

**Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975**

A summary by Romyana Hristova  
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## **I. Introduction into second-century Gnosticism**

### **The Gnostic Worldview**

“Essentially, the Gnostic worldview posits the existence of an unknown, transcendental God in a perfect, spiritual world as well as the existence of a lower, imperfect, deity (Demiurge) [appropriated from Plato, from the Greek *demiurgos*, “artisan”, who fashions the world out of chaos, identified with the God of the Jews], the creator of the imperfect material world. Man is a composite being – an immortal spirit (the true human Self), which is trapped in a mortal body after his descent into the material world. A major consequence of being imprisoned into the world is that man forgets that his essence is divine and he loses touch with his true Self. Thus his main duty is to restore his lost integrity and to reunite with God, attaining liberation” (Hristova, 17).

The Gnostic teachers were influenced by Platonism, apocalyptic Judaism, Iranian-Zoroastrian religious ideas.

### **Definitions of *gnosis*:**

“knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an ‘elite’, i.e., of an esoteric kind. ...salvation is only possible through Gnosis, i.e., an esoteric knowledge of the origin and destination of one’s inner self (Hanegraaff, 404). ...the decisive criterion for designating an idea or text as Gnostic is whether or not it involves a concept of knowledge that considers **Gnosis as indispensable means of salvation**, indeed salvation itself” (Hanegraaff, 405). ...The central Gnostic idea of revealed, secret Gnosis as a gift that illuminates and liberates man’s inner self is found in all periods ... Gnosis, which in some way or another is imparted to him through revelation.” ...knowledge of God to be possible only through revelation.” (Hanegraaff, 405) [Apostle Paul’s case]

Another essential feature of gnosis is the mutual intimate relationship between God and man.

**Church Fathers’ attack against the gnostic “heretics”, “dissidents within the Christian movement”** (Greek *hairesis*, “a choice” in a most general sense; a strongly negative connotation only in a Christian context) (Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* 148).

**Tertullian** (c.160-c.220) – **heretics** are those who ask questions and “deviate from the majority consensus” established by the church; they are the ones who make different choices and value diversity, not unity. Therefore, “making choices is evil, since choice destroys group unity” and by implication the agreement in doctrine, morals and leadership – the characteristics of the true church, according to him (Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* 63-64 quoted in Hristova 8).

**Irenaeus** (c.140-202), bishop of Lyon, tarred Gnostic ideas forever “with the brush of heresy” in his five-volume treatise *Refutation and Overflow of **Falsely** Called Knowledge*; aim – to discredit the Gnostics who challenged his position as a bishop, or shepherd of the Church. He presented his position as *orthodox* (ortho-“**right**” + doxa “**thinking**”), i.e. right thinking and truth on the grounds of being consistent with the apostolic tradition as he comprehended it. This was sufficient for him to secure his ecclesiastical *authority* (Churton 90-91 quoted in Hristova 8).

**The Gnostics** – holders of a tradition of insight, which had preserved “the real meaning of Christ’s teaching”; the *authority of personal and immediate experience*, which was advocated by Jesus himself - in *The Gospel of Thomas*, a key text for the Gnostic Christians – “You have ignored the one living in your presence and have spoken (only) of the dead” [i.e. the prophets]. Thus, the Gnostics rejected any kind of “secondhand testimony” (Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* 145 quoted in Hristova 9).

## II. *The Gnostic Paul*

**Introduction** (pp. 1-12): book’s focus is on how Paul is being read and interpreted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

### **Two conflicting views of Paul:**

- 1) Gnostic Paul – by 2<sup>nd</sup> cen. Gnostics (Valentinius, Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus); in Nag Hammadi writings (e.g., The Gospel of Truth; The Gospel of Philip, and more texts uncovered more recently)
- 2) Antignostic Paul– by Church fathers (Ireneus, Tertulian, Origen – mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century to mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century) and some contemporary NT scholars (Bultmann, 1947; Wilkens, 1959; Barth, Brox)

Both traditions claim to be authentic:

- 1) **Valentinians** trace their origin to Paul: Valentinius was “**a hearer of Theudas, who was a disciple of Paul.**” They follow Paul’s own secret wisdom tradition. They cite only Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews. Bypass or reject the Pastoral Letters: First Epistle to Timothy, Second Epistle to Timothy and The Epistle to Titus as not written by Paul, but in his name after his death.

- 2) For the **Church Fathers** Paul is “their ally against the gnostics”. They cite the “Pastoral Letters” assuming their authenticity, and in which he is presented as “the antagonist of false teachers”, “seducing the gullible with the lure of falsely so called gnosis.”

Paul’s reason to advise Timothy “. . . stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false [or, other] doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies...” **1 Timothy 1:3-4a** (NIV, 2011). “Christian Gnostics borrowed ideas from Greek philosophy and pagan faiths, which were blended with Christian concepts. While the heresy in the Ephesian church may have incorporated some pagan beliefs or practices from the cult of Artemis, there is no concrete evidence of this.” (Mowczko, Blog, July 29, 2020, <https://margmowczko.com/1-timothy-212-in-context-3/>)

**Conclusion** of the book (pp.157-166):

The power and appeal of the Valentinian “propaganda”/ teaching is deplored by the church fathers. Irenaeus says of them: “outwardly such persons seem to be sheep, for they appear to be like us, from what they say in public, repeating the same words (of confession) as we do; but inwardly they are wolves.” ...and privately they offer to remedy the ‘deficiencies’ of that faith through their own “apostolic tradition”. (p.157)

Even Irenaeus admits their exegesis to be plausible, defending their practices by citing Paul’s example and defend their views through arguments from scripture, and at the same time “wily and deceptive” (p.158). Valentinians’ **greatest appeal** lies in their theological teaching, particularly for seekers “gifted with pneumatic nature”. To them the Valentinians offered “wisdom hidden in a mystery” / “hidden wisdom”, which relates the myth of Sophia, which “reveals the secret of their election through grace, and teaches the ‘deeper interpretation’ of the scriptures.” (p.159)

**The dangers** of Valentinian exegesis: as per Irenaeus Satan inspired them to divide the church internally; their teaching on election to encourage arrogance, envy, resentment, etc.; they incite confusion and controversy, disturb the faith of the simple; raise doubts about the efficacy of the sacraments – if the baptism is efficacious, or if it is only a preparation for the “higher” sacrament of *apolytrois*.” [a ritual system that included a sacrament performed for an individual at the point of death. The rite helped to "establish" the individual in the higher celestial realms.] (p.160)

Ecclesiastical Christians, before Irenaeus, tended to avoid discussion of Paul’s theology. They revered him as an apostle and martyr, mention his as an apostolic leader. Other sources express hostility – “satanically inspired divider of the Roman community properly headed by Peter. They

may have even preferred to exclude Paul's letters from the canon, but it was too late, he was already a martyr of Rome, a chief apostle. Irenaeus is determined to prove: that Paul stands against the gnostic heretics, quoting the Pastorals; that he was in agreement with the other apostles and in no way differs from them by citing Acts 15. He uses a one-sided exegesis of Paul's theology, like Origen after him, reinterpreting his letters in an "orthodox" direction and becomes the church champion challenger of "the gnostic Paul" (162).

If Paul was antignostic, how could the Gnostics claim him as their great pneumatic/spiritual teacher? And use him as a source of their christology, anthropology, sacramental and resurrection theology?

What is Paul's relation to Gnostics? Too much focus in scholarship on "**gnostic terminology**" in Paul's letters. An attempt to read first-century Pauline material in terms of second-century gnostic evidence. ... "the error of equating theological questions of the Pauline era with clichés of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century controversies." ... Some scholars agree that Paul seems to have adapted his theological language from Jewish and other religious traditions available to him in the first century. (163)

Some of this "gnostic terminology" in Pauline letters may be explained more plausibly as Pauline terminology in the gnostic writings. -> Valentinus developed his theology independently of the ecclesiastical community; his followers insist that Valentinian exegesis complements and completes church tradition, it does not contradict it, as it derives directly from Paul's own wisdom tradition. Today, "antignostic Paul" predominates in the scholarly debate. Yet, **to decide between a Gnostic or orthodox exegesis is a false alternative**. To read Paul either way is to read him unhistorically, attempting to interpret his theology in terms of categories formulated in second-century debate. Or to read him with "a renewed openness." (164)

### **Gnostic exegetes claim:**

- 1) Scriptures are to be read **symbolically** as Paul himself intended. Thus, the terms Jews and Gentiles are not to be taken literally;
- 2) The main division is NOT between Jews and Gentiles, but between **the many "psychics" who are "called"**, they are the Jews; and **the few pneumatics, the "elect,"** , "those **beloved of God**"(p.15), they are identified with the Gentiles (Rom 3:19-31, pp. 23-24)
- 3) Thus, Paul taught in **two different ways** at the same time and wrote his letters "in two ways at once", following Christ example, who initiated only a few into the secret meaning of his parables.

### **III. Quotes from the BOOK:**

#### **(1) Galatians**

Valentinians read in *Galatians* Paul's "proclamation of his independence" of other apostles, particularly Peter; they claim that Paul "distinguishes his own **pneumatic teaching** of the gospel from the merely **psychic preaching** of the other apostles.":

**Gal 1:1-5:** Paul, an apostle—**sent not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father**, who raised him from the dead ...grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us from the present aion [the present evil age], according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup> to whom be glory unto **the aions of the aions.**", [i.e. the gods in the Gnostic pleroma (fullness); Aion (sg), a cosmic god of eternity; associated also with Zurvan and (evil) Ahriman] ; ["for ever and ever. Amen", NIV]

Valentinians contrast the **liberty** that Paul, the pneumatic teacher, reveals "to the Gentiles" with the psychic kerygma that Peter, "who lacked perfect Gnosis," preaches "to the Jews." Valentinians contrast the "God of the Jews," that is of the *psychics* with the God of the Christians," that is of the *pneumatic* "Gentiles." (p.112, FN 2)

The Father wills "to deliver us from **the present evil aion**" which is **ruled by the demiurge**, whom Paul calls "**the god of this aion**" (2 Cor 4:4) ["the god of this world" has blinded the minds of them which believe not," KJ]

**Gal 1:6-8:** "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him [Paul] ... for **another gospel** ... some who want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if .. an **angel from heaven** [i.e., the Demiurge] should preach to you a gospel contrary ...let him be accursed."

The Valentinians claim that the other apostles, incl. Peter and Luke, preached another gospel, even another god than Paul proclaimed ..."under the influence of Jewish opinions." ... "Irenaeus calls such exegesis **blasphemy**, the madness of those who ...have imagined ...that they themselves are purer in doctrine and more insightful than the apostles."

**Gal 1:11-17:** "...the gospel I preached is not a human one. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but received it through revelation of Jesus Christ. ...(15) But when it pleased the One [God] who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace, to reveal his son in me.." – According to Valentinian exegetes God separated Paul **the psychic "outer anthropos"** from the **pneumatic "inner anthropos."**

*Col 3:9-10* – The "old anthropos" [man] must be put off in order to "put on" the new, pneumatic anthropos. Psychics must effect this transformation through their own efforts. For Valentinians Paul "alone knew the truth, since to him the mystery was revealed by revelation." (p.102)

...that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles ... I did not go to Jerusalem, ["the psychic region (topos)] ...but I went into Arabia, and Damascus. [i.e., Gentile lands, "the pneumatic region"]

Paul clarifies his relationship to the apostles "before him":

**Gal 2:1-5** – After 14 years Paul goes back to Jerusalem, urged by a revelation, where he set forth **in private** before those who were respected, the gospel which he preached among the Gentiles, lest in any way he had run in vain.

According to the Valentinians, Paul knows that such privacy is an essential precondition for communicating the pneumatic gospel, “the gospel of uncircumcision”. But Irenaeus offers an opposite interpretation: that Paul’s private disclosure of his gospel to Peter, James and John “expresses his need for them to authorize his teaching.” (p.104)

Peter remained “ignorant” and “imperfect”, as the apostle “to the Jew” he was sent from the demiurge (the god of the Jews), who wrought in him the apostleship of circumcision, to preach the kerygmatic/psychic message of Jesus.

Paul’s confrontation with Peter – on the grounds that when Peter ventured into Antioch (“Gentile territory”) tried to compel even some of the pneumatic “gentiles” to “act like Jews” (Gal 2:2-4), for psychic apostles still observed the “law of Moses” in obedience to the demiurge.

**Gal 2: 19-2:** “For through the law **I died to the law** so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (NIV)

Valentinian exegesis – Paul was redeemed from the cosmos and its demiurgic ruler. For crucifixion symbolizes the process of transformation – what was **hylic** in Paul has been consumed, what is **psychic** has been purified. He now lives **pneumatically**, or rather Christ lives in him. He rejects the righteousness through the law, in which psychics place their hope. (p.106)

Also in **Gal. 6:14-16:** ...the cosmos has been crucified to me, and I to the cosmos. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but a new creation [creature, KJ]. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to [and upon, KJ] the Israel of God.

**Gal 3:13-14:** ...”The crucifixion signifies the giving up of the material body to destruction, simultaneously the inner man is released for reunion with God.” (p.107)

## *(2) 1 Corinthians*

**1 Corinthians** – the **contrast** between the secret wisdom Paul discloses to the initiates and the “foolishness of the kerygma (the psychic preaching) he offers to psychic believers” ( 2:6-3:4).

Paul addresses first the **pneumatics**, who are given the grace of God and “are enriched in every way in him, in every logos and every gnosis” and who “lack no charismatic gift” (1:4-5). Then he speaks to the others, the **psychics**, in different terms – those who have not yet received gnosis, nor have they attained perfection, he prays that God will sustain them to the end, even in the judgement (1:8), assuring them that it is God the Father who has **called them** into communion with the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:9).

Addresses schisms and divisions, a plead for a common confession, to be perfectly joined together in the same mind. (1:10)

The Valentinian initiate will recognize the schisms between pneumatic Christians who follow the secret teaching of Paul and the psychic Christians who follow Peter, founder of the psychic church. Paul insists that although the teachings differ they confess the same thing.

**1 Cor 1:14-17** – Paul address the **baptism** and **contrast his mission** with that of the other apostles – psychic apostles, notably Peter, preach an baptize “with water”, offering to psychics forgiveness of sins, but “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to evangelize [preach the gospel, KJ]. Yet he abstains from public preaching because “the **logos of the cross**” (the cross symbolizes wisdom’s (Sophia) fall and restoration seems foolishness to the psychics. They believe only what they see, their *sensory perceptions* and cannot be persuaded to believe through *logos* (discourse) (1:18-20). Psychics have become fools, dominated by the foolish demiurge, which has vowed to “destroy the wisdom of the wise.”(19-20).

**1 Cor 1:21-24** – Paul preaches in the most accessible way, but the kerismatic message speaks in different ways to the two groups because the Jews (psychics) seek **signs and miracles**, and the Greeks (pneumatics) seek **wisdom**. Psychics receive it as the “Power of God,” the pneumatic Gentiles – spiritually as the “Wisdom of God.”

**1 Cor 2:6-12** – *the nature of gnosis* (12)– we have received not the spirit of the world/cosmos (i. e, the demiurge), but the spirit which is of God (the Father) who alone reveals the deep things of God”; The demiurge and the psychics have received only the “spirit of the cosmos” (2:12) “and consequently lack understanding of pneumatic realities” (p.59). Only the *elect know the mind of the Lord* because as he says “we have the mind of Christ” (2:16).

**1 Cor. 3:18-23** - Yet, he warns the **psychics** that anyone who consider himself to be “wise in this age” is “a fool before God” the Father. Paul admonishes the **pneumatics** not to boast of their spiritual superiority (3:23) and not to judge anyone before the time when the Lord comes .. then every man shall receive his praise from God. (**4:1-5**) – but to be considered as “**servants of Christ**”, “administrators of the mysteries of God.”

**1 Corinthians 7** – human conjunction in marriage – a double signification: 1) the conjunction of Christ with the elect; 2) the relation of the elect with psychic believers, a baptism the former perform for the latter to ensure they will receive the power to transcend the region of the demiurge.

**1 Cor 10: 29b-33** - ...please all men in all things, not seeking advantage, but that of the many; that they may be saved...they must do all for the glory of God since *both the psychic Jews and the pneumatic “Greeks” are members of the ecclesia of God (10:32)*. Irenaeus indicates that while they participate willingly in the communion celebration with the “psychic church” they reserve the pneumatic, eucharistic celebration for private meetings among initiates.” (p.74)

**1 Cor 12 – 8** – spiritual gifts – “the logos of gnosis” / “the word of knowledge” (KJ)

## 1 Corinthians 15 – the mystery of the resurrection

**1 Cor 15 – 10** – “But by **the grace of God** I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” (NIV). [grace is bestowed only to the elect]

**1 Cor 15 – 12** - But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no **resurrection of the dead**? - According to the Val. Exegesis “the resurrection of the dead” is “**the recognition of the truth**” spoken by those who have **gnosis**,” it concerns the present, not the future. (p.81)

**1 Cor 15: 35-40 – the resurrection** – Paul offers a **symbolic (pneumatic) interpretation** through his metaphor of the seeds. **Two types of seeds**: psychic seed of the called and pneumatic seed of the elect. Although God has willed that they differ in body, flesh, and in glory, God will raise “each in its own order”. Valentinians call the belief in bodily resurrection “the faith of fools” (i.e. of psychics).

**1 Cor 15: 42-57** - Now Paul reveals the great mystery of the resurrection (**15:44, 50, 51**) – the transformation / transmutation of the material/natural body into a spiritual one.

Paul assures the elect that their present labor – preaching and ministering to the psychics – is not in vain (**58**) since the “dead” psychics are to be “raised,” i.e. transformed and changed, so that “God shall be all in all.” (p.86)

Paul counsels those who have gnosis like himself – in *Philippians* he urges the “elect” to “become as I am” (Phil 3:17), to become like Christ. In *Ephesians* and *Colossians* the Valentinians see Paul’s praise for the **pneumatic Christ**, i.e. “**Christ in us**” (Col 1:27; 3:16 – “let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom”).

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