Gnosticism is a general term that refers to various religious and philosophical sects that flourished in the first few centuries C. E. There was no uniform set of beliefs among Gnostics although many of the rival sects referenced common mythologies. Some Gnostic sects were drawn to and adopted Christian beliefs while others may have originated in the Church and later left to form their own schools of thought. Common to most manifestations of Gnosticism is the concept of a fallen material world, created through a cosmological accident by an evil deity, the Demiurge. They thought humans should strive to escape the imprisonment of the physical world by recognizing the divine spark that they called gnosis.

Gnosticism and Christianity

Several recent studies have focused on the relation of Gnosticism to Christianity. Is it probable that Gnosticism in some way influenced Christianity? Or is it more accurate to speak of Christianity’s influence on Gnosticism? Some scholars have suggested that certain heretical teachers would not have been excluded from the church during their lifetimes. In fact, Valentinus and Marcion might have been respected by Gnostics served to demonstrate the evil nature of the physical world and the necessity of escaping to the spiritual world above. Gnostic teachers, such as Valentinus, used biblical characters in their construction of these myths. The roles of God and humanity, however, were reversed when compared to the account of Genesis. To be granted salvation through gnosis, Adam and Eve had to disobey the Demiurge and eat the forbidden fruit, as they were urged by the serpent. Such beliefs were declared heretical – although, probably not during the lifetime of Valentinus – and led to the exclusion of Gnostics from the official Christian Church that later emerged.

What is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism is a general term that refers to various religious and philosophical sects that flourished in the first few centuries C. E. There was no uniform set of beliefs among Gnostics although many of the rival sects referenced common mythologies. Some Gnostic sects were drawn to and adopted Christian beliefs while others may have originated in the Church and later left to form their own schools of thought. Common to most manifestations of Gnosticism is the concept of a fallen material world, created through a cosmological accident by an evil deity, the Demiurge. They thought humans should strive to escape the imprisonment of the physical world by recognizing the divine spark that they called gnosis.

Ancient Gnosticism and its interaction with early Christianity will be examined. Special attention will be paid to the later, more complex system of Gnosticism associated with Valentinus, a Second Century C.E. teacher located in Rome who would later be denounced as a heretic. The project also considers influences on the development of Gnosticism and compares its evolution with that of Christianity over the same period. Sources utilized for the study will include several Gnostic texts from the Nag Hammadi library, such as The Gospel of Truth, as well as the accounts of the heresiologists, focusing mostly on Irenaeus’ Against Heresies.

Abstract

The example of Valentinus and his school is valuable to the historian. Valentinus was active in Rome during the mid-second century, a period when Christians were only beginning to develop an ecclesiastical structure. Likewise, interaction between Valentinians and Christians was not uncommon and they may even have attended the same religious meetings. Less is known about the Valentinian school and its adherents because so few of their writings have survived. It was not until after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945 that historians were able to begin to understand Valentinianism.

Sources and Texts

For this study, many of the texts from the Nag Hammadi library will be used, as well as some of the writings of the opponents of Gnosticism. Some texts that are attributed to Valentinus or his followers are:

- Gospel of Truth
- Gospel of Philip
- Letter of Polycarp to Flora
- Harvest – a poem believed to be written by Valentinus

Sources from opponents of Gnosticism:

- Against Heresies by Irenaeus
- Hippolytus’s Refutation of All Heresies
- Excerpts of Theodotus by Clement

Works Cited


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