

## The Gospel of John: Materiality as Fundamental to Orthodox Christianity

In the centuries immediately following the death of Jesus Christ, the persecuted Christian movement struggled to cope with the profoundly human question of how a supposedly good and powerful God could allow pain and suffering to exist within His creation. One response to this question of theodicy presented itself in Gnosticism, a Christian heresy of the second and third centuries which rejected the Genesis *mythos* and, consequently, the goodness of the material world. Although gnostic beliefs fell outside the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, they nevertheless played a crucial role in helping orthodoxy to take a conscious and definite shape. By rejecting Gnosticism and its supposition that materiality is fundamentally bad, Christianity came to see itself as an utterly world-embracing religion. In fact, Christian orthodoxy developed to say that not only is materiality *not* antagonistic to salvation, but also that materiality is intricately intertwined with, and even necessary for, salvation. And so while Christians are called to turn away from a dependence on material possessions and towards a yearning for eternal life, they are nevertheless called to enjoy the fruits of this world, recognizing that all creation is a physical manifestation of God's transcendent goodness. Several Christian writings composed during the first three centuries AD proved to be absolutely essential in defining orthodoxy against the struggle with Gnosticism, including the works of the Apostle Paul and, later, Origen of Alexandria, the first systematic theologian. But orthodox Christianity's most enduring and foundational response to the challenge of Gnosticism arguably lies in the Gospel of John, the most anti-gnostic text of the New Testament. The Gospel of John, with its broad cosmological scope and its emphasis on the centrality of the crucifixion, is perhaps the best representation of

the orthodox view that would ultimately triumph over Gnosticism: The material world is fundamentally good, and all of creation will be redeemed in time.

In order to grasp the fact that the orthodox Christian view of the material world developed in stark contrast to the gnostic view of the material world, it is necessary to define the basic principles of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a heretical form of Christianity that gained momentum over the course of the second and third centuries in its attempt to respond to the problem of evil in the world. Interestingly, though, adherents of Gnosticism answered questions of theodicy in a radically different way than did their orthodox Christian counterparts. Rather than using the Genesis myth as a starting point to explain the origin of evil, Gnostics completely rejected the account of creation *ex nihilo* offered in the first book of the Christian Bible. Gnostics argued for the dualism of God, claiming that the ‘good’ God did not create this world at all. Rather, the material world was brought into being by an evil deity, and was therefore hopelessly fallen and corrupt. According to gnostic belief, the good God offers humanity a chance to escape from the material world by following Jesus Christ, the teacher of *gnosis*, or “secret knowledge.” Some of the alleged secret teachings are collected in the Gospel of Thomas, a mid-second century gnostic text which contains 114 sayings, or *logia*, ascribed to Christ. The gnostic rejection of materiality is particularly evident in logion 56, in which the Thomasine Jesus proclaims, “Whoever has come to know the world has discovered a carcass, and whoever has discovered a carcass, of that person the world is not worthy” (Patterson et al.). Another important gnostic text, the Apocryphon of John, even compares the human body to a prison, and is emphatic that upon salvation, “[the soul] is not cast into another flesh” (Wisse). Clearly, Gnosticism and orthodoxy were diametrically opposed in regards to their views on materiality

and embodiment. In order to triumph over this threatening heresy, early Christian orthodoxy would have to respond by finding its own explanation for the nature of good and evil in the material world, as well as for what role physicality plays in salvation and resurrection.

Of all the texts composed within the first few centuries of Christianity, the Gospel of John contains perhaps the most organic and eloquent anti-gnostic explanations for the fallen state of the material world, and was therefore essential in shaping the orthodox response to Gnosticism during the time of the early church. Because its author wrote sometime around the turn of the second century, when Gnosticism had already begun to take shape, it is very likely that, aware of the rising heresy, he purposefully designed his gospel as a direct challenge to gnostic beliefs. Unique from the other canonical gospels, John opens with a profound theological prologue that reflects on Christ's relationship to God and to the *cosmos*, a Greek word that translates as "the whole of creation." This prologue seems to be aimed directly at Gnosticism, for John explicitly claims that God is the source of everything that exists when he states, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1.3). By presenting God as the creator of the cosmos, this gospel indicates that nothing which He created can be evil. Moreover, John evokes the Incarnation, the enfleshment, of Christ when he writes, "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1.14). This gospel reasons that because God Himself took on material flesh in order to enter into and redeem His creation, materiality cannot be fundamentally evil, as Gnosticism supposes. Indeed, later on in John's gospel, Christ himself will proclaim, "I came not to judge the cosmos, but to save the cosmos" (12.47). Because God, the absolute principle of goodness, does not condemn His creation, neither should anyone else.

The anti-gnostic miracles which Jesus performs in the first twelve books of John's gospel, known collectively as the Book of Signs, affirm the beauty and goodness of creation as well as lay the foundations for Christian sacramentalism, or the idea that there is an inherent element of sacredness in the material world. The first of Christ's 'signs' is the transformation of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. It is no accident that John chose to include this specific miracle in his gospel; because its context is that of a marriage ceremony, it is grounded in a fundamental celebration of love, humanity, and 'this-worldliness.' In effect, John presents a beautiful portrait of Jesus Christ as a human, rejoicing in those fruits of the earth which Gnostics so vehemently condemn. Anti-gnostic traces surface yet again in Christ's penultimate miracle, his symbolic healing of a man blind from birth. In this miracle, Jesus "[spits] on the ground and [makes] mud with the saliva and [spreads] the mud on the man's eyes" (9.6), giving him sight. In effect, God mixes Himself with the earth in order to make something righteous; no gnostic text would ever conceive of such an idea. Christ later tells his disciples, "'The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me'" (10.25), introducing the idea that his miracles serve as visible manifestation's of God's grace. For this reason, the Gospel of John lies at the heart of sacramentalism; for sacraments, like miracles, are physical enactments of divine grace. The orthodox church came to place a great importance on sacramental rituals, particularly the *eukharistia*, in which bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. The fact that sacramentalism — this celebration of the intersection of the material and the immaterial, the earthly and the divine — became so deeply imbedded within the Christian tradition is a testimony to the triumph of orthodoxy over Gnosticism.

In the remaining books of his gospel, known collectively as the Book of Glory, John focuses intensely on the last scenes of Christ's life, and attempts to offer an explanation of salvation and resurrection that differs from that of Gnosticism. In these last books, like the first, John maintains his profound emphases on the goodness of the material world. As Passover approaches, for example, Jesus is anointed with costly perfume (12.3) and hailed with branches of palm trees (12.13). Although these are small details, by including them, John shows that material things can be used for the higher purpose of glorifying of God. Another anti-gnostic emphasis on materiality occurs when, before his death, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, enacting such a profound, physical expression of love (13.5). Finally, on the night before his death, Jesus speaks to his disciples in an attempt to comfort them, his words evoking a strong sense of this-worldliness:

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (16.21-22)

These poignant lines reveal John's overwhelming emphasis on physicality. When Jesus alludes to his death and resurrection, he compares them to the agony and joy of childbirth, one of the most earthly, embodied sensations of the human experience. Throughout the entirety of his gospel, John focuses heavily on physicality as the means and medium for salvation and redemption, stressing that the material world, the *cosmos*, is somehow intricately involved in the death and resurrection of Christ. For instance, John repeatedly refers to Christ as the perfect paschal sacrifice, or "the Lamb of God." In doing so, he makes explicitly clear the fact that salvation is

only able to be brought about by Christ's physical, bodily death; in other words, salvation is accomplished through his very blood, which "takes away the sins of the cosmos" (1.29). This idea that materiality somehow plays a necessary role in salvation stands in stark contrast to gnostic belief. But the scenes that most strongly mark the Gospel of John as a direct challenge to Gnosticism are the resurrection scenes, in which Christ appears in tangible, bodily form to his disciples. Revealingly, though, the one disciple who doubts the physical resurrection of Christ is Thomas, who had become a major figure in the gnostic tradition by the time John wrote his gospel. Thomas declares, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20.25). Shortly after, Jesus appears and invites Thomas to reach out and touch him, confirming the physicality of his resurrection and thereby rejecting gnostic beliefs in the irredeemability of the body. In the Gospel of John, the struggle between Gnosticism and orthodoxy is evident, the latter insisting on the physicality of salvation and placing this directly in front of Thomas.

Because of its unwavering rejection of gnostic values and its continual celebration of the material world, the Gospel of John played a crucial role in defining early Christian orthodoxy in the face of Gnosticism, which eventually lost its influence in the third century. Although John's gospel is in no way as prolific as the Letters of Paul the Apostle, nor is it a systematic theology like the work of Origen, it nevertheless lays the very foundations for the orthodox belief in the goodness of the material world, a belief which triumphed over Gnosticism and which has endured to this day.

Works Cited

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