Gnosticism and the Gospel of Thomas: A Biblical Response
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Abstract: The spirit of the antichrist had appeared in the first century AD and was misleading the Christians of that day. The Apostle John through his letter guided the Lord's church not to be led astray by the spirit. In his epistle John wrote thus: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is the spirit of antichrist.” (1 Jn 4:1-3). The doctrine that John was facing at that time was Gnosticism. The word 'Gnosticism' comes from the words Ancient Greece: ωστνωστικός (gnostikos), which means: learned. While the word ωσςης (gnōsis) means knowledge. The teachings of Gnosticism are also encountered by Christians today. For that reason, Christians today need to understand the doctrine and then anticipate its influence in Christian life. Through this paper, the authors will give some responses to the views of Gnosticism and its relation to the ‘Gospel’ of Thomas.

Keywords: Gnosticism, Gospel of Thomas, Apostle John, Christians,

Introduction

The spirit of the antichrist had appeared in the first century AD and was misleading the Christians of that day. The Apostle John through his letter guided the Lord's church not to be led astray by the spirit. In his epistle, the Apostle John wrote “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already” (1 Jn. 4:1-3). The false doctrine that the Apostle John was facing at that time was Gnosticism. The word 'Gnosticism' comes from the Greek word: ωστνωστικός (gnostikos), which means learned, while the word ωσςης (gnōsis) means knowledge (Hoeller, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

The teachings of Gnosticism were not only faced by the apostle at that time. The teachings of Gnosticism are also encountered by Christians today. For that reason, Christians today need to understand the doctrine and then anticipate its influence in Christian life. Through this paper, the author will give some responses to the views of Gnosticism.

Overview of Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a collection of ancient religions whose followers distanced themselves from the material world. This religion emerged in the first centuries with a mystical and esoteric nature (known and understood only by certain individuals). For Gnostics, salvation was obtained through gnosis (hidden knowledge). They held that the material world was created by Demiurge. Demiurge was the creator god, inferior to God, or called the wrong god. Demiurge was not perfect and even was considered evil. In the Platonist tradition, the name demiourgos was used. Other names for the Demiurge were Ahriman, El, Saklas, Samael, Satan, Yaldabaoth, or Yahweh (Holroyd, 1994).
According to Graham Stanton, Gnosticism’s adherents held that this world was an evil place, created by an evil god, who turned away from the one true God. Christian Gnostics, on the other hand, regarded themselves as the descendants of one true God, who are confined in this evil world (Pagels, 1978). Gnosticism was influenced by philosophers such as Plato who is known for his idealism (Churton, 1987).

There are two premises associated with Gnosticism. First premise: Gnosticism supported the concept of the dualism of spirit and matter. The Gnostics believed that matter was essentially evil and that the spirit was good. Consequently: Gnostics believed that whatever the body does, even the vilest of sins, is meaningless because true life exists only in the spirit world. They say that the body is a ‘spirit prison’, and has to be tortured, so that a pure spirit can be set free. Or at another extreme, the body can be liberated to satisfy all its lusts, because it will eventually break down.

The authors’ response to the first premise: (a) Logos was once flesh ("The Word/Logos became flesh/sarx John 1:14). The flesh is not synonymous with sin. The flesh (body) is neutral, depending on how one uses it. (b) The body is not to but tortured, but is to be trained to do God’s will (1 Corinthians 9:27).

The second premise deals with the Gnostic Group’s claim to have a higher knowledge, that is, the “higher truths” known only to some (esoteric). They claimed to have a higher knowledge, not from the Bible, but acquired through a higher mystical realm. They saw themselves as a higher class than others, because their knowledge of God was higher and deeper. The authors’ response to the second premise: The Apostle Paul wrote, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13: 2).

Gnosticism reveals a different faith’s style of a Christian. It rejects the idea of simply “believe” and be saved. It rejects Biblical literalists, rejects those who say the Bible has everything in relation to salvation. It rejects those who say Christianity means accept Jesus or die (Holroyd, 1994). These ideas are encountered by Christians today, that many refuse to accept the authority of the Bible and many would find their own way to obtain salvation.

Gnosticism’s View on Salvation

In Gnosticism, salvation was obtained by acquiring divine knowledge that frees people from the illusion of darkness (Grant, 1966). The author's response to Gnosticism's view of salvation is: (1) Jesus does not say anything about salvation through knowledge, but only through faith in Him as Savior. (2) Darkness is not an illusion, but as a reality that exists in this world. The founder of the Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy, considered illness and death an illusion. However, she still experienced the (not illusory) reality of illness and death on December 3, 1910. (3) “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Eph. 2: 8-9). The salvation Christ offers is free and available to all who believe (Rom 3:24), not just to some who have special knowledge.

Gnosticism’s View on the Personhood of Jesus Christ

The Gnostics believed that the physical body of Jesus was not real, but only “apparent,” and His spirit came to Him at the time of His baptism, but left Him before He was crucified. The author's response to this view is that this concept rejects the true humanity of Jesus and His redemptive work. In fact, if Jesus did not become a real man, He could not suffer, die and be a sacrifice for His people (Heb. 2:14-17). According to the Bible, Jesus is 100% God and 100% human. This is a paradoxical reality (note: paradox are two things that seem to be contradictions, but that's the reality, and they complement each other). According to Gnosticism, Christ was sent to remind the gnostic followers of the true nature of their being. For them, Christ told the secrets (gnosis) to the gnostic followers that they might escape from this evil world and return to the true God.

The Effect of Gnosticism Seen in the Gospel of Thomas
The ‘Gospel’ of Thomas belongs to the New Testament Apocrypha group. The word ‘apocrypha’ comes from the words apokruphas which means: hidden. The term was first used by Jerome, a Church Father, and refers to the books that in the Septuagint (OT translation in Greek) are placed outside the canonical books (39 books in the OT). The Apocrypha books of the OT are rejected for inclusion in canon groups for the following reasons. They (1) Contain historical, geographical, and placement of occurrences at the wrong time. (2) Teach false doctrines and are inconsistent with scriptural teaching inspired by the Holy Spirit. For example: the doctrine of praying for the souls of the dead. (3) Contain fewer divine elements that characterize the Scriptures, for example: do not contain prophecies (Perkins, 1980). They were incorporated into the Deuterocanonical category by the Roman Catholic Church. The names are: Tobit, Judith, Supplemental Additions for the book of Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, Epistles of Jeremiah, Supplemental Additions to the Book of Daniel, first Maccabees, Second Maccabees. The NT Apocrypha includes a great deal of literature. Its writing were an imitation of the Gospels. For example, the words and experiences of Jesus, the gospel associated with Jesus, an apostle, the 12 apostles, holy women, extreme heresies, brothers of Jesus, , etc. Much of the material dates from the first century to the third AD.

In 1946, several other apocrypha documents were found in the ancient Coptic Gnostic library in Nag Hammadi, Egypt (West Bank of the Nile). The most famous of these findings was the ‘Gospel’ of Thomas which contains 114 logions (secret sayings and parables that are considered as Jesus’ sayings). This ‘Gospel’ was written in Greek in Edessa, Syria about 140 AD. According to Hippolytus, this ‘Gospel’ was worn by the ancient Naassenes (Rudolph, 1983).

The 144 logia contain a collection of sayings that are claimed as being from Jesus, whose authority is non-canonical. According to Grant, the contents were colored by Naassene-style Gnosticism. Meanwhile, according to Gartner, a Valentinian influence on Gnosticism is very strong. Perfection is achieved through ascetism and refraining from sexual intercourse. (Rudolph, 1983).

Gnostic’s influence is already visible in logion 1: These are the secret sayings of Jesus living and written by Didymus Judas Thomas. And he says: ‘He who finds the meaning of these utterances will not feel death’ (Rudolph, 1983).

Gnostic followers consider themselves as the elect, the elite minority, so the logion 49 writes, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are alone and superior, for you Will find the kingdom; For you are from there and you will return to it” (Rudolph, 1983).

Then, the last logion says: Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary (Magdalene) forsake us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I will lead him (Mary), so I will turn it into Man, so that he can also be a living spirit resembling you men. For every woman who makes themselves male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. “This teaching refers to the reunification of the sex types. The Gnostics believed that gender differences were the origin of evil” (Singer, 1992).

**Author’s Response to the Gospel of Thomas**

Since the early church age, our Church Fathers rejected apocryphal literature, including the Gospel of Thomas, and did not include it in the canon of the Bible. This decision was based on the clear evidence that the doctrines promoted were incompatible with the whole doctrine of the Bible. The universe was not created by an evil god, but by the One and true God. It is Sin that had corrupted the earth (Gen 3:17-18, Romans 8: 21-22). Sex is a gift from God. The command to reproduce was given by God before Adam and Eve fell into sin (Gen 1:28). How can humans multiply if they do not have sex? The Spirit-filled people, will give up all aspects of their life to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. God's people should not be arrogant and feel superior. The more mature a person's spiritual level becomes, the more humble he is; The more he realizes ‘all because of His grace,’ that all glory be to God alone (Rom 11:36).

God does not differentiate between men and women, as the apostle Paul wrote, “In this case there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between servants and free men, between men and women. All of you are one for Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Thus the ‘Gospel of Thomas’ is not worth mentioning as the ‘Fifth Gospel’. It is a book that contains teachings that are contrary to Christianity.
Conclusion

Gnosticism is one of the heresies that can also be said to be antichrist, which continues to spread and seek to confuse biblical Christian doctrine. A disturbing teaching can also destabilize a believer's faith. When Christians have no biblical doctrinal grip on faith in Jesus Christ, they can easily fall into the trap of this heresy. In the face of the development of Gnosticism, Christians must be cautious in order not to be shaken and to lose faith and to keep their faith firmly based in Christ, unshakable by the heresies of the world (2 John 1: 8).

Bibliography