

3. The Gnostics

Gnosticism was a syncretistic mixture of Jewish elements, Christian doctrines, and pagan speculative thought. It was the great heresy of the second century. Some of its proponents include Simon Magnus, Cerdo, Cerinthus, Basilides, Bardaisan, Saturninus, Valentinus, and Marcion.

Gnosticism came in many varieties, but there appear to be some ideas held in common. Gnostics held that God is spiritual, good, exalted, all-perfect, and light; the head of the spiritual world of light. This God is not the god of the Old Testament, for he was the creator god, an evil demiurge. Gnostics held that matter is relatively unreal, shadowy, evil; the visible world and human flesh are evil. Salvation is for some Christians only; viz., those who are able to receive the GNOSIS, which is the true spiritual enlightenment, the secret teaching imparted by the apostles to their immediate disciples, who in turn passed it on to other "spiritual" men. Their chief apostle was Paul, many of whose teachings they felt supported Gnosticism (e.g., his contrast between flesh as evil and spirit as good).

The Gnostics held varying views concerning the Person of Christ, although all of them denied that Christ had a true incarnation, death, or resurrection. Some of them affirmed and others denied that Christ was a person. Some of them (the Docetae) taught that Christ's human body was not real, but simply appeared real. Some taught that Christ's human body was real, but was not a material body. And some (Cerinthians) taught that Christ entered Jesus (the natural child of Joseph and Mary) at baptism and left him at the crucifixion.

