



Research Paper

Gnostic Christians and the Problem of Evil

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ABSTRACT- This brief paper presents the problem of evil in the context of Gnostic Christian beliefs. Christian form of Gnosticism developed in the 2nd century and formed one of the branches that were committed to the interpretation of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Gnosticism was a spiritual way that developed with the confluence of the teachings of many cultures. Gnostics preferred allegorical interpretation of scriptures to literal interpretations. They believed that literal interpretation was for the simple-minded people, while allegorical interpretation required sophisticated thinking. Gnostic Christians tried to understand the teachings of the Septuagint and Jesus Christ through their knowledge of the symbols and principles found in Platonism and Judaism, among others. Gnostic Christian writings were not preserved well. But their appearance in polemical writings of extant literature from around the same time and the discovery of some manuscripts provide us enough to carry our speculation. The views of Valentinus, Marcion and a few non-canonical gospel writers have been outlined.

KEYWORDS - Gnostic, Christianity, problem of evil, Jesus Christ, flesh, spirit

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I. INTRODUCTION

The century when Gnostic Christian teachings flourished was a century that needed to make sense of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in light of the many events that transpired since the day of his resurrection. Jesus' second coming had not occurred yet, despite of the suggestion of his imminent return. One of his followers, Paul, was a prolific writer who wrote many things about Christ but never developed a systematic Christology. The Jewish temple that had held a significant role in the lives of early Christians was destroyed. The Christian movement was scattered and unregulated. All these factors led to the development of different Christian communities who followed Jesus in their own ways. Gnostic Christians took the path of esoterism. Gnostic Christians thought that dreams and visions had profound importance in the discovery of truth. They did not find the need to establish standards of conformity and legitimacy among the interpretations. This validated a wide range of convictions. While some went the ascetic path, others immersed themselves into promiscuity. Some rejected the significance of the Septuagint others however saw the same as a necessary precursor to the mission of Jesus.

Gnostic Christians did not identify the origin of evil with moral failing. Evil was caused by emotional distress and confusion. Identifying divine inside of each person also meant that the individual itself was the source of its reality. It was no longer constrained by the rules of others. An enlightened gnostic did not have to follow communal ethics and often lived in solitude. Because Gnostic Christians lacked eschatology, the time of destruction and regeneration, suffering is attributed to being located at a certain place. There is no hope of happiness on earth and there is also no delay on God's part. Death is what will separate the spirit from the flesh, and the knowledge of this is what can bring some amount of relief while one is still alive.

II. SOME GNOSTIC VIEWS

Gnostic Christians unanimously held that Jesus was a great spiritual teacher who talked about the true God. This true God was philosophically perfect, a transcendent being who was changeless and good. What was subject to change and instability was the opposite of God and hence evil. Matter or flesh stood for all undesirable things. The true God is not regarded the same as the creator God in Genesis because the creation story in Genesis suggests the divine involving itself with matter. So, the Gnostics claimed that the Father that Jesus spoke of was not the same as the God of the Jews. Further, some Gnostics could not even entertain the

idea that Jesus could have involved himself with matter. So, they held that Jesus was never embodied in the flesh. His disciples only saw an illusion of flesh or a flesh of a dignified kind.

2.1 Valentinus

Valentinus is described by some traditions as the author of *The Gospel of Truth*. He believed that Jesus shared some mysteries with his disciples which were kept secret. He claimed to have received this secret knowledge from Theudas, who was initiated into the secret wisdom by the apostle Paul. Valentinus in turn was willing to initiate others who possessed the capacity to accept it. This secret knowledge consists in the insight that the Jewish God is not the highest God. Those who once worshipped the creator god of Genesis must declare freedom from its authority and judgement. This was the true message of Jesus who was envisioned as the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Jesus did not die to satisfy the wrath of God on humankind. Jesus' mission was to deliver a person from error. Error was what caused a person to act reprehensibly. According to Valentinus, the removal of error is the same as the beginning of self-discovery. When one starts this journey there is at first an encounter with anxiety. A person then realises that the source of all anxiety resides in the flesh. When a person comes to disregard the body and matter in general, then one also transcends pain, fear, and all kinds of unhappiness. Like Plato, Valentinus thought that the material world was an imperfect representation of a more perfect reality. Valentinus and his followers divided the nature of people into three groups - the fleshly (sarkikoi), the soulish (psuchikos) and the spiritual (pneumatikoi). Only the spiritual could see the divine truths while the soulish person might grasp some of it with effort. But the divine truths were completely off limits for the fleshly.

2.2 Marcion

We do not know about Marcion and his followers outside the polemical writings of other writers because his writings were not among those that were unearthed. What is known is that Marcion supported docetic Christology and that Christ conveyed secret knowledge. Marcion did not find a correlation between the Jewish messiah and the Christian messiah. He thought that the conflation of the two personalities was a terrible mistake. Marcion accepted only the gospel of Luke and ten letters of Paul as providing correct information about the being and mission of Christ. But he suspected that even these had been infiltrated by insertion of dubitable sayings that leaned favourably on the Jewish tradition. He believed that the Jews and the Christians could not share the same set of holy scriptures because the Septuagint talked about a different god. The Jewish god was an embodied god who punished people as per his laws. The Father of Jesus, who was also the Gentile God was spiritual and redeemed people from their ignorance. However, Marcion did not seem to believe in universal redemption or an end time eschatology.

2.3 The Gnostic Gospels

The Gnostic gospels read deeper meanings into the biblical narratives. One common thread that runs in all these gospels is the statement of continuing revelation of Christ to different people in different ways.

The Gospel of Philip suggests the idea that humanity made God in its own image. The cause of the fall of mankind was an act of outward projection of divinity. Adam and Eve failed to recognise divinity inside of them and projected it towards external things. This mistaken projection resulted in the worship of natural objects and artifacts. The fall of human beings from divine consciousness to ordinary consciousness is not seen as a sin against the highest god but rather a blunder. The path back to divine consciousness is through the path of knowledge. Correct knowledge includes recognising the true nature of God. God is spirit, truth, and ultimate source of all things. This spiritual idea of God is truer than the corporeal ideas of God as judge, king, creator, or master. It is not possible to understand the truth about God without first encountering these images, but having once understood, a person must see the real thing that is represented by these symbols. When a person goes beyond these images, then that person becomes his or her own saviour. The Gospel of Philip did not endorse external moral sanctions. The knowledge and practice of morality were regarded as private matters depending on the spiritual enlightenment of the person. *The Gospel of Philip* also informs that Jesus revealed himself to individuals in a manner that they could comprehend. Jesus could appear as a child or an old man depending on the maturity of the person.

The Gospel of Mary informs that Mary Magdalene saw the risen Christ before any other person. The credibility of her witness is questioned by Peter and Andrew who suspect that she has concocted a lie about the resurrection in order to justify her own strange ideas. But Mary insists that her words were divinely inspired and in this way *The Gospel of Mary* subtly relays the message that the apostles are not the ultimate earthly authority on what Jesus said.

The Gospel of Thomas asserts the importance of knowing what a person truly is. It contains Jesus as saying that the one who knew himself gained profound knowledge of everything else. This self-knowledge opened the truth of all other things because each person was a twin of Jesus. The title of being a twin suggested that a person had an inherent spiritual nature as Jesus. The spiritual nature is the true identity of a person. The search for God began with introspection. Self-knowledge has the power to save the knower. What one finds in

such self-examinations may be disconcerting at first, but ultimately it empowers the one who embraces it. The kingdom of God is not a place far above or some place on earth. The kingdom of God is inside every person and can be accessed in the present. The emphasis on inner wellbeing led to the cultivation of solitude as a virtue. Communal ethics was relegated as only a preliminary path to self-enlightenment.

FINAL REMARKS

Gnostic Christianity does not have to deal directly with the logical and evidential arguments from evil. Gnostic Christians do not regard the highest god as the creator god. One of the underlying assumptions of the logical problem of evil is that the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God is also the creator. Although the goodness of God may not come under scrutiny, it raises wonder if a God who was not directly involved in our creation is worthy of worship. The abundance of suffering does not raise doubts to the existence of God because suffering is caused by matter and ignorance. Matter is unstable one should expect sufferings as long as one is embodied in flesh. The highest God does not have complete authority over matter. Matter is regarded by some as coeternal with God. However, this metaphysical scheme seems unfair as only people who have the ability to receive the spiritual truths are redeemed.

The problem of divine hiddenness would also not be strongly felt by Gnostic Christians because it is assumed that God is only a revelation away. Gnostic Christians found symbolism in ordinary things like dreams, so all of them might not expect to hear or see extraordinary things. As long as they read deeper meanings into them, divine inspiration could come from anywhere. Gnostic Christians are also not affected by the lack of ample support for the biological birth and physical resurrection of Jesus because they do not lay emphasis on make any historical or scientific claims. Although it might be argued that the divine is determined to forever remain hidden to the sarkikoi group of people, it could also be the case that such group of people do not even have a desire for liberation. Similarly, the psychikos group of people might have more difficulty accessing the divine truths because their priorities are divided between the spirit and flesh.

The Gnostics' emphasis on self-discovery instead of relying on authority find sympathy with modern scholars who value inquiry and individual conviction. Elaine Pagels notes that even though there were attempts to obliterate the teachings of Gnostic Christian sect, it was only driven into hiding and has made many reappearances since. She noticed such reappearances of the Gnostic Christian themes in the works of Jacob Boehme, George Fox, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche, among others, in whose works there is an admiration for Christ but a revulsion for the institution of Christianity.

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