for gnostics, in my view, came from the immediacy of His vision of God. In Jesus they saw an image of the Divine and, through an elaborate theology based in mysticism and secrecy, they found a route to the High God or Light.

But there is an important point of contact between the Gospel of John and the Gnostics. John 14: 5-6 says:

"Lord we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way? Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

These words on billboards throughout the Christian world are used to imply authority for clergymen, popes and institutions. Each has a corner on that market.

The Gospel of John also introduces the "Logos" into the faith. If Jesus wrote the Gospel, it was clearly written after the crucifixion and after it had become clear that God's Imperial Rule would be established in the near future. What these words came to mean was self-knowledge through faith, through belief in a creed, through dreams, and through angels.

The "logos" comes to us through a myriad of redactors, each with his own agenda and authority. Perhaps, and in my view, the greatest, of these is the psychologist Carl Jung.

"In antiquity, the orthodox church insisted that humanity needs a way beyond its own power – a divinely given way – to approach God."<sup>10</sup>

Elaine Pagels writes that "the catholic church offered to those who would be lost without it, a way to salvation."

What gnostics had in common was an opposition to institutions. They disagreed with each other and they disagreed with established authority about everything, from the role of women, martyrdom and the "way" of salvation. What they shared in common was an uncompromising individualism.

The body was evil, the body was good. Perfection through opposites, not the Law. That was the gnostic way.

From the Nag Hammadi scrolls comes this poem which some scholars feel should be placed in a new Christian canon. The poem is "Thunder: Perfect Mind". One verse only for now.

*"I am the honoured / and the despised*

*I am the prostitute / and the respected woman.*

*I am the wife / and the virgin*

*I am the mother / and the daughter.*

*I am the members of my mother."*<sup>11</sup>

Evil and good are part of the same unity. The body is sinful: in lust comes goodness. There is no room here for the Jewish trajectory of the unclean, of a Temple, of a hereditary priesthood, of a book of wisdom or five books of laws.. There is nothing here of Creed, dogmatics or a divine hierarchy of bishops, priests, moderators or gurus.

Williams, in a note to chapter 7 of "Rethinking Gnosticism", quotes the 18<sup>th</sup> century historian Johann Lorenz on this point:

"... gnostic doctrine relating to morals and practice was of two kinds which were extremely different from each other. The greatest part of this sect adopted rules of life that were full of austerity ... all the gnostics, however, were not so severe in their moral discipline. Some maintained that there was no moral difference in human actions; and thus confounding right and wrong, they gave loose rein to all the passions ... There is nothing surprising or unaccountable in this difference between gnostic moralists; for, when we examine the matter with attention, we shall find that the same doctrine may very naturally have given rise to these opposite sentiments. As they all deemed the body the centre and the source of evil, those of the sect who were of a morose and austere disposition would be naturally led ... to mortify and combat the body as enemy of the soul; and those who were of a voluptuous turn might also consider the actions of the body as having no relation, either of congruity or incongruity, to the state of a soul in communion with God."

The gnostic world view is popular today amongst the New Age philosophies. Like the gnostics in the ancient world, current writings are contradictory, quite confusing, anti-establishment if not anarchistic, and quite exciting. The modern philosophical base has been described by Carl Jung. It will be interesting to see what comes of it all. But one thing is certain. The Old World Order has passed away. It should be buried.

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<sup>1</sup> Kempton Hewitt, C.M. "A New Plot for the Jesus Story". p. 123, Westar Institute, Fall 1998 Meeting, Seminar Papers, Santa Rosa, CA. Kempton Hewitt, C.M. "A New Plot for the Jesus Story". p. 123, Westar Institute, Fall 1998 Meeting, Seminar Papers, Santa Rosa, CA.

<sup>2</sup> "Gospel of Hebrews" in "The Complete Gospels", Funk/Miller, Polebridge Press. "Gospel of Hebrews" in "The Complete Gospels", Funk/Miller, Polebridge Press.

<sup>3</sup> Gospel of the Ebionites" *ibid.* p. 437 Gospel of the Ebionites" *ibid.* p. 437

<sup>4</sup> "Gospel of the Nazoreans" *ibid.* p. 443 "Gospel of the Nazoreans" *ibid.* p. 443

<sup>5</sup> "The Crafting of the Kingdom", Arthur J. Dewey, pp 106-7, Westar Institute, Fall 1998 Meeting, Seminar Papers, Santa Rosa, CA. "The Crafting of the Kingdom", Arthur J. Dewey, pp 106-7, Westar Institute, Fall 1998 Meeting, Seminar Papers, Santa Rosa, CA.



<sup>6</sup> Thiering, Barbara. "Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls", Doubleday. "Jesus of the Apocalypse: The Life and Times of Jesus After the Crucifixion". Doubleday. "The Book that Jesus Wrote", Doubleday. Thiering, Barbara. "Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls", Doubleday. "Jesus of the Apocalypse: The Life and Times of Jesus After the Crucifixion". Doubleday. "The Book that Jesus Wrote", Doubleday.

<sup>7</sup> Crossan, John Dominic. "The Historical Jesus: The Life and Times of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant". Harper, San Francisco. Crossan, John Dominic. "The Historical Jesus: The Life and Times of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant". Harper, San Francisco.

<sup>8</sup> "Rethinking Gnosticism". Michael Allen Williams, Princeton, p. 292. "Rethinking Gnosticism". Michael Allen Williams, Princeton, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> "Gnosis", Kurt Rudolph. Harper and Row, pp 64 - 67. "Gnosis", Kurt Rudolph. Harper and Row, pp 64 - 67.

<sup>10</sup> "The Gnostic Gospels". Elaine Pagels, Random House. 120 - 1 "The Gnostic Gospels". Elaine Pagels, Random House. 120 - 1

<sup>11</sup> "Gnosis". Kurt Randolph, p. 81. "Gnosis". Kurt Randolph, p. 81.