

28. McGiffert, Arthur Cushman, *A History of Christian Thought, Volume I: Early and Eastern, From Jesus to John of Damascus* (Charles Scribner's Sons 1932)

On the first two pages of his book, written in 1932 before the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library finds, McGiffert starts by painting a background scene. The scene includes the hope among some of the Jews for a new golden age, one to be ushered in by God's intervention. Of course given the dire straits the people were in, under Roman oppression, some saw this light shine at the end of an apocalyptically dark and violent tunnel. Of course there were also those who liked and even profited from the present situation by collaborating with the forces of occupation. In the midst of this situation, Jesus appears.

Jesus is educated as a Jew, reading his scriptures, and is influenced by some outsiders like John the Baptist. But he leaves us no writings. All that is available regarding the life of Jesus is the testimony of his devotees, as filtered through later followers who began to write down what they knew.

McGiffert's first chapter is a culling of early tradition from the Gospels and Acts. He emphasizes pretty much the same things later scholars emphasize as early tradition.

His next chapter is on Paul, then follows a chapter on John and Ignatius, and in both cases he suggests what was added to the first layer of tradition by these early Christian leaders. His reading is quite similar to that of more recent scholars' writings on these topics, in my opinion. Then comes the chapter I was most interested in, Chapter 4, "The Gnostics."

McGiffert declares outright on his pages 45 through 47 that Gnosticism was a pagan development that permeated the Graeco-Roman world, and that it was a variegated thing. It

attracted followers in Judaism though its dualistic stance was not compatible with Jewish monism. Its adherents generally (it was a variegated thing, after all) sought salvation in terms of escape out of the evil world into the purer and holier spiritual state of being. When a Christian teacher spoke convincingly of a God incarnated to do just that, Gnostics became believers. It was the Pauline vision of Christianity that had such appeal to them.

The Gnosticism in Paul is discussed and contrasted with the Gnosticism in John on pages 30 through 36. Both are compared with main-line Gnosticism. This is done on pages 50 through 58. I looked through the rest of the book and then returned it to the library since my questions had been addressed.

What were my questions? Were Gnostics the first Christians? McGiffert says no. Was Paul a Gnostic? McGiffert says no. Was John a Gnostic? McGiffert says no.

Gnosticism didn't invade Christianity until the theology of Paul became widely known. Both Paul and John said some of the same things Gnostics said using the same language. But there were also significant differences that keep Paul and John outside of the large and variegated tent that is Gnosticism, and is Christian Gnosticism as well (Valentinian Gnosticism is much milder than that begun by others.

Paul at his Gnostic best teaches dualism, a war between matter and spirit going on within each of us. Salvation is by the grace of God alone. Salvation is attainable in this life and resurrection is a spiritual and not a physical thing. Gnostics wholeheartedly agreed with all of the above. But against this Paul still has respect for the God of Genesis, whereas Gnostics painted him as a demi-urge, or worse. Paul said the law no longer applied, Gnostics generally threw

out the entire Old Testament.

Gnostics taught the doctrine of emanations, God emanating into lower spheres and depotentializing until matter could be contacted. This is how the demi-urge that created this world was connected to God. This was the way Gnostics brought this evil matter out of a good God: at a great distance from that God.

Paul's idea of God entering a human body through a woman, growing up, suffering and dying to be resurrected in spirit was unacceptable to the Gnostic view. Though they saw themselves as sparks from the Divine destined to return to the Divine, they were very far removed from that Divinity. Paul's God moving directly into matter was close to being blasphemous to most Gnostics.

John wrote a Gnostic sentence in John 17:3 where he said: "This is life eternal to know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou didst send." This became a favorite among Christian Gnostics. Yet John seemed to believe in a physical resurrection, in contrast with Paul (a point made on page 34). John also believed the life of Christ, and what he did and said in that life, as being important. Paul believed that all that really mattered was his death and resurrection. John believed obedience was important as a perquisite for salvation, Paul taught that obedience was an evidence of salvation.

Gnostics tended to being ascetic, as did Paul, but carried it to extremes. Gnostics also put emphasis on "rites, ceremonies, and sacraments" that mediated the saving, mystical revelation of Christ, something that seems not too interesting to Paul. Gnostics, in contrast to both Paul and John, believed only an elite could be saved, returned to their Divine state. Some taught that normal Christians, through

faith and works, could be saved into a lower level of salvation.

This is all very interesting to me because of my past belief in Mormon doctrines that captures all of the above and reconciled almost all the doctrines mentioned as characteristic of Paul's view, John's view, and the Gnostics' views. But I have departed a long way from the questions posed above, which were already answered above. Yes. No. No.