

Was the Apostle Paul a Gnostic?

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Paradigms from the past influence our current thinking in more ways than we commonly know. Thus a paradigm of Christianity developed by a Christian bishop who died in the year 202 A.D. continues to exercise a significant influence over how we see the world in general, and Christianity in particular. He was a contemporary of another Christian who sought to become a bishop, but didn't make it, and whose view of the world and of Christianity almost disappeared from history due to the triumph of the paradigm of his competitor, and about whom we would have known little except for a discovery in a trash heap in Egypt in 1945. And the little that we did know about him was what his adversary who won the argument had to say about him – until some of the documents in the Egyptian trash heap were translated from Coptic into English, and scholars began to read for the first time the views of the “loser” in the struggle between these two early Christians.

The first of these protagonists is Irenaeus of Lyon, who was born in A.D. 130 in Smyrna in Asia Minor. He claimed to be a disciple of Polycarp, (60 A.D – 156 A.D), who, in turn, was claimed to have been a disciple of John the Evangelist – one of Jesus' twelve apostles. This claim is important to the paradigm developed by Irenaeus as the authority for his views of the true nature of Christianity. It should be noted in passing that the dates indicated for these figures are approximate, and scholars hold different opinions as to which dates for them should be used.

Irenaeus was ordained a *presbyter*, or “elder,” probably at Lyon, and then succeeded the first bishop of Lyon, St. Pothinus, when he suffered martyrdom around 180 A.D. He is best known for his book, *Adversus Haereses*, which, despite the title, was written in Greek. The actual title was “On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis,” which identifies it as a polemical work. It was particularly aimed at the views of another Christian priest, Valentinus, whose works were almost exclusively known only through *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus. Irenaeus insisted that there were three sources of information on the authenticity of Christian doctrine:

- Christian Tradition
- Christian Scriptures
- Episcopal Authority

“Christian Tradition” was the unwritten information about Christ and the Church handed down from the apostles. “Christian Scriptures” were those writings of the

apostles and the sub-apostolic community which the “Church” considered to be authentic and suitable for teaching. “Episcopal Authority” was the “chain of tradition” from the apostles to their successors (bishops), and the successors of those bishops. In the case of Irenaeus, he claimed that his line of succession as bishop came from his ordination (as presbyter?) by Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, and through him to the Apostle John the Evangelist. It is somewhat interesting that he did not claim his predecessor at Lyon, Pothinus, as the source of his authority, but rather the Bishop of Smyrna by whom he had presumably been ordained a presbyter.

Much of our biographical information on all this comes from another, and later, bishop – Eusebius of Caesarea (260 A.D. – 340 A.D.) who published his *Ecclesiastical History* around 313 A.D. But Irenaeus himself is the chief source on the theology he espoused, and – until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in 1945 – on the theological views of Valentinus, whom he disparaged and attacked for holding “false” views about Christianity.

Valentinus (100 A.D. – 160 A.D.) was probably born in Egypt. The Christian historian Epiphanius (310 A.D. – 403 A.D.) stated that he was educated at Alexandria in Egypt, and this is likely as Alexandria was then a great center of Greek philosophy, and Valentinus seemed to be very well versed in such philosophy. Clement of Alexandria (150 A.D. – 215 A.D.) stated that Valentinus was the disciple of Theudas, who was, in turn, the disciple of Paul. This is important, because Irenaeus maintained that Valentinus invented his ideas of Christianity out of whole cloth, while his were inherited from the apostles. But if Clement is to be believed, Valentinus could make the same claim to having received his teaching from one of the apostles through Theudas – as long as the self-proclaimed “apostleship” of Paul is acknowledged. Thus one of the three principles enunciated by Irenaeus for the authenticity of Christian teaching were present with Valentinus – “Christian Tradition.” Unfortunately the only mention of “Theudas” in the scriptures was in chapter five of the *Acts of the Apostles*, where he is stated to have been a failed Jewish rebel, and not a follower of Jesus, with no association with the Apostle Paul. So whereas we have some certain information as to Polycarp in the “chain of authority” to Irenaeus, that chain is not very certain in the case of Valentinus.

However that may be, Valentinus eventually settled in Rome, and became a teacher. There is no evidence that he was a presbyter, although the fact that he apparently considered himself as a competitor for the position of Bishop of Rome upon the death of Pope Hyginus (the information is from another Christian historian and theologian, Tertullian). Our information on the structure of the early church is so sketchy that it is difficult to state anything about the church at Rome with any precision. In any event, Valentinus did not succeed in becoming a bishop, and then moved to Cyprus, where he died.

If all that we knew about Valentinus were from *Adversus Haereses*, our picture of him would be rather one-sided. Irenaeus belonged to the movement that scholars today call *proto-orthodoxy*, or the teachings of Christianity which later became what was called at a later date, Orthodoxy. The term “proto-orthodoxy” means the earliest stage of what eventually became the theology of the victors in the struggle with other Christian sects, and in particular, the theology of those who won out over Gnostic Christian sects – including Valentinus and his disciples. Because the theology of the losers was written by the victors, there is a reasonable supposition that the theological views of these Gnostic Christian sects was not accurately presented. But until we had the advantage of reading the actual texts of these sects after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, that was all that we had.

Amongst the manuscripts discovered at Nag Hammadi was a work attributed to Valentinus, or at least to his school, called *The Gospel of Truth*. It is not a “gospel” in the same sense as the four received gospels that form our New Testament, but is rather a sermon on the principles of Christianity. A translation from the Coptic original can be read at <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/got.html> . It differs in significant ways from other Gnostic writings in the collection, and indeed, from other surviving Gnostic works, and thus some scholars have denied that it is “Gnostic” at all. However, the preponderance of scholarly opinion is that it is, indeed, a part of what may fairly be termed “Gnosticism,” and is a Christian Gnostic work.

A key characteristic of Gnostic teaching is that *knowledge* is the path to understanding God, and thus its name – Gnostic – from the Greek word for “knowledge,” *gnosis*. This paragraph from the Gospel of Truth is illustrative of the connection with this *knowledge* of God that Jesus came to reveal:

Oh, such great teaching! He abases himself even unto death, though he is clothed in eternal life. Having divested himself of these perishable rags, he clothed himself in incorruptibility, which no one could possibly take from him. Having entered into the empty territory of fears, he passed before those who were stripped by forgetfulness, being both knowledge and perfection, proclaiming the things that are in the heart of the Father, so that he became the wisdom of those who have received instruction. But those who are to be taught, the living who are inscribed in the book of the living, learn for themselves, receiving instructions from the Father, turning to him again.

An excellent analysis of this work can be found in [The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions](#), by Bentley Layton (1987). The “Introduction” to the Gospel of Truth, beginning on page 250 has valuable information on the work.

The title of this paper, “Was the Apostle Paul a Gnostic?” leads to a consideration of the position of Valentinus, and his followers, on the nature of the Christian scriptures, and especially on the letters of Paul. Irenaeus had claimed that the

Gnostics discounted the teaching of the apostles and the newly emerging Christian scriptures, but instead created their beliefs out of whole cloth. A closer look at Valentinus, however, belies this assertion. A significant explanation of all this can be found in a book by the Princeton historian Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters (1975). Pagels' thesis is not that Paul was a Gnostic, but rather that his letters could be interpreted as *Gnostic* by theologians and philosophers such as Valentinus. In other words, it is not so important to demonstrate that Paul's writings contained *Gnostic* themes, but that others thought that his writing had Gnostic themes. Another way of looking at this is that the paradigm used by Valentinus was a different paradigm from that used by Irenaeus, and this this different paradigm led to very different conclusions about the nature of Paul and what he believed and taught.

Valentinus apparently based his views of Paul on these excerpts from his letters:

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to **the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages**.... *Romans 16:25* [Emphasis Added]

But we speak **God's wisdom, secret and hidden**, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. *1 Corinthians 2:7* [Emphasis Added]

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³ And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— ⁴ was caught up into Paradise **and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat**. *2 Corinthians 12:2-4* [Emphasis Added]

Note this excerpt from the *Gospel of Truth*:

That is the gospel of him whom they seek, which he has revealed to the perfect through the mercies of the Father as the hidden mystery, Jesus the Christ. Through him he enlightened those who were in darkness because of forgetfulness. He enlightened them and gave them a path. And that path is the truth which he taught them. For this reason error was angry with him, so it persecuted him. It was distressed by him, so it made him powerless. He was nailed to a cross. He became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father. He did not, however, destroy them because they ate of it. He rather caused those who ate of it to be joyful because of this discovery.

Pagels points out a further teaching of Valentinus on Romans 1:19-20:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature,

invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

She states (page 16):

The teacher, Valentinus, alluding to this passage, explains that those who see “in faith” perceive in the visible cosmos an image of the invisible God. He gives an example: a painted portrait conveys less than the living presence of the person who models for it; but the name makes up for what the model lacks, so that the person can be recognized from the portrait. So whoever knows the divine name perceives that the “invisible things of God” energizes the visible creation.

The point of all this is that, contrary to the allegations of Irenaeus that Valentinus ignored the Christian scriptures, Valentinus and his followers simply had a different interpretation of these same scriptures. And yet there is a difference. Valentinus is clearly in the Gnostic tradition that God has a *secret knowledge and wisdom* which is not revealed to just everyone. Only those who seek out this knowledge will become “enlightened” and truly understand the nature of what God revealed through Christ. Thus:

If he pleases, he reveals anyone whom he desires by giving him a form and by giving him a name; and he does give him a name and cause him to come into being. Those who do not yet exist are ignorant of him who created them. I do not say, then, that those who do not yet exist are nothing. But they are in him who will desire that they exist when he pleases, like the event which is going to happen. On the one hand, he knows, before anything is revealed, what he will produce. On the other hand, the fruit which has not yet been revealed does not know anything, nor is it anything either. Thus each space which, on its part, is in the Father comes from the existent one, who, on his part, has established it from the nonexistent. [...] he who does not exist at all, will never exist.

Not everyone is capable of receiving this teaching, and thus – as Paul states -

But we speak **God's wisdom, secret and hidden**, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. *1 Corinthians 2:7* [Emphasis Added]

The point of this paper is to show that a *paradigm* often determines the outcome of how truth is perceived. Irenaeus started from the assumption that the tradition that he had received, through (in his mind) authoritative sources, and confirmed by Christian scripture, was *truth*. Those who obtained their knowledge elsewhere were not legitimate teachers of Christianity – were *heretics* who should not be considered as worthy of the name of “Christian.” Valentinus, on the other hand, started with a different *paradigm*, a model of reality which shaped his use of tradition and Christian scriptures. Until we discovered *The Gospel of Truth* in the Nag Hammadi collection we only had Irenaeus’ version of Valentinus. Now we have

his, to compare with that of Irenaeus. Is either one correct? Is either one incorrect? Our own paradigm of the nature of truth may shape our answer in much the same way that it did for Irenaeus and for Valentinus. As Pilate once asked Jesus, “What is Truth?”