

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistle of Peter

January 28, 2008

The First Epistle of Peter was written to fairly newly formed churches located in northern Asia Minor, along the south coast of the Black Sea. The churches consisted of exiles from the persecution of the church in Jerusalem (Diaspora), newly converted Jews living in the communities where they settled, and Gentiles that became believers. Many of these Gentiles could have been ‘god-fearers”, that is Gentiles that found Judaism attractive, and would join the Jews in worship in the synagogues. Eventually large numbers of the Gentile communities became believers, causing consternation amount the political, economic, and religious leadership, which led to persecution of the believers.

I have postulated that Peter established many of these churches as he traveled through the region on his way from Jerusalem to Rome. We do not have documented evidence of this, and many scholars think that Peter did not know any of these churches personally, and was writing generalized pastoral letters to them. For what it is worth, I think they are wrong.

In his first letter, Peter addressed the new churches that were beginning to undergo some degree of persecution. He encouraged them to stand up to the persecution, and used Jesus as their example of patient endurance while suffering.

By the time this second letter is being written the churches are well established, but are now undergoing internal problems brought about by false teachings in the church. It is amazing how quickly errors arise in the churches. The churches are not much more than one generation old. The nature of the false teachings is not clear, but from Paul’s writings we know that Gnosticism arose early in church history.

Gnosticism is a poorly defined amalgamation of Greek philosophy, Biblical teachings, and oriental mysticism, that places an emphasis on esoteric knowledge (*gr. gnosis*) rather than faith for salvation. Jesus resurrection is explained spiritually, but his physical resurrection is denied. In fact, they denied that Jesus came in the flesh, because God could not be tainted by the evil of the material world. Therefore, if the Christ was truly God, he could not have really been a man.

Gnosticism may take the form of severe asceticism or blatant immorality. The ascetic form of Gnosticism taught that because the body, and all matter, is evil it must be controlled by rigorous discipline of the flesh. However, immorality was the preferred form, and the teaching said that since body is completely evil it cannot be controlled, and therefore it does not matter what is done in the body. Thankfully, with the right knowledge (gnosis), the spirit can be saved.

## Gnostics, Gnostic Gospels, & Gnosticism

A one-sentence description of Gnosticism: a religion that differentiates the evil god of this world (who is identified with the god of the Old Testament) from a higher more abstract God revealed by Jesus Christ, a religion that regards this world as the creation of a series of evil archons/powers who wish to keep the human soul trapped in an evil physical body, a religion that preaches a hidden wisdom or knowledge only to a select group as necessary for salvation or escape from this world.

The term "gnostic" derives from "gnosis," which means "knowledge" in Greek. The Gnostics believed that they were privy to a secret knowledge about the divine, hence the name. (Huxley coined "agnosticism" on the basis that all knowledge must be based on reason. We cannot rationally claim to have access to knowledge that is beyond the powers of the intellect.)

There are numerous references to the Gnostics in second century proto-orthodox literature. Most of what we know about them is from the polemic thrown at them by the early Church Fathers. They are alluded to in the Bible in the pastorals (spurious Paulines of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), for example 1 Tm 1:4 and 1 Tm 6:20, and possibly the entirety of Jude. Ignatius of Antioch writes against them as well as Docetism, a doctrine closely related to Gnosticism that stated that Christ was pure spirit and had only a phantom body. Second Clement is a document aimed at refuting early second century Gnosticism. Marcion was the most famous of the Gnostics, and he established a "canon" of the Pauline epistles (minus the pastorals) and a "mutilated" Luke (presumably considered so because it lacked proof-texts such as Lk 22:43-44). Justin Martyr mentioned him c. 150 CE, and Irenaeus and Tertullian wrote against him extensively in the late second century (in *Against Heresy* and *Against Marcion*, respectively).

Besides Marcion, other important Gnostics were Basilides and Valentinus. Some Gnostic documents are the Gospel of Truth, the Letter to Rheginus, Treatise on the Three Natures, Apocalypse of Adam, the Gospel of Matthias, Gospel of Philip, Acts of Peter, and Acts of Thomas. Although the Gnostics were prolific writers, most of their works have been burnt or lost in favor of proto-orthodox writings (and known only through patristic references).

Some scholars have theorized that Gnosticism has its roots in pre-Christian religions, instead of being merely an offshoot of Christianity.

The following are writings by Gnostics of the second century according to some scholars, although some others dispute this classification for writings such as the Gospel of Thomas.

- . [Gnostic: The Gospel of Thomas](#)

- [Gnostic: The Secret Book of James](#)
- [Gnostic: Basilides](#)
- [Gnostic: Naassene Fragment](#)
- [Gnostic: Gospel of Mary](#)
- [Gnostic: Dialogue of the Savior](#)
- [Gnostic: Gospel of the Savior](#)
- [Gnostic: Marcion](#)
- [Gnostic: Epiphanes](#)
- [Gnostic: Ophite Diagrams](#)
- [Gnostic: Ptolemy](#)
- [Gnostic: Gospel of Truth](#)
- [Gnostic: Excerpts of Theodotus](#)
- [Gnostic: Heracleon](#)
- [Gnostic: Acts of Peter](#)
- [Gnostic: Acts of Thomas](#)

All of the above documents and more are presented on the [Early Christian Writings](#) web site.

Here are some books about Gnostics and Gnosticism.

- [Gnosis : The Nature and History of Gnosticism](#) by Kurt Rudolph
- [The Gnostic Gospels](#) by Elaine Pagels
- [The Gnostic Paul](#) by Elaine Pagels
- [Rethinking "Gnosticism"](#) by Michael Allen Williams
- [The Elements of Gnosticism](#) by Stuart Holroyd
- [Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy : A Study in the History of Gnosticism](#) by Alastair H. B. Logan

Here are some web pages about Gnostics and Gnosticism.

- [Henry Wace: Gnosticism](#)
- [Religious Tolerance: Ancient Gnosticism](#)
- [Catholic Encyclopedia: Gnosticism](#)
- [The Gnostic Society Library](#)

Thank you for visiting the [Early Christian Writings](#) web page.