

THE GNOSTIC SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Nag Hammadi Library

The Treatise on the Resurrection

INTRODUCTION: What is Gnosticism?

“**Gnosis**”* *intuitive knowledge of spiritual truths*) and “**Gnosticism**” are still rather **arcane** (*ahr-'keyn - Known or understood by only a few*) terms, though in the last two decades they have been increasingly encountered in the vocabulary of contemporary society. The word *Gnosis* derives from Greek and connotes “*knowledge*” or the “*act of knowing*”. On first hearing, it is sometimes confused with another more common term of the same root but opposite sense: **agnostic** (*One who is skeptical about the existence of God but does not profess true*), literally “not knowing”. The Greek language differentiates between rational, propositional knowledge, and a distinct form of knowing obtained by experience or perception. It is this latter knowledge gained from interior comprehension and personal experience that constitutes gnosis.¹

In the first century of the Christian era the term “**Gnostic**” came to denote a **heterodox** (*het-er-o-dox - Not in agreement with accepted beliefs, especially in church doctrine or dogma*) segment of the diverse new Christian community. Among early followers of Christ it appears there were groups who **delineated** - *de-lin-e-at-ed - represented accurately or precisely*) themselves from the greater household of the Church by claiming not simply a belief in Christ and his message, but a “**special witness**” or **revelatory** - *re-ve-la-to-ry - pointing out or revealing clearly*) experience of the divine. It was this experience or *gnosis* that set the true follower of Christ apart, so they asserted. Stephan Hoeller explains that these Christians held a “conviction that direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings, and, moreover, that the attainment of such knowledge must always constitute the supreme achievement of human life.”²

What the “**authentic truths of existence**” affirmed by the Gnostics were will be briefly reviewed below, but first a historical overview of the early Church might be useful. In the initial century and a half of Christianity -- the period when we find first mention of “Gnostic” Christians -- no single acceptable format of Christian thought had yet been defined. During this formative period Gnosticism was one of many currents moving within the deep waters of the new religion. The ultimate course Christianity, and Western culture with it, would take was undecided at this early moment. Gnosticism was one of the seminal influences shaping that destiny.

That Gnosticism was, at least briefly, in the mainstream of Christianity is witnessed by the fact that one of its most influential teachers, Valentinus, may have been in consideration during the mid-second century for election as the Bishop of Rome.³ Born in Alexandria around 100 C.E., Valentinus distinguished himself at an early age as an extraordinary teacher and leader in the highly educated and diverse Alexandrian Christian community. In mid-life he migrated from Alexandria to the Church's

evolving capital, Rome, where he played an active role in the public affairs of the Church. A prime characteristic of Gnostics was their claim to be keepers of sacred traditions, gospels, rituals, and successions – esoteric – (**es-o-ter-ic** - *Intended for or understood by only a particular group*) matters for which many Christians were either not properly prepared or simply not inclined. Valentinus, true to this Gnostic predilection, apparently professed to have received a special apostolic sanction through Theudas, a disciple and initiate of the Apostle Paul, and to be a custodian of doctrines and rituals neglected by what would become Christian orthodoxy.⁴ Though an influential member of the Roman church in the mid-second century, by the end of his life Valentinus had been forced from the public eye and branded a heretic by the developing **orthodoxy** (**or-tho-dox-y** - *Adhering to the accepted or traditional and established faith*) Church.

While the historical and theological details are far too complex for proper **explication** (**ex-plic-a-tion** - *the act of making clear or removing obscurity from the meaning of a word or symbol or expression etc.*) here, the tide of history can be said to have turned against Gnosticism in the middle of the second century. No Gnostic after Valentinus would ever come so near prominence in the greater Church. Gnosticism's emphasis on personal experience, its continuing revelations and production of new scripture, its **asceticism** (**as-cet-i-cism** *extreme self-denial*) and **paradoxically** (*A seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true*) contrasting **libertine** (*One who acts without moral restraint*) postures, were all met with increasing suspicion. By 180 C.E. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, was publishing his first attacks on Gnosticism as heresy, a labor that would be continued with increasing vehemence (**ve-he-mence** - *intensity or forcefulness of expression*) by the church Fathers throughout the next century.

Orthodoxy Christianity was deeply and profoundly influenced by its struggles with Gnosticism in the second and third centuries. Formulations of many central traditions in Christian theology came as reflections and shadows of this confrontation with the Gnosis.⁵ But by the end of the fourth century the struggle was essentially over: the evolving ecclesia had added the force of political correctness to dogmatic denunciation, and with this sword so-called "heresy" was painfully cut from the Christian body. Gnosticism as a Christian tradition was largely **eradicated** (*utterly destroyed*), its remaining teachers ostracized – (*To exclude from a group*), and its sacred books destroyed. All that remained for students seeking to understand Gnosticism in later centuries were the denunciations and fragments preserved in the **patristic** (**pa-tris-tic** - *Of or relating to the fathers of the early Christian church or their writings*) **heresiologies** – (**huh-ree-zee-ol-uh-jee** - *a reference work on heresies*). Or at least so it seemed until the mid-twentieth century.

The Treatise on the Resurrection

Translated by Malcolm L. Peel

Some there are, my son *Rheginos*, who want to learn many things. They have this goal when they are occupied with questions whose answer is lacking. If they succeed with these, they usually think very highly of themselves. But I do not think that they have stood within the Word of Truth. They seek rather their own rest, which we have received through our Savior, our Lord Christ. We received it when we came to know the truth and rested ourselves upon it. But since you ask us pleasantly what is proper concerning the resurrection, I am writing you that it is necessary. To be sure, many are lacking faith in it, but there are a few who find it. So then, let us discuss the matter.

How did the Lord proclaim things while he existed in flesh and after he had revealed himself as Son of God? He lived in this place where you remain, speaking about the *Law of Nature* - but I call it '*Death*'. Now the *Son of God, Rheginos*, was *Son of Man*. He embraced them both, possessing the humanity and the divinity, *so that on the one hand he might vanquish death through his being Son of God*, and that on the other through the Son of Man the restoration to the *Pleroma (the totality of divine powers)* might occur; because he was originally from above, a seed of Truth, before this structure had come into being. In this many dominions and divinities came into existence.

I know that I am presenting the solution in difficult terms, but there is nothing difficult in the Word of Truth. But since the *Solution* appeared so as not to leave anything hidden, but to reveal all things openly concerning existence - the destruction of evil on the one hand, the revelation of the elect on the other. This is the *emanation (em-a-na-tion - something that is emitted or radiated)* of Truth and Spirit, Grace is of the Truth.

The Savior swallowed up death - (of this) you are not reckoned as being ignorant - for he put aside the world which is perishing. He transformed himself into an *imperishable (that will not die or decay) Aeon (a divine power or nature emanating from the Supreme Being and playing various roles in the operation of the universe)* and raised himself up, having swallowed the visible by the invisible, and he gave us the way of our immortality. Then, indeed, as the Apostle said, "We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him". Now if we are manifest in this world *wearing him*, we are that one's beams, and we are embraced by him until our setting, that is to say, our death in this life. We are drawn to heaven by him, like beams by the sun, not being restrained by anything. This is the spiritual resurrection which swallows up the *psychic (Capable of extraordinary mental processes, such as extrasensory perception and mental telepathy)* in the same way as the fleshly.

But if there is one who does not believe, he does not have the (*capacity to be*) persuaded. For it is the domain of faith, my son, and not that which belongs to *persuasion (induce belief or action)*: the dead shall arise! There is one who believes among the philosophers who are in this world. At least he will arise. And let not the philosopher who is in this world have cause to believe that he is one who returns himself by himself - and (*that*) because of our faith! For we have known the Son of Man, and we have

believed that he rose from among the dead. This is he of whom we say, "He became the destruction of death, as he is a great one in whom they believe." Great are those who believe.

The thought of those who are saved shall not perish. The mind of those who have known him shall not perish. Therefore, we are elected to salvation and redemption since we are **predestined** (*decree or determine beforehand*) from the beginning not to fall into the foolishness of those who are without knowledge, but we shall enter into the wisdom of those who have known the Truth. Indeed, the Truth which is kept cannot be abandoned, nor has it been. "Strong is the system of the **Pleroma** (*refers to the totality of divine powers*); small is that which broke loose (and) became (the) world. But the All is what is **encompassed** (*include as part of something broader*). It has not come into being; it was existing." So, never doubt concerning the resurrection, my son Rheginos! For if you were not existing in flesh, you received flesh when you entered this world. Why will you not receive flesh when you ascend into the **Aeon** – (*a divine power or nature emanating from the Supreme Being and playing various roles in the operation of the universe*)? That which is better than the flesh is that which is for (the) cause of life. That which came into being on your account, is it not yours? Does not that which is yours exist with you? Yet, while you are in this world, what is it that you lack? This is what you have been making every effort to learn.

The afterbirth of the body is old age, and you exist in corruption. You have absence as a gain. For you will not give up what is better if you depart. That which is worse has **diminution** (*dim-i-nu-tion - incompleteness*), but there is grace for it.

Nothing, then, redeems us from this world. But the All which we are, we are saved. We have received salvation from end to end. Let us think in this way! Let us comprehend in this way!

But there are some (who) wish to understand, in the enquiry about those things they are looking into, whether he who is saved, if he leaves his body behind, will be saved immediately. Let no one doubt concerning this. [...]. indeed, the visible members which are dead shall not be saved, for (only) the living members which exist within them would arise.

What, then, is the resurrection? It is always the disclosure of those who have risen. For if you remember reading in the Gospel that Elijah appeared and Moses with him, do not think the resurrection is an illusion. It is no illusion, but it is truth! Indeed, it is more fitting to say the world is an illusion, rather than the resurrection which has come into being through our Lord the Savior, Jesus Christ.

But what am I telling you now? Those who are living shall die. How do they live in an illusion? The rich have become poor, and the kings have been overthrown. Everything is prone to change. The world is an illusion! - lest, indeed, I rail at things to excess!

But the resurrection does not have this **aforesaid** (*being the one previously mentioned or spoken of*) character, for it is the truth which stands firm. It is the revelation of what is, and the transformation of things, and a transition into newness. For imperishability descends upon the perishable; the light flows down upon the darkness, swallowing it up; and the **Pleroma** (*the totality of divine powers*) fills up the deficiency. These are the symbols and the images of the resurrection. He it is who makes the good.

Therefore, do not think in part, O Rheginos, nor live in conformity with this flesh for the sake of **unanimity** (*u-na-nim-i-ty - being of one mind*), but flee from the divisions and the **fetters** (*A chain or shackle*)

for the ankles or feet), and already you have the resurrection. For if he who will die knows about himself that he will die - even if he spends many years in this life, he is brought to this - why not consider yourself as risen and (already) brought to this? *If you have the resurrection but continue as if you are to die - and yet that one knows that he has died - why, then, do I ignore your lack of exercise?* It is fitting for each one to practice in a number of ways, and he shall be released from this Element that he may not fall into error but shall himself receive again what at first was.

These things I have received from the generosity of my Lord, Jesus Christ. I have taught you and your brethren, my sons, considering them, while I have not omitted any of the things suitable for strengthening you. But if there is one thing written which is obscure in my exposition of the Word, I shall interpret it for you (pl.) when you (pl.) ask. But now, do not be jealous of anyone who is in your number when he is able to help.

Many are looking into this which I have written to you. To these I say: Peace (be) among them and grace. I greet you and those who love you (pl.) in brotherly Love.