

The Gospel of John and Gnosticism

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Teachings about Gnosticism
 - 2.1 History of Gnosticism
 - 2.2 Characteristics of Gnosticism
- 3 John's Gospel in light of Gnosticism
 - 3.1 Reaching out to Gnostics
 - 3.1.1 Logos and Knowledge
 - 3.1.2 Dualistic Language
 - 3.2 Correcting Gnostic teachings
 - 3.2.1 The Love of the Father
 - 3.2.2 The Flesh of the Son
- 4 Summary

1 Introduction

It would be safe to say that the Gospel of John is one of the most deeply investigated and disputed subjects in the realms of theology. Besides, scholars' interest in the teachings about Gnosticism arouse significantly since the finding of ancient Gnostic writings at Nag Hammadi in 1945. This essay therefore deals with two of the recently most interesting subjects of theology, analyzed and linked to each other. Studies reveal a close relation of the topics. It is particularly of significant importance and interest for us to study the Gospel of John in light of the Gnostic movement at that time.

For such purposes, we will first briefly introduce the teachings of Gnosticism as accurate as the standpoint of contemporary scholarship allows. Its religious origins and chronological history is highly disputed and hence given a separate chapter, followed by a brief introduction of the various Gnostic types and systems. As most scholars are reluctant to define Gnosticism, we will depict at least the core points of the Gnostic idea without providing further description of the complex Gnostic movement in a broader sense. We eventually study the elements of John's Gospel that are related to Gnostic thoughts to get a better understanding of John's vocabulary in light of the historical religious circumstances and here in particular of the strong Gnostic movement John had to deal with in his time. We will see that John tried both to reach out to Gnostics as well as to correct their teachings.

Because of the complexity of Gnostic teachings, we will concentrate on the most relevant points and particularly point out the important issue of the heretic teaching called Docetism. The general title of this essay "The Gospel of John and Gnosticism" indicates, however, that we intend to merely give an overview of the subject rather than to contribute to the many related debates that can be found in literature.

2 Teachings about Gnosticism

2.1 History of Gnosticism

Gnosticism in its broader sense originates from a variety of sources. It seems fairly clear that elements of Hellenistic philosophy and oriental religions as well as ideas derived from Judaism and Christianity mingled together and formed the Gnostic systems with its few characteristic features that appeared during the first century A.D. Barrett describes the gospel age as highly syncretistic,¹ yet he identifies Judaism and Greek philosophy as the two main thought worlds of that time. Whereas Platonism and Stoicism were based on the conception of the superior mind above matter, Gnosticism stepped further into a radical dualism between spirit and matter and taught that knowledge ('gnosis') would be the medium of salvation (Barrett 1955, 22).

Wilson, too, shows that the Hellenistic world was the religious base for Gnosticism to arise, whereas Judaism absorbed certain aspects of Hellenism and served as a link to menace the early Christian Church with heresy (Wilson 1958, 68-85). Grant points out the influence of sectarian Judaism on incipient Gnosticism. Among other (disputable) examples, he recalls the gnostic account of Justin found in the book Baruch that shows certain relations to Jewish thought, e.g. the use of Genesis and the picture of marriage (Grant 1966, 19-26; cf. Dodd 1953, 99). Gnostic terms are also found in Judaistic literature such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, such terms or thoughts were not necessarily gnostic from the beginning, but seem to be used and reinterpreted later by the Gnostics (Wilson 1958, 75). Overall, the issue of early Gnostic origins is complex and disputed by scholars from various viewpoints based on many different source materials.

That the classical Gnostic heresy has its roots in early Christianity of the first century

A.D., however, remained undisputed in line with the Church Fathers until the rise of 'higher criticism' by some German scholars and the Tübingen school. Rudolf Bultmann suggested in 1925 that the Gospel of John would be a deviation of the reconstructed 'Gnostic Redeemer myth,' assuming that the author was a former Gnostic (Yamauchi 1973, 30). For some scholars, therefore, main issue concerning the origins of Gnosticism is the question of 'Pre-Christian Gnosticism.' Many of those who argue in favour of the early existence of the Gnostic idea teach the influence of Gnosticism on the origins of Christianity. In their view, the passages in John that show similarities to Gnostic writings are developed out of Gnostic thought rather than additional source for Gnostic syncretism. Some scholars presuppose that the Christian religion grew out of religious, social and political coincidences.² In contrast, Christian theology is based on God's sovereign self-revelation, related to but not emerged from historical circumstances. Hence the argumentation of this essay follows the doctrine of inspiration of John's Gospel and does not depend on the dating of the Gnostic origins. We consider the Gnostic influence as one of the first struggles of the church confronted with heresy without questioning the essence of Christianity. We are in agreement with the majority of theologians and refer to their work of argumentation.³

In fact, the classical Gnostic writings cannot be convincingly dated before the first century. It appears to be "true that the roots of Gnosticism can be found in the Judaism, Christianity, and paganism of the first century, but classical Gnosticism has not yet been documented before the second century" (Combs 1987, 212; cf. Dodd 1953, 98). Most

¹ See also Dodd (1953, 98) for a few examples of syncretistic (gnostic?) works.

² See Wayne Flow (1981) who comments Elaine Pagel; other controversial scholars are Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, Ernst Käsemann.

³ See Combs (1987), Morris (1972, 62-63), Wilson (1958, 71-75) and Yamauchi (1973).

likely Gnostic thought in its early stage was also found in Judaistic sects, but it became mature by interacting with various sources along with Christianity in the first and second century A.D., when the Gnostic systems emerged in a great variety.⁴

The magician Simon Magus, who is mentioned in Acts 8:9 as well as in the apocryphal Acts of Peter, is regarded by many as the first Gnostic, following the writings of the Church Fathers (Wilson 1958, 99). Simonian Gnosticism developed further by the works of Simon's successor Menander and later by Saturninus of Antioch.⁵ Basilides and his son Isidore later taught at Alexandria, which was also home of Valentinus, who is regarded as the most influential leader of the Gnostic movement in the late second century. The Valentinians Heracleon and Ptolemy wrote the first commentary on the Gospel of John, giving an interpretation in Gnostic terms. Manichaeism was founded by Mani in the later third century and was characterized by its high syncretistic tendency (Yamauchi 1971, 29).

Cerinthianism arose in the second century A.D. and was more definitely gnostic (Wilson 1958, 102). The Church Father Irenaeus also mentioned the Barbelo-Gnostics and the Sethians. Moreover, he wrote that the Valentinians among themselves varied in their understanding of the Gnostic system (Combs 1987, 203). Clement of Alexandria recorded the numerous names of the Gnostic sects who were called after their founder, their place of origin, their nationality or their activities. The large number of names indicates the huge variety of groups among the Gnostics (Grant 1966, 7).

⁴ Dodd (1953, 97) points out that some Gnostics absorbed Christianity, whereas some who regarded themselves Christians were influenced by Gnosticism. Whatever the direction might have been, the Gnostic heresy emerged during the gospel age. See also Wilson (1958, 67).

⁵ According to Irenaeus, the three systems are the oldest (Grant 1966, 15). Whereas Simon is seen by Wilson merely as a pagan rival to Christianity, Saturninus' teachings are typical Gnostic. His new element was asceticism (Wilson 1958, 101-103).

To sum up, in particular the writings of the Church Fathers show that Gnosticism in its maturity and variety grew later in the second century and hence not before the writing of John's gospel, but incipient Gnostic thought was present during biblical times (Wilson 1958, 82). Gnosticism was significantly influenced by Christianity with the possible contribution of John's language.⁶ However, John's gospel certainly is also an answer to the beginnings of the Gnostic heresy in all its various types (Wilson 1958, 97). We will see later how John reaches out to Gnostics and at the same time defends the gospel against the Gnostic teaching with its certain characteristics.

2.2 Characteristics of Gnosticism

The traditional description of Gnosticism follows our viewpoint to regard Gnosticism as heresy that the early Church Fathers battled with (Dodd 1953, 97; Wilson 1958, 66). Although its origins can be traced back to different sources of the time before Christ and in particular to Hellenism, it is proper to concentrate on the classical Gnosticism that became mature during the gospel age. The various Gnostic systems require a definition along the features they had in common. According to Wilson, the following four points identify the religion as Gnostic (Combs 1987, 206; Wilson 1958).

(1) The Gnostics distinguish between their god, who is utterly transcendent and naturally unknown, and the Demiurge, the creator of the world and the God of the Old Testament. Yamauchi describes the traditional teaching.

“From the divine Pleroma there is posited the fall of an emanation, either the female Sophia or the male Anthropos. Sophia gives birth to the Demiurge, who is a caricature of the Demiurge of Plato's Timeus. He is portrayed as an evil, ignorant creator who tries to imitate the perfect order of the Pleroma by creating the physical universe. The Demiurge is often considered to be the Old Testament Jehova” (Yamauchi 1971, 30).

⁶ The commentaries on John written by the Gnostics contributed to its development.

Even if some Gnostic groups differed from this tradition, yet the creation was frequently viewed as the work of angels or similar beings who are inferior and in opposition to the true transcendent god.⁷ The God of the Old Testament was then commonly degraded to one of the inferior beings. The ‘true’ supreme god was removed further from matter and creation and therefore more and more transcendent and unknown to the world (Wilson 1958, 102). The world, the body, flesh, matter was regarded as evil and discarded from the heavenly regions and the ‘true’ god (Wilson 1958, 70).

(2) Man is created by the lower beings, but he is also a ‘Spark of Light’ and thus naturally akin to the spiritual divine. He is a prisoner of the world and of his body, controlled by the evil power of the Demiurge and imprisoned out of envy. From this viewpoint, the world was like hell for the Gnostic and freedom from the world and their own body was the ultimate goal (Yamauchi 1971, 32).

As Wilson puts it, “the biblical conception of the whole man as the creation of God has given way to the Greek dichotomy of immortal soul and mortal flesh” (Wilson 1958, 105). Disobedience to God’s law was a way to gain freedom, since in the Gnostic’s view the creator is an evil Demiurge. The relationship between man and his creator was perverted, and Old Testament references to evil (e.g. the Serpent, Sodom, Cain, Korah and Esau) were used in a favourable and perverted sense (Yamauchi 1971, 33). Consciousness of sin and the need for atonement was absent, since the world, the body and all matter is evil by creation and not fallen by the consequence of sin. Some despised the world and lived in asceticism; others gave in to a licentious life, since matter had no

⁷ For Simon Magnus, Menander and Saturninus, the world was created by angels who were in rebellion against the supreme god (Grant 1966, 15).

meaning for spirit and gnosis made ethics irrelevant (Cox 1966, 176; Wilson 1958, 70).⁸

(3) The Gnostics further believe in “a myth narrating some kind of pre-mundane fall, to account for man’s present state and his yearning for deliverance” (Combs 1987, 206). Though it is generally rejected that the ‘Gnostic Redeemer-myth’ reconstructed by Bultmann and his followers existed in pre-Christian times and influenced the early Church,⁹ the reference might be valuable here for the purpose of illustrating the later Gnostic idea that includes the fall as well as the concept of a redeemer. Probably during the gospel age, the Gnostic myth was shaped similar to the following.

‘Primal Man of Light’ fell and was torn into pieces by demonic powers. He left behind ‘Sparks of Light’, the pneumatics of mankind. Since then, demons try to keep the sparks from recalling their former state by sleep and forgetfulness, but the transcendent Deity sends the Redeemer who revives the interest in their origin and gives them the proper knowledge (‘gnosis’) of oneself that enables them to re-ascent into heaven. The Redeemer is taught to be another Light being, who came in the mere appearance but not substance of man to deceive the demonic powers and thus to remain unnoticed. As the Redeemer ascends, he provides the way for the redeemed spirits to follow. And as the souls collect upward, the Redeemer is redeemed and ‘Primal Man’ is restored, again (Combs 1987, 208).

The myth reveals more clearly the radical dualism between the transcendent Deity and the material evil that dominates the Gnostic thought world. The world of light is contrasted to the world of darkness. Whereas spiritual heaven is essentially good, the material world is essentially evil, since the Demiurge created all matter and governs the

⁸ Wilson (1958, 101) refers to the Nicolaitans who were indifferent to morality.

⁹ See Yamauchi (1973, 29) for detailed argumentation; the concept of the redeemer probably

world. The Redeemer descends from heaven and ascends back without taking part in this world. He remains a spiritual being who only pretends to be human.¹⁰

Gnosticism was fundamentally mythical without anchor to history (Dodd 1953, 101). The world was seen as an illusion, because time is the creation of the Demiurge. Hence, historical events have no significance or reality (Yamauchi 1971, 31), including the historical life and suffering of Jesus. The literal resurrection of Christ from the dead is denied and the teachings interpreted in allegorical terms. At this point pre-Christian religious ideas met Christianity and formed Gnosticism in its heretical maturity.

(4) The Gnostics believe in the saving knowledge ('gnosis') that awakens the consciousness of man's true nature as the 'Spark of Light.' According to the Valentinians, this "gnosis is redemption of the inner, spiritual man" and not of the body or the soul. The gnosis is not learned but revealed (only to a few) by the Redeemer who is sent from the transcendent world of light. It is first of all self-knowledge about his true divine self, the 'Spark of Light' dwelling within, discovered in various myths about the origin of the universe and of mankind (Grant 1966, 7-10).

Gnostics were therefore utterly self-centered people, spending their time in search for their own celestial nature and the divine element in one's true self. No interest is given in God, their neighbours or the community. Among the Gnostics, an attitude of spiritual superiority dominates the social life, for the true Gnostic has deeper knowledge and receives clearer revelation than others. It is not difficult to imagine that such 'gnosis' was

derived later from Christianity and not before (Wilson 1958, 106).

¹⁰ In the gnostic Acts of John, Jesus is described as the Redeemer who was substantial immaterial. He left no footprints and did not blink his eyes (Flow 1981, 261). In another text, Jesus passes through people like water through a tube (Yamauchi 1971, 37). The Cerinthians, on the other hand, taught that Jesus was only man but not God (Wilson 1958, 102). It was essentially impossible for the Gnostics to believe that a human man was also God.

gained by all possible means, widely opening the doors to syncretism and all kinds of religious practices.¹¹ Myths were invented, and the ‘deeper’ the gnosis, the more confusing its teachings. To cite Ireanaeus,

“Every day each one of them, in so far as he is able, produces some novelty. For no one is ‘perfect’ among them who is not productive of great lies... Since they disagree with one another in teaching and in tradition, and the more recent converts pretend to find something new every day and to produce what no one ever thought of, it is difficult to describe the opinions of each.” (Grant 1966, 11)

In conclusion, we focus on the main characteristics of Gnosticism without further mentioning all the multiple thoughts of the numerous Gnostics that evolved throughout the first three centuries A.D. For the purpose of our analysis of John in light of Gnosticism, we recall the essential Gnostic element of knowledge by revelation, the dualistic worldview with the belief in a transcendent god other than the God of the Old Testament, and the belief in a myth about a Redeemer who is sent from this god to reveal such knowledge.

3 John’s Gospel in light of Gnosticism

3.1 Reaching out to Gnostics

3.1.1 Logos and Knowledge

The Gospel of John starts very differently from the synoptic gospels. “In the beginning was the word” (‘logos’) (John 1:1, NIV) is an expression that asks for proper knowledge of the religious background of John’s readers. Apart from the Jews who read the verse with the creation story, prophecy and wisdom passages of the Old Testament in mind, the Gentile world had its own background that influenced the perception of the Johannine concept of logos. Though John’s idea of logos is essentially his own,¹² he at

¹¹ Syncretism is a characteristic of Gnosticism in all its forms (Wilson 1958, 69).

¹² We agree with Morris (1972, 122).

the same time reaches out to the people in using their own distinctive language, for 'logos' was recognized by the people as something supremely great and important (Morris 1972, 116).

In Stoicism, 'logos' meant not merely 'word' but rather 'thought' or 'idea' that lies behind the word itself, something that divinely rules the universe (Barrett 1955, 28; Dodd 1953, 263). Mingled with Hellenism in a broader sense, the concept of logos reaches the Gnostic mind that regards itself superior to matter. In addition, religious ideas like Philo's or Judaism associate the concept of logos with the importance of wisdom (Dodd 1953, 274; Beasley-Murray 1998, II.4.1.i). Knowledge ('gnosis'), in turn, is not far away from wisdom and logos. The systems correlate.

Basilides and Valentinus place the logos in the transcendent world, and Jesus thus would be called logos because he descended from there (Dodd 1953, 109). Though Gnosticism does not see the logos as a mediator in a Christian sense, a link is given to reveal truth about the person of Jesus who is finally revealed in the first chapter of John as being the logos Himself. He was in the beginning, created all things and then brought truth or 'knowledge' the Gnostic might be interested in.

If the term Gnosticism merely refers to the belief that salvation is by knowledge, so Dodd, "in this sense the Gospel according to John should be classed as Gnostic" (Dodd 1953, 97). This noteworthy statement is based on the emphasis that John lies in the knowledge of God. In chapter 17, Jesus prays,

"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3, NIV)

Here it seems that salvation is gained by knowledge, just as in Gnosticism. Elsewhere John says twice that the world does not 'know' God in contrast to those who believe

(John 1:10; 17:25). Such passages can easily be interpreted in Gnostic terms, yet we have to distinguish between two different meanings of the word ‘knowledge.’ For the Gnostic, knowledge is a gift of God that makes man “a being like God, or even a god himself.” (Dodd 1953, 153; cf. Wilson 1958, 104) Knowledge, often conveyed in myths, is the power to overcome the evil forces in order to reach heaven. Salvation is by gnosis, and the one who brings such gnosis is the Saviour (Dodd 1953, 113). Differently, with the Hebrew meaning as translated in the LXX in mind, John speaks of ‘knowledge’ that is first of all intercourse with God (Dodd 1953, 152). Intercourse with God both requires and brings knowledge of Him, but first of all presupposes belief in Him. Accordingly, John often points out the necessity of belief (John 1:12; 3:16, 3:36, 6:47, 11:25, 20:31).

Despite the differences, we note that John reaches out to the Gnostics by emphasising the spiritual level of the gospel story, rather than by means of a predominantly historical narrative as done more clearly by the Synoptists. “Knowledge is a vital theme of the gospel” (Barret 1955, 31), though John does not use the word ‘gnosis.’ It is the knowledge of God based on belief that brings eternal life and not the deceptive self-knowledge the Gnostic was searching for.

3.1.2 Dualistic Language

As we have seen, “all Gnostic systems rest upon a metaphysical dualism.” (Dodd 1953, 103) The Gnostic supreme god is transcendent, living in a world of light, absolutely separated from the world of darkness. Basilides wrote in such dualistic terms of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ that was typical for the Gnostics,

“In the beginning there were light and darkness. ... When each of these came to recognition of the other, and the darkness contemplated the light, the darkness, as if seized with desire of the better thing, pursued after it, and desired to be mingled with it and to participate in it.” (Dodd 1953, 103)

The Gnostic, living in the world of darkness, is longing for the world of light. He is searching for gnosis, revealed by the messenger sent from the world of light. In comparison to Basilides, John writes in his first chapter about Jesus,

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” (John 1:4-5, NIV)

Later, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12, NIV) and teaches further, “I have come into the world as a light, so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” (John 12:46, NIV) The Gnostic understands the depth of meaning that lies beyond the key word ‘light’ and therefore he sees the divine origin of Jesus. Moreover, he knows of himself that in this world he ‘stays in darkness.’

In harmony with such a dualistic thought world, Jesus “descended from heaven” and “has ascended into heaven.” (John 3:13, RSV; cf. John 6:38.62). He is “from above” and “not of this world”, whereas the people are “from below” and “of this world.” (John 8:23) John touches the Gnostic dualistic concept and tells about a redeemer who is sent from the transcendent world of light similar to Bultmann’s reconstruction of the ‘Gnostic Redeemer myth.’ In Gnostic dualism, however, belonging to one order excludes belonging to the other order. Light cannot belong to darkness, and spirit cannot belong to matter. “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” (John 3:6) At this point the purely dualistic interpretation requires correction, since Jesus was both born of the Spirit and born of flesh by the virgin Mary.¹³

John’s close relation to Gnostic vocabulary led to the theory, “the writer of the Fourth Gospel was a convert from a Gnostic baptist sect.” (Bultmann in Yamauchi 1973, 30) For Bultmann, Jesus’ claim to be the ‘light of the world’ must be seen as ‘the great

¹³ With a sharper distinction between the two orders in John writes Dodd (1953, 107).

Gnostic Revealer pronouncement.’ We should also notice that, on the other hand, early conservative theologians like Epiphanius rejected the Fourth Gospel as heretical due to its language (Dodd 1953, 102). We can see the difficulty to draw the line between truth and error through the midst of similar language that is used in different contexts and based on different doctrines.

Today, it is often vague to interpret such linguistic relations between John and the Gnostics without the proper use of historical documents. As mentioned earlier, the Gnostic materials cannot be dated earlier than the Gospel of John. Therefore it also remains difficult for us, overall, to say whether John used Gnostic language in order to reach Gnostics or the Gnostics later used John’s Gospel to enlarge their ‘gnosis.’¹⁴ However, we will now see that John’s account is also a rich source for defending the truth against the Gnostic heresy.

3.2 Correcting Gnostic teachings

3.2.1 The Love of the Father

In Gnosticism, God our Father as revealed in the Old Testament is seen as one who is in rebellion against a higher being who created Him.¹⁵ In other words, He is given the position of Satan who opposes his God.¹⁶ The picture of God cannot be farer from the truth. God is essentially good, but He is given the character of evil. The Gnostic god, on the other hand, is transcendent and unknown. He lives in the world of light without interest in this world. He did not even participate in creation. The world is seen as

¹⁴ The Valentinians used Johannine data, see Wilson (1958, 81) with reference to Quispel.

¹⁵ For Cerinthus, who taught in Asia Minor at the end of the first century (Yamauchi 1973, 54) and therefore in the place and time of the Fourth Evangelist, the God of the Old Testament was an angel (Grant 1966, 98; Wilson 101).

¹⁶ According to the Gnostic Simon, the angels created the world and rebelled out of jealousy. In this context, Grant (1966, 16) refers to Exodus 20:5.

essentially evil, and a good god cannot take part in evil. Therefore, God also would not love the world. The relationship between God and men as taught by the Gnostics is characterized by absolute separation. In contrast, John writes in chapter 3, verse 16, about the love of God for the world:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, NIV)

God gave His Son out of love for this world. Such a thought is new for the Gnostic.

Furthermore, John teaches continuity between the Old Testament and the Gospel. It is the Old Testament God who gave His Son and not any transcendent being from the Gnostic world of light. The Old Testament Scriptures testify about Jesus. God the Father Himself testifies about His Son, and finally Moses, too, wrote about Jesus long before (John 5:37-46). Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. His appearance is announced and real, Christianity is not based on myths but on history.

Jesus is the way to the loving Father who is the God of the Old Testament (John 14:6). He brought salvation through His blood to enter into the Father's kingdom. Even more, access to the Father is already given by prayer (John 16:26). Unity with the Father is one of Jesus' promises (John 14:23). The kingdom of God already present on earth is what we call 'realized eschatology' and stands in contrast to the rather pessimistic world view of the Gnostics who did not regard life on earth as worthy to live. For them, the world and all matter, including their bodies, was entirely evil and thus separated from God. According to John, however, God wants to make His home with us. For the Gnostic, “all that has any value in mankind is a divine spark which has descended from the unknown Father.” (Grant 1966, 97) In contrast, Jesus came to bring real life (John 10:10).

On the other hand, the love of God is given only to those who are obedient (John

14:21.23). Contrary to the Gnostic god, God is interested in people's life in this world. Though "they are not of the world", they are sent "into the world" (John 17:16.18) just as the Son was sent before. They are commanded to love each other just as the Son loves them (John 15:12). Jesus' teaching stands in opposition to the Gnostic idea that life in the material world would be without meaning for the spiritual world. The Christian life of love reaches out to the world and does not focus on oneself in order to gain 'gnosis.' God the Father loves the world and sends His people to show this love to others. He asks for an obedient, self-giving life that follows the example of His Son.

3.2.2 The Flesh of the Son

The Gnostic heresy reaches its climax in the denial of the flesh of the Son of God, the value of His death and the historicity of His resurrection. As we have seen above, the concept of a redeemer was based on myths. Now we have to consider that "in nearly every case the Gnostic redeemer is the Christian Jesus or is modeled upon him."¹⁷ (Grant 1966, 15) The heresy then questions the doctrine of incarnation. Due to the Gnostic dualistic worldview, Jesus could not be God and human at the same time. He could not be both from this world and the world of light. He could not be both material and spiritual. If Jesus was God, then He was not human. If He was human, then He could not be God. This dualistic idea formed the Gnostic doctrine of Docetism, which said that Christ had only an apparent body and therefore only appeared to suffer on the cross.

Cerinthus, on the other hand, taught that Jesus was born as man and died as man. Only from His baptism until his suffering Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit (Cox 1966, 175). Here we can see the effort the Gnostics made to bring together history and myth,

¹⁷ Simon and Menander taught that they descended from heaven themselves (Grant 1966, 16).

truth and their own ideas and doctrines. It might be that the emphasis John sometimes laid on the divinity of Jesus is a direct answer to Cerinthus' teachings at John's time in Asia Minor. However, "the background to John is the early Christian church." (Morris 1972, 63) John wrote later, after the writings of the Synoptists, into a religious atmosphere that already was characterized by Gnostic heresy spread over a larger area than Asia Minor. Men with their ideas and teachings travelled around and influenced one another, so that John corrects the heretical movement in general rather than only Cerinthus. And so John writes in response to Docetism,

"The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14, NIV)

The logos came from the 'other world' but became flesh and dwells among the people in this world. The divine word, the supreme God Himself came down to earth and did not remain transcendent. He became real flesh and took part in the material world, and His name was Jesus Christ (John 1:17). In addition, John repeatedly emphasises on the many eyewitnesses of Jesus including himself. He tells about Jesus whose glory they have seen (John 1:14) and whose body they could touch even after His resurrection (John 20:27). They have seen blood and water coming out of Jesus' side when He was crucified (John 19:34). They ate and lived with Jesus, so they knew He was human.

Gnostic heresy strongly questions the unity of the divine-human person of Jesus. Either Jesus was only man or He was only God, they say. Though John addresses both aspects in his Gospel, he stresses on the divinity of Jesus more than in his epistles. In the gospel, Jesus is often portrayed in dualistic words as the divine person who descended from heaven. In John's letters, he again fights against the Gnostic idea and stresses on the fact that they really have 'heard and seen' Jesus as a human being (1 John 1:1).

4 Summary

The issue of Gnosticism is complex and difficult to summarize. Many scholars have written many articles on this topic with various types of insight. Especially due to historical uncertainties, it is rather impossible to get a clear picture about the relations between John's Gospel and Gnosticism. We found that there are linguistic similarities but pointed out that it is not clear whether John followed the Gnostics or the Gnostics followed John. On the other hand, however, we get a clearer picture of John's message once we know more about the historical meaning of John's vocabulary such as 'light' and 'word.' It is even more valuable to contrast the truth against error, to understand the depth of the gospel's meaning that is outstanding against the Gnostic heresy such as Docetism. We are encouraged to think more about the humanity as well as the divinity of Jesus.

It is notable that relatively little is found in the commentaries about the Fourth Evangelist who is defending Christianity against Gnosticism, though elements of it can clearly be seen. It seems obvious that John uses the word 'flesh' to expose the false belief in Docetism, for example. The reason for such hesitations might be found in the struggle with the more recent viewpoints of the German Tübingen school, for John's defence against Gnosticism also somehow implies the existence of 'Pre-Christian Gnosticism.' This essay about 'The Gospel of John and Gnosticism' fails to contribute to this debate, yet it is the author's hope that he has given an accurate overview of the probable relations between John's Gospel and the Gnostics.

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