

**A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO**  
**THE LOST GOSPELS**



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*Front cover: Mary Magdalen. Detail from Deposition of the Cross scene  
over St John of the Cross side altar by P. Verkade (1927) in Carmelites’  
church in Döbling, Vienna*

*Title page: photo by Chris Monaghan*

*Opposite: The Nag Hammadi papyrus books inside leather covers*

# INTRODUCTION



In 1945 an Arab farmer discovered an earthenware jar filled with thirteen papyrus books near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. These books were Coptic translations of ancient texts originally written in Greek. Included in this collection were the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel to the Egyptians.

These writings and the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Judas are often referred to as “Gnostic Gospels” or “Gnostic Apocrypha” and they are influenced to varying degrees by a movement that took its name from the word for knowledge (gnosis) widespread in various forms characterised by its very distinctive myth of the origins of the world and humanity, its sectarian nature, and its esoteric mysterious language.

Eventually, fully developed Gnosticism was judged not to be orthodox; but it would be a great disservice to these writings to think

that there is not much that we can learn from them since they were written by devout Christians steeped in the Jewish scriptures, the Gospels, and the writings of Paul.

These works are widely available in bookshops or online ([www.gospels.net](http://www.gospels.net)), leaving contemporary Christians with many questions about their message, scope, and importance.

Claims are made about them having a story of Jesus and the early Church that runs counter to those found in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, and this leaves people either fascinated, perturbed or both.

Some scholars argue that the Gospel of Thomas preserves some of Jesus’ sayings that were not included in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. This continues to be an area of vigorous debate among scholars as they wrestle with what criteria and methods should be employed to determine the original sayings of Jesus.

Many of the lost gospels were “attributed” to the disciples in order to find wide acceptance. Many of them were written between the second and fourth centuries, such as the gospels named after Judas, Matthias, and Andrew. Some of them are Gnostic in character indicating a late date – the Gospel of Barnabas even has Islamic characteristics that indicate a much later date.

These writings come to us from a time before the contents of the New Testament canon were formally determined. They are filled with allusions to and direct citations of the four canonical gospels and the writings of Paul.



Above: Map shows where original scrolls were found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt

## WHEN THE GOSPELS WERE BEING WRITTEN

There are many other writings that were not influenced by Gnosticism, and these too have now been designated as non-canonical or apocryphal. Along with the texts named above, they invite us into the early centuries of the church's life from Egypt to Syria and Rome.

They come to us from a time before the contents of the New Testament canon were formally determined. It was a dynamic time when local churches preserved their own versions of the gospel traditions even as the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John were emerging as authoritative late in the second century.

While many of these writings were not included in the New Testament as we know it today, they are important witnesses to the esteem in which the canonical writings were held and how widely they were used in the first centuries of the church's life. These writings are filled with allusions and direct citations of the gospels and the writings of Paul.

The introduction to the Gospel of Luke makes clear that the task of preserving and interpreting the traditions of Jesus was not isolated to a few select authors: "... many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us ..." Luke 1:1.

Eventually, the Church had to make judgements about what was considered normative and what was to be excluded. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons around 180 CE, stated "It is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer than they are." – 3.11.8 *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies).

This very statement testifies to the ongoing debate among early Christian groups about what texts should be given pride of place and preserved

as authentic, and what should be jettisoned. Some writings were rejected because they were deemed to be the product of the creative imaginations of particular local churches, others because they were seen to be suspect and sometimes heretical.

These days we are so fortunate to have access to fragments of writings, early references to Jewish-Christian gospels, Infancy gospels, gospels about the death and Resurrection of Jesus, dialogues with the risen Jesus, and sayings gospels. While some are called gospels, that does not mean they are all narrative biographies like the gospels we are familiar with.

Many early Christians naturally wanted to explore the gaps and questions that existed, such as the early life of Jesus and Mary, and the content of conversations that Jesus had with the disciples after his resurrection. And so these writings show us the questions and concerns of different local communities.

For this reason, they should be treasured because they provide us with glimpses into the wide variety of concerns, questions, and approaches that existed in the first centuries of the Christian movement that was made up of many local churches and networks.

We can be surprised or disconcerted by the variety of approaches, streams of thought and lack of cohesion these writings reflect, but if we look at the number of Christian churches today, and our lack of unity, the same observation could be made.

*Apocrypha* is a term used for writings that are not accepted as part of the canonical scriptures.



There is so much to explore and since this is a *Friendly Guide*, we

Gnostic writings ask fundamental questions about where we come from, where are we going, the purpose of life, and why the world is as wounded and fractured as it is.



cannot go into great detail about such a vast range of writings – but we can make a start here and appreciate their contexts and content. Then we can develop a fuller appreciation of their world, concerns and interests and the people of faith that produced and preserved them.

The gospels that have been chosen are a snapshot of the richness and diversity of early Christian writings during the early centuries of the Church's life. There are gospels that focus on the early life of Jesus and Mary, such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of James.

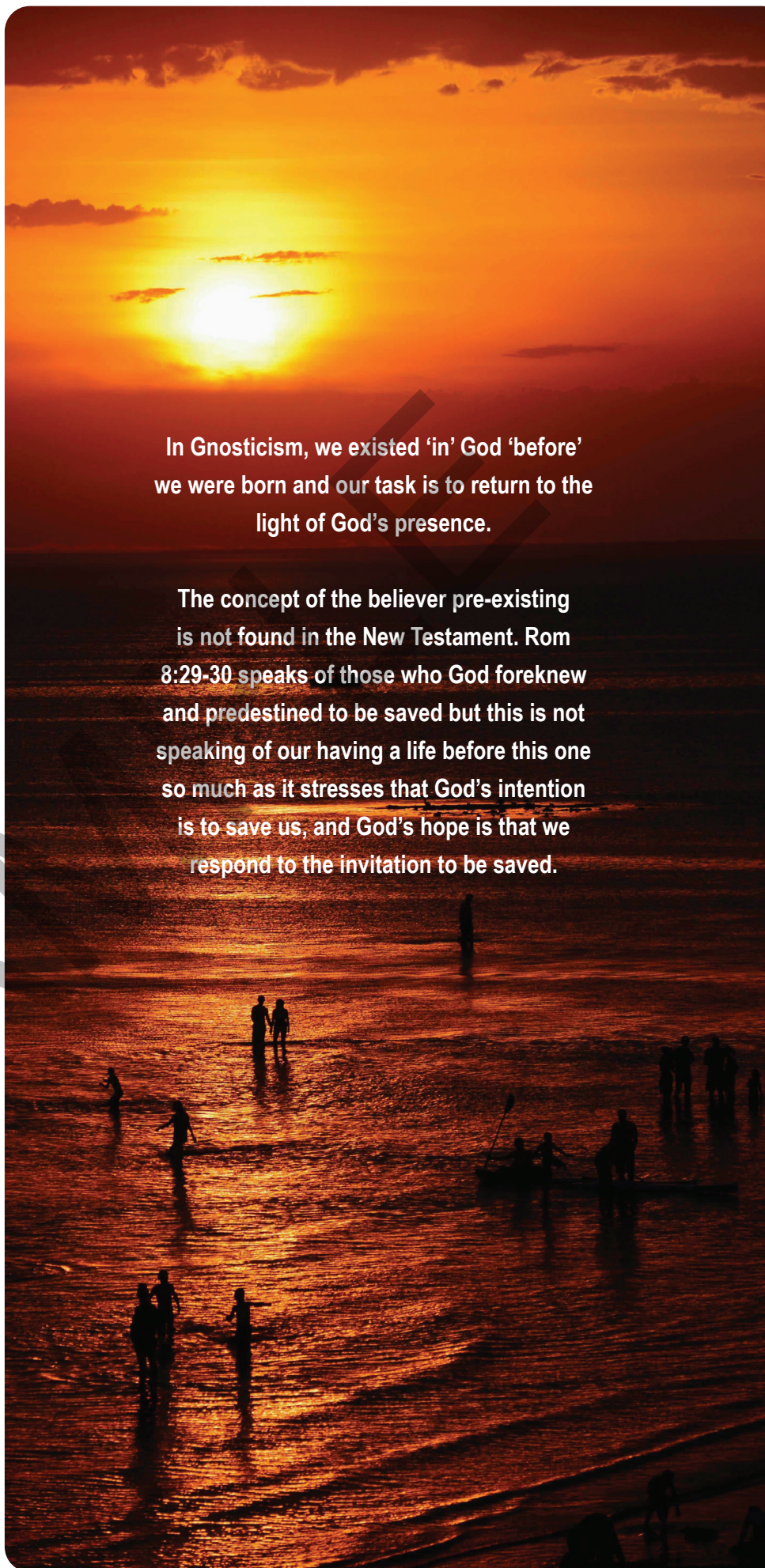
Some writings are focused on Jesus' Passion and Resurrection, such as the Gospel of Peter, or on his teachings after the Resurrection. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene has been chosen as an example. Among the writings found at Nag Hammadi, The Gospel of Thomas, the Gnostic Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Truth are made up of isolated sayings by Jesus. These writings are known as 'sayings' gospels. In this short introductory overview, it would be impossible to adequately treat this extensive body of literature but these snapshots have been chosen as representative.

## WHAT WAS GNOSTICISM?

The eminent Yale scholar Bentley Layton describes the Gnostic writings as taking us into a world that is "a breathtaking world of fantastic symbols, beautifully intricate myths, weird heavenly denizens and extraordinary poetry".

The style of Gnostic writings might confuse and unsettle us but their questions about life are ones that we also share. They ask fundamental questions about where we come from, where are we going, the purpose of life, and why the world is as wounded and fractured as it is.

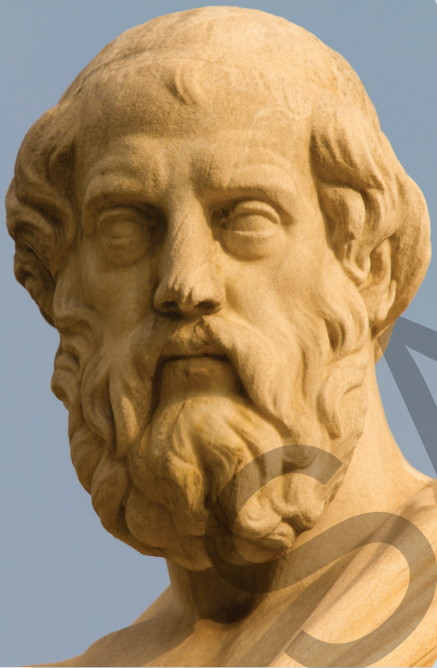
Gnosticism was not a movement



**In Gnosticism, we existed 'in' God 'before' we were born and our task is to return to the light of God's presence.**

**The concept of the believer pre-existing is not found in the New Testament. Rom 8:29-30 speaks of those who God foreknew and predestined to be saved but this is not speaking of our having a life before this one so much as it stresses that God's intention is to save us, and God's hope is that we respond to the invitation to be saved.**

**Plato: one of the students of Socrates and a teacher of Aristotle; a philosopher in ancient Greece; one of the most influential thinkers in human history. Most historians place his birth date at between 429 and 427 BCE. Died in 348 or 347 BCE. His work was a major influence on Christian thought from St Augustine of Hippo in the 3rd century CE through to medieval and Renaissance times.**



—w—  
**Ignorance,  
 the root and stem  
 of all evil.**

*Plato*



that was uniquely Christian – it took various forms. One major influence was Neoplatonism, which was the re-emergence of Platonic thought regarding the origins and creation of the universe and humanity found in Plato's *Timaeus*.

Platonic thought's division between the ideal world and our world deeply influenced both Jewish and Christian Gnosticism. Key concepts were that of body and soul, the real and the ideal. Plato's understanding – of the ideal world as opposed to our world – affected Gnostic myths about creation and their evaluation of it in largely negative terms. Plato's idea was that the unmoved mover and origin of all things did not create the world – that was the work of a demiurge. In Platonic thought, this demiurge was a benign master-builder creating a world in accord with the divine design.

## THE GNOSTIC WORLDVIEW

**T**he divide between the ideal and the real, between the spiritual and the physical, light and darkness deeply influenced the Gnostic worldview. They believed that every human being has a spark of the divine within them and it is only by knowledge that comes from the saviour and redeemer that we can be freed from an imperfect material world that decays and dies and come to our eternal destiny.

On that journey home, the soul would have to overcome multiple obstacles and powers that opposed it. Through *knowledge*, the Gnostic would be empowered to successfully undertake the journey.

Baptism was a very important ritual for Christian Gnostics since it was by means of baptism that they would be initiated and empowered. This union of the initiated person with God was referred to using the beautiful and intimate imagery of the Bridal Chamber.

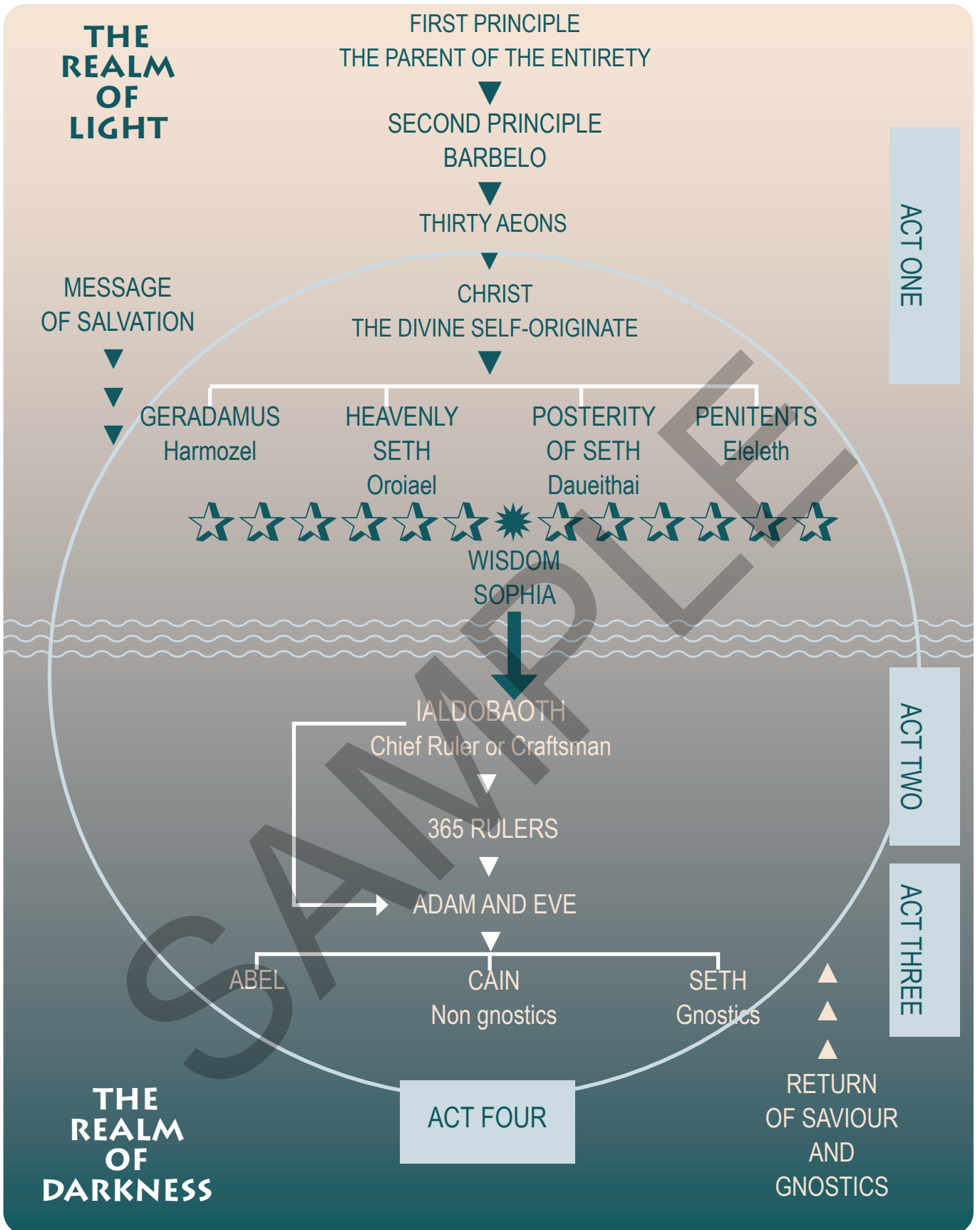
In Gnostic thought, the world and our human origins become much more fraught and conflicted than in Plato's *Timaeus* myth. The Gnostic story was a highly complex myth that took many forms. One example is that of The Secret Book of John, also known as The Apocryphon of John.

In this text, the origin of all that is (god) expanded from a solitary being to a second principle Barbelo/Barbero, and then into ten emanations called aeons/realms. The last of these was Wisdom (Sophia) the mother of the living. In this the anointed is the only-begotten and before him there are four luminaries: Harmozel, Oroiael, Daeithai, Eleleth. *See diagram opposite*

With them are Adamas (the perfect human) with Harmozel; Seth (son of man) with Oroiael; the descendants of Seth are holy ones with Daeithai; and the souls of those who have repented late. The spiritual universe was filled and then Ialdobaath stole that divine power from Wisdom and created the material universe, dominating our world through 365 rulers. The power that Ialdobaath stole was recovered partly by Wisdom.

For Gnostics, the battle for humanity and creation continues, and it is by means of a heavenly saviour that people can be awakened and overcome the rulers and bondage to the body and so be empowered to journey back to the light.

Jewish and Christian Gnosticism shared an apocalyptic worldview. Jewish apocalyptic literature was already marked by battles between the forces of good and evil, and by traditions of fallen angels at war with God. People hoped for a resolution of conflict in the created order and in the heavens. This apocalyptic worldview lies behind the longing for the Kingdom of God that formed such an essential part of the preaching of Jesus, preserved in his parables and in the Lord's Prayer.



This graphic outlines one form of the complex Gnostic creation myth that unfolds in four acts. **ACT ONE** describes the first stages of creation and various supernatural powers. **ACT TWO** deals with the creation of the material world and the rulers that will impede humanity's return to the light.

**ACT THREE** is concerned with the creation of humanity. **ACT FOUR** explains the quest that is set before human beings to return to God by means of knowledge of the Saviour.

'Gnostic' means 'having knowledge, especially secret or esoteric spiritual knowledge'.

Source: Ancient Greek γνωστικός, (gnōstikós)



**Valentinus was a second-century Egyptian Christian, taught in Alexandria, who arrived in Rome about 136 and whose teachings were later declared to be heretical.**

*Below: Saint Valentinus icon, anon*

Gnosticism reinterpreted Genesis' accounts of creation in ways that mainstream Christians eventually judged as inauthentic, because the Gnostics viewed the material world as flawed. In Genesis, God created the world in an ordered and loving fashion, declaring it good and blessed. In Gnostic thought, however, Israel's God was seen to be jealous, and this did not fit with the Gnostic view of God existing beyond all limitations and human emotions.

It follows that as mainstream Christianity emerged, it had difficulty reconciling the Gnostic understanding of the physical universe – as created by Ialdabaoth, the intermediary and distorted demiurge – with the biblical accounts of a loving God. Gnosticism was essentially dualistic in its worldview. This drove a wedge between God and creation in ways that were at odds with the Judeo-Christian appreciation of God's intimate and enduring relationship with all creation.

In Christian Gnosticism the

figure of Valentinus (c. 100-180) loomed large. He came to Rome around 136 and only fragments of his writings are still accessible to us. Valentinus had considerable impact because he built a bridge between Gnosticism and more orthodox Christianity. Ironically, since he was so successful his opponents considered him dangerous because of his blurring of the divide between the two streams of thought. He was able to maintain the authority of the canonical writings by interpreting them allegorically.

This enabled him to honour the scriptures and reinterpret them through the filter of Gnostic thought and myth. The Gospel of Truth is generally considered to represent Valentinian thought and it contains much that is both mystical and quite beautiful. This serves as a reminder not to demonise the works of Gnostic Christians whose commitment to living a spiritual and Christian life was no less authentic and well-meaning than our own.

