

Lecture Six

The Gnostic Gospel of Truth

Scope: This lecture considers one of the most intriguing documents from the Nag Hammadi library, the gnostic "Gospel of Truth," which scholars widely believe was written by Valentinus, the head of one of the most prominent Christian gnostic sects. The book is unlike the gospels of the New Testament, in that it does not relate stories about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Instead, it celebrates the "good news" of the salvation that Jesus has brought by revealing the knowledge that can lead to deliverance from this material world. The understanding of God, the world, Christ, and salvation here stands in stark contrast with the views that eventually became orthodox in Christianity. We then consider a gnostic tractate that directly attacks the proto-orthodox views, a Nag Hammadi tractate allegedly written by Peter, which stresses that salvation is a matter of the spirit, not the flesh.

Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we saw some of the major tenets of Christian Gnosticism.
 - A. These religions stressed the importance of knowledge (= *gnosis*) to escape the trappings of this evil material world, a world that, in their belief, was not created by the true God but came into being as a result of a cosmic disaster.
 - B. Since the nineteenth century, the issue of whether Gnosticism was principally Christian or not has been debated. Based in part on documents from the Nag Hammadi library, scholars have continued to question whether Gnosticism antedated or postdated Christianity.
 - C. Christ was an aeon (divine being) who revealed the truth necessary for salvation.
 - D. Salvation came by learning one's true nature as divine and by acquiring the secret knowledge that can bring liberation from this material world.
 - E. In the lectures that follow, we will look at some of the sacred texts written by and for Christian Gnostics.
- II. The Gospel of Truth is one of those gnostic books we had known about from the

writings of Irenaeus but did not have in our possession until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library.

- A. Its title comes from its opening line, which reads, in part, "The Gospel of Truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of Truth the grace of knowing him..."
- B. This is not, however, a gospel in the way we usually think of one: There is no word about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Instead, it is the "good news" of the salvation he has brought by bringing the truth that can free the soul from its bondage to material things.
- C. This is one of the most powerful and moving expositions of the joy of salvation to survive from Christian antiquity. Among other things, it shows that gnostic Christians were not just wild profligates or misguided intellectuals, as their patristic opponents claimed. This is a text filled with heartfelt gratitude to God for the unexpected grace of salvation that has been received.
- D. Many scholars attribute the work to a famous gnostic Christian, Valentinus.
 1. Valentinus was from Alexandria, Egypt, but moved to Rome sometime around the year 130 A.D.
 2. He was active as a Christian writer, orator, and leader over the course of the next thirty years or so. According to Tertullian, he turned on the church only after his bid to become bishop failed.
 3. We have some fragments of his writings. If the Gospel of Truth does go back to him, it shows that his opponents were right to attribute to him unusual poetic powers, as can be seen even in the Coptic translation of this text (it was originally in Greek).
- E. The book discusses many central issues for Christians in the second century: the nature of God, the character of this world, the person of Christ, and the work of salvation he brought and how one should respond to it.
- F. Strikingly, its views stand diametrically opposed to those that eventually became dominant in Christianity and have been handed down to the present.
 1. Eventually, Christianity maintained that this world was the intentional creation of the one true God and, as such, was made

good (even if sin later came into the world). The gnostic Gospel of Truth claims that the material world came about by a conflict in the divine realm, resulting in ignorance, anguish, terror, and error.

2. Christianity also eventually claimed that Christ was the one who died for the sins of the world and that his death and resurrection are what bring salvation. The Gospel of Truth maintains that Jesus brought salvation by delivering the truth that could set the soul free; it was out of anger for his deliverance, of this knowledge that the ignorant rulers of this world put him to death, in error.
3. Christianity insisted that people are made right with God by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. The gnostic Gospel of Truth maintains that people are saved by receiving the correct knowledge of who they really are. When they do so, they are like a drunk person becoming sober or a sleeping person coming awake.
4. Christianity understood that God would redeem this sinful world, creating it anew as a utopian place of eternal life. The Gospel of Truth states that once saving knowledge comes to souls entrapped in this world, the world of ignorance will pass away.

G. The book concludes with an exhortation for its hearers to share the true knowledge of salvation to those who seek the truth and not to return to their former (Christian?) beliefs that they have already transcended.

III. Far more polemical in its attitude toward non-gnostic Christianity is a second tractate from Nag Hammadi, the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (one of three apocalypses allegedly written by Jesus' disciple). This document is the first forgery that we will consider.

- A. *Pseudepigrapha* literally means "false writing." The term is applied to documents written under the name of someone who is not the actual author. Modern examples include authors writing under a pen name, as well as forgeries.
- B. Forgery was condemned as a practice in antiquity, although it was harder to detect and was, in fact widely done.
- C. The term *Apocalypse* means a "revelation."
 1. In this book, the truth of Jesus' identity is revealed to Peter.
 2. Those who fail to understand this message (the proto-orthodox Christian leaders especially!) are castigated for their ignorance.
 3. We see that not only were the proto-orthodox opposed to heresy,

but so, too, were the people that they claimed were heretics. For them, it was the proto-orthodox who promoted false teaching!

- D. The book begins with the teachings of "The Savior," who informs Peter that there are many false teachers who are blind and deaf and who blaspheme the truth and teach evil.
1. These are those who proclaim a "dead man."
 2. Later, we learn that they are leaders of churches who call themselves "bishops" and "deacons."
 3. These teachers fail to understand that the material world is to be despised and escaped by the true soul.
 4. In particular, they fail to realize that when Jesus was killed, it was only his body that suffered and died; his real self—his immortal soul—was above suffering and death.
 5. What was killed, then, was simply a shell; the true Savior stood above the cross laughing at those who thought they could harm him. And he continues to laugh at those who think that the physical world is what is real, when in fact, it is false and transitory.'
- E. In short, this book polemicizes against the proto-orthodox leaders of the church who believe that the world was created by the good God, that Jesus Christ was himself really completely flesh, and that his death was necessary for the forgiveness of sins.
- F. Gnostics, too, could attack those they believed did not support the truth of the Christian religion—even the proto-orthodox whose views were eventually to win out and determine for all time what Christians would believe about God, the world, Christ, and salvation.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 24, 35-36.

Supplementary Reading:

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

Robert M. Grant, *Jesus after the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Are there ways that the views advocated by the Gospel of Truth are embraced by modern Christians today?
2. How does the attack of the Apocalypse of Peter against proto-orthodox believers affect our understanding of the meaning of the terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy*?

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