

ENEMIES OF THE FIRST CENTURY BELIEVERS: GNOSTICISM, HELLENISM & JEWISH TRADITIONS & LEGALISM (HOW THE APOSTOLIC WRITERS COUNTERED THESE ENEMIES OF THE GOSPEL)

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Why is it necessary for present-day Messianic believers to have an basic understanding of Gnosticism, Hellenism and Jewish religious legalism? There are several reasons how not understanding these concepts could lead the serious student of the Apostolic Writings (New Testament) to have an incomplete view of the writings of the Apostles which could further lead to false theological (antisemitic and anomian [lit. antiTorah-law]) conclusions as has to a large degree in the historic Christian faith.

One cannot have a complete understanding of the writings of the early Messianic Believers without understanding the historical context in which they wrote. The Epistles, for example, were more often than not, addressing specific issues in specific congregations. The Epistles are answers to the questions, but we can only infer what the questions were, since the written record of these is lacking. So we see the Apostolic writers addressing Gnosticism, Hellenism and Jewish, non-Scriptural, traditions as enemies of the Gospel. So understanding these issues will help us to not only understand the forces at work in the first century to undermine the Gospel message, but may help us to understand the forces attacking the Gospel truth in our day. For example, Gnosticism of the first century is no different than the New Age Movement of our day. So such a study is very relevant to us.

Additionally, we see a giant theological and spiritual shift occurring between the time the last Apostolic writers penned their last letters (in the early AD 90s) and by the first third to half of the second century. By this time a decided shift or departure had occurred within the Church away from its Jewish or Hebraic roots. In many places Sabbath observance gave way to Sunday worship, eventually Easter replaced Passover. By the very early part of the second century we see in the writings of the “Early Church Fathers” a noticeable antisemitic bias and little-by-little a rejection of anything “Jewish”; i.e., a total rejection of the Torah-laws found in the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament).

This rejection of the Jewish roots of the Church by the Early Church Fathers did not happen spontaneously. It was a gradual process brought about by antisemitic (nonreligious) political forces occurring in the Roman Empire at the time, as well as the pressure for Christianity to syncretize with some pagan practices in order to facilitate the assimilation of new converts from paganism into Christianity. The seeds of the shift of Messianism to paganized-Christianity can be seen clearly in the writings of the Apostolic Writers as they, even as early as the AD 50s and 60s, are mounting a vigorous defense against those forces which would undermine the purity of the Gospel truths. But as the Apostolic defenders, who were the stalwarts of the *faith once and for all delivered*, died off, and the focus of the Church shifted geographically from Jerusalem to Gentile Asia, numerically from a majority of Jewish converts to a majority of non-Jewish converts and theologically from an adherence to a Torah and Hebraic beliefs and practices to a more cosmopolitan and politically correct theology which was more *tolerant* of pagan philosophical and religious practices and more *accepting of diversity*. Why and did this occur? It was the natural course of things, the path of least resistance. What happened to the early church spiritually is the analogous to the principle in physics called the law of entropy which states that elements within the universe tend to devolve rather than evolve.

GNOSTICISM AND SORcery

“In Yeshua’s time the ‘mystery religions’ included the cult of Dionysius and the Orphic Mysteries, as well as various Gnostic approaches (*Gnostic*, from Greek *gnosis*, *knowledge*, means that these religions claimed to offer a body of secret knowledge which would lead to salvation)... A number of religions, both then and now, claim to make available special knowledge or mysteries to an inner circle. Biblical religion is not so. Its truths are available to all

who read and believe the Bible. While Yeshua walked the earth there was an inner circle of disciples who received precisely the knowledge necessary to disseminate God's truth to all men throughout all generations" (*Jewish New Testament Commentary* by David Stern, pp. 47-48).

"Gnosticism itself was a philosophically oriented system of self-perfection through knowledge which offered a cheap substitute for both Judaism and Christianity—cheap in that, like many New Age and other modern variants, it skirted and minimized the issue of sin" (Stern, p. 579).

—**Acts 8:10 The Great Power of God.** Simon the Sorcerer, or Simon Magus (the Magician) first mentioned here. An early Jewish or Samaritan magician or Gnostic. Early church fathers attribute to him as being one the leaders of Gnostic Christianity and of having a great following and of possessing great demonic powers.

According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. 13) in its article entitled *Simon Magus* we read, "In morals Simon was probably Antinomian [or anomian; i.e., anitTorah-law], an enemy of Old Testament law. His magical arts were continued by his disciples; these led unbridled, licentious lives, in accordance with the principles which they had learned from their master. At any rate they called themselves Simonians, giving Simon Magus as their founder."

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* says of Simon Magus in an article by that name, "Simon was...regarded by all the Church Fathers as the great heretic from whose school and teaching sprang all the later motley heresies of Christianity; and inasmuch as his system contained Gnostic teaching, Gnosticism itself was ascribed to him..."

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (published in 1915) in an article entitled *Simon Magus* says of Sorcerers in general during the first century and Simon in particular,

"It is not strange to find the gospel brought into direct conflict with magicians, for in the 1st and 2nd centuries there were a multitude of such persons who pretended to possess supernatural powers by which they endeavored to deceive men. They flattered the sinful inclinations of the human heart, and fell in with men's current ways of thinking, and required no self-renunciation at all. For these reasons the magicians found a ready belief on the part of many. The emperor Tiberius, in his later years, had a host of magicians in constant attendance upon him. Elymas, with whom Paul came in contact in Cyprus "was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man" (Acts 13:7 the King James Version). Elymas was one of those magicians, and he endeavored to turn away the deputy from the faith. Luke expressly calls this man "magus", Elymas the magus (Acts 13:6,8 margin).

"The influence of such persons presented an obstacle to the progress of the Christian faith, which had to force its way through the delusions with which these sorcerers had surrounded the hearts of those whom they deceived. When the gospel came in contact with these magicians and with their works, it was necessary that there should be striking facts, works of supernatural power strongly appealing to men's outward senses, in order to bring them out of the bewilderment and deception in which they were involved, and to make them able to receive the impression of spiritual truth. Such miracles were wrought both in Cyprus and in Samaria, the spheres of influence of the magicians Elymas and Simon. These divine works first arrested men's attention, and then dispelled the delusive influence of the sorcerers."

Was Simon the Originator of Gnosticism? In answer to this question *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says:

"Irenaeus also has much to say regarding Simon and his followers. He makes the legendary Simon identical with the magician of Acts 8, makes him also the first in the list which he gives of heretics, and also says that it was from him that Gnosticism sprang. The account which he gives of the Simonians shows that by the time when Irenaeus lived, their system had developed into Gnosticism; but this fact does not justify Irenaeus in the assertion that Simon of Acts 8 is the originator of the Gnostic system. The early Christian writers took this view, and regarded Simon Magus as the founder of Gnosticism. Perhaps they were right, "but from the very little authentic information we possess, it is impossible to ascertain how far he was identified with their tenets" (Alford, *New Testament*, II, 86). In the midst of the various legends regarding Simon, it may be that there is a substratum of fact, of

such a nature that future investigation and discovery will justify these early Christian writers in their judgment, and will show that Simon Magus is not to be overlooked as one of the sources from which Gnosticism sprang. The exact origin of Gnosticism is certainly difficult to trace, but there is little or no indication that it arose from the incidents narrated in Acts 8. It cannot be denied that a connection is possible, and may have existed between the two, that is between Simon Magus and some of the Gnostic heresies; but the facts of history show widespread tendencies at work, during and even before the Apostolic age, which amply account for the rise of Gnosticism. These are found e.g. in the Alexandrian philosophy, and in the tenets of the false teachers at Colosse and in other places. These philosophical and theosophical ideas commingled with the influences of Zoroastrianism from Persia, and of Buddhism from India, and these tendencies and influences, taken in conjunction, were the sources of the various heresies known by the name of Gnosticism.”

—**1 Cor. 1:22 Greeks try to find wisdom.** “[T]he presumption that God can be contacted, sin forgiven or ultimate meaning attained through wisdom is itself an act of faith and a misplaced one at that; known as gnosticism, it is targeted in the NT as the enemy of the Gospel.

“Today there is a recrudescence of gnosticism in what is loosely called the New Age Movement” (Stern, p. 443).

—**Eph. 1:23 The full expression of him fills all created (CJB) or In him the fullness of the godhead dwells bodily (KJV).** Stern says, *Fullness* is the Greek word *pleroma* which was a technical term used by Gnostics to refer to the totality of angels or *aeons* that supposedly mediated between God and humanity. He continues, “In Ephesians and Colosians Sha’ul counters the Gnostic heresy by co-opting its jargon to express biblical truth. We learn in these letters that Sha’ul prays for the believers in Ephesus to be “filled with the *pleroma* of God” (3:19); that “it pleased God to have his *pleroma* live in his Son (Col. 1:19); and that believers, corporately as the Messianic Community, constitute the Messiah’s body and thus the *pleroma* of him who fills all creation (this verse)—but unlike Gnostics, Sha’ul discusses sin in the very next sentence...Sha’ul takes the wind out of Gnosticism’s sails by proclaiming that its aim of attaining the *pleroma* cannot be reached by its means, but only by biblical means, only by joining the Body of Messiah through trusting and being faithful to Yeshua” (Stern, pp. 579-580).

—**Col. 1:19 It pleased God to have his full being (Greek *pleroma*) live in his Son.** “*Pleroma* was a technical term used by the Gnostics...to refer to the totality of various spiritual “levels” and the beings or entities presumed to exist there...Sha’ul uses the method of seizing on a characteristic distinctive of the heresy he is fighting and showing how it relates to and supports the Gospel. Thus he follows the pattern he described at 2 Cor. 10:4-5: **We demolish arguments and every arrogance that raises itself up against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey the Messiah**” (Stern, p. 605).

—**Col. 2:2-3 Understanding...fully knowing...secret truth...wisdom...knowledge...** “All are Gnostic technical terms.

—**Col. 2:8 Philosophy** “Here the word stands for heretical Gnostic or pre-Gnostic alternatives to the true understanding of who the Messiah is” (Stern, p. 606).

—**1 Tim. 1:3 3b-4 As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith.** Probably referring to both Jewish (Talmudic) and pre-Gnostic teachings (Stern, p. 632).

—**1 Tim. 2: 5-6 For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Messiah Yeshua, Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.** “This idea resisted by non-Messianic Jews who argue that

no human mediator is needed between God and mankind. The two-covenant theorists mentioned in Jn. 14:6, where Yeshua said, **No one comes to the Father except through me**, would offer the variant that Jews come to God without a mediator but Gentiles approach him through Jesus. Some, taking for granted that the very idea of a mediator is in principle un-Jewish, think Sha'ul brought it in from Gnosticism in order to make his Gospel more palatable to Gentiles.

“Although Gnosticism posits various beings between God and man, the idea of a mediator between God and mankind is not only Jewish but inseparable from the history of Israel recorded throughout the Tanakh. Quite apart from the Jewish tradition that angels mediated at the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, Yeshua’s role as Mediator was foreshadowed by Moses, who is described as mediator for the Torah not only at Gal. 3:19, but also in the fourth-century *Midrash Rabbah* (*Deut. Rabbah* 3:12) and the 9th-century *midrash* (*Pestikta Rabbati* 15:3)” (Stern, pp. 637-638).

—**1 Tim. 6:20-21** **O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: Which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen.** More references to Gnostic concepts circulating among the called out ones, according to Stern (Stern, p. 647).

—**Heb. 9:27** **And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.** According to Stern this is a counter to the non-biblical and Gnostic notion that only the soul is pure while the body is unclean, inferior and unworthy of being immortal necessitating that the body be reborn again and again until it is perfected (reincarnation).

—**1 Jn. 1:5-10** Stern says, In Yochanan’s day it was especially the Gnostics who, misusing Romans 6 and 8, said that since the Messianic believer has the Spirit of Messiah in him, he cannot sin any more. Yochanan agrees that the Spirit of Messiah cleanses us and gives us strength to overcome sin...nevertheless, we still commit sin as v. 10 reminds us. Jer. 31:30 says that everyone will die for his own iniquity. Isa. 65:20 speaks of sinners in the Messianic Era (Millennium) and Mt. 6:12 speaking to believers says, Forgive us our trespasses...” (Stern, pp. 768-769).

—**1 Jn. 5:6** **He is the one who came by means of water and blood, Yeshua the Messiah.** “Contrary to Gnostic [and New Age] teachings, he did not ‘receive the heavenly Christ [consciousness]’ upon emerging from the Jordan; rather, it was Yeshua, already the Messiah, who was immersed; and his immersion in water symbolized his death and resurrection. Likewise, he did not imitate being human but died a real death on the execution-stake; otherwise he would not have atoned for our sin” (Stern, p. 776).

—**Jude 3-4** **Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Yeshua Messiah.** In stating the need to contend for the faith once delivered is implied that the faith once delivered was under attack by those who were attempting to corrupt the simple Gospel message and turn it into a licentious or libertine message—where one can have salvation and still live a sinful life. This was the basic message behind Gnosticism, as we saw earlier.

—**Rev. 2:24** **But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden.** “Various Gnostic philosophies appealed to people’s pride by promising spiritual knowledge deeper than that available to ordinary mortals. Many modern cults and movements make the same empty promises” (Stern, p. 798).

HEDONISM/LIBERTINISM/NICOLAITINISM

—**Acts 15:20 Abstain from fornication.** Sexual immorality was rampant in Greek culture whether it was fornication, adultery, homosexuality, sodomy, or male and female temple prostitution.

—**Rom. 6:1-2 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?** This was a common libertine belief, that the more we sin the more YHWH will pour out his grace. Jude addresses this very heresy in Jude 4 where he says that these unrighteous rebels creep into the congregation and espouse licentiousness. See also:

—**Rom. 3: 8 And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just.** (See also 6:15)

—**1 Cor. 6:12 You say, [supplied] For me everything is permitted, Maybe, but not everything is helpful...(CJB).** Stern writes, “*You say*, are not in the Greek text but are added to show that this was not a central principle of Sha’ul’s teaching but a saying in use among a group of Corinthians who would later have been called Gnostic libertines” (Stern, p. 451).

—**2 Tim. 3:2-5**

2 This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

3 For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good,

4 Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;

5 Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

6 For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts... Here is a apt description of libertinism.

—**Jude (entire book)** (written before AD 70) is a defense against heretical doctrines making inroads in the Messianic community such as libertinism. Here are some quoted excerpts which show this:

-4 For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness [license to do evil]...

6 And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

7 Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.

8 ¶ Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities.

16 These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage.

18 How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts.

19 These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit.

—**Rev. 2:6, 15 Doctrine of the Nicolaitans.** A heretical sect which encouraged idolatry and sexual sin who, according to second century Church father, Iranaeus (*Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chap. 26), encouraged believers to “lead lives of unrestrained indulgence.” In Rev. 2:14-15 those who held to this doctrine were equated with Balaam both of whom promoted sexual immorality and the eating things sacrificed to idols.

ASCETICISM

Asceticism is the theory and practice of bodily abstinence and self-mortification, generally in a religious sense. The aspects of this philosophy which affected the early Messianic Jewish believers of the first century, to which Sha’ul makes allusions in several places in his epistles, originates from the philosophers of ancient Greece. It was from their philosophic speculations that the concept of dualism originated; namely, the idea that the pure, divine and immortal soul of man is trapped in an evil and mortal body and that for the soul to return to where it came the body must be mortified, tortured, deprived of needs and care and abstinence of pleasure is required. Therefore, fasting, celibacy, vegetarianism, wearing of drab clothing, the forgoing of personal hygiene and other such flesh sublimating practices were encouraged in order to help free or release the imprisoned soul from the evil body so that spirituality might be obtained.

The Jewish Encyclopedia say in an article entitled, *Asceticism*, “It is thus seen that both the term and the idea which the term expresses are of non-Jewish origin and implications. Judaism can not be said to encourage Asceticism, even in the restricted sense of discipline...Judaism is of a temper which is fatal to asceticism; and the history of both Judaism and the Jews is, on the whole, free from ascetic aberrations. Fundamental to the teachings of Judaism is the thought that the world is good. Pessimism has no standing-ground. Life is not under the curse. The doctrine of original sin, the depravity of man, has never had foothold within the theology of the synagogue. It never held sway over the mind and the religious imagination of the Jews. In consequence of this the body and the flesh were never regarded by them as contaminated, and the appetites and passions were not suspected of being rooted in evil. The appeal to mortify the flesh for the sake of pleasing Heaven could not find voice in the synagogue.”

In line with his Jewish heritage, Rabbi Sha’ul vigorously opposed the encroachments of the Hellenistic concepts of dualism and asceticism (as we cite below). Despite this, asceticism made inroads early on in the Christian church and what later evolved into the Catholic Church. We likely see the influences of dualism and asceticism in the monastic life of the monks and nuns, the wearing of monochromatic clothing, abstaining from fish on Fridays, penance, the idea that marital relations should be for procreative purposes only and other such practices.

—**Rom. 14:1-15:6** The issue in this passage of Scripture is not the calling into question of whether certain Torah feast days (Sabbaths) or dietary laws are still binding upon believers today or not but rather about “weak believers, either Gentile or Jewish, who have not yet grown sufficiently in their faith to have given up attachment to various ascetic practices and [tradition of men, not YHWH-ordained and instituted] calendar observances” (Stern, P. 433).

—**1 Cor. 7:3-9** “Apparently there was in Corinth a movement toward celibacy within marriage—extremes spawn extremes, so where libertinism flourishes one often finds asceticism as a reaction. Therefore, in v. 5 Sha’ul finds it necessary to advise married couples against such sexual abstinence, except by mutual agreement for a limited time” (Stern, p. 453).

—**Col. 2:18-23**

18 Let no man beguile you of your reward in a false humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

19 And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.

20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,

21 (Touch not; taste not; handle not;

22 Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

23 Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. [They do indeed have the outward appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed religious observances, false humility and asceticism; but they have no value at all in restraining people from indulging their old nature. — CJB]

Here Sha'ul lists a number of ascetic and other Greek religious attributes and practices: false humility, worshipping of angels, touch not, taste not, handle not, will worship and neglecting the body. The Apostle here is clearly referring to Hellenistic religious practices and not to Torah commandments since Torah does not prohibit the neglecting of the body and is nowhere referred to in Scripture as “the commandments and doctrines of men.”

—1 Tim. 4:2-3 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

Stern says, “Sha’ul favors self-discipline for the sake of the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 9:24-27), but not for asceticism. His own attitude toward marriage (1 Cor. 7:1-40) and eating (Rom. 14:5-6, 14-17, 20; 1 Cor. 8:8, 13; 10:23-11:1; Col. 2:16-23) is eminently sensible, avoiding both self-indulgence and self-denial.

“**Abstinence from foods** does not mean observing kashrut [the Jewish (biblical) dietary or kosher laws], although false teachers probably did incorporate elements of the Jewish dietary laws into their ascetic practices” (Stern, p. 644).

LEGALISM/JUDAIZING

Legalism Defined: We define legalism here *not* as obedience of the Torah commandments *from a heart of love* for the Father (Yeshua said in Jn. 14:14, “If you love me, keep my [Torah] commandments.”) realizing that you are saved not by your works, but by faith in Yeshua and through his grace, but as a mechanistic, letter-of-the-law, earn-your-salvation approach to obedience.

Stern defines legalism as “actions stemming from a boastful, self-righteous belief that by [keeping YHWH’s Torah-commandments], by following a set of rules in one’s own strength, without trust in God or faithfulness towards him, one can earn God’s praise and applause and obligate him to grant one birth in heaven” (Stern, pp. 345-346). He goes on to say that a legalistic, works-based approach to the Torah-commandments of YHWH is “bad-self strength works produced when sinful people misuse and pervert the Torah, so that instead of regarding it as God’s precious gift intended both to orient people toward righteous, God-motivated behavior and at the same time to show them how far short they fall of achieving it, they regard the Torah as a rulebook containing requirements they can meet mechanically, without trusting God or even caring about him, and can therefore take great pride in their own achievements and have great self-satisfaction over how much they have pleased God” (Stern, p. 346).

Numerous Scriptural references in the Sha’ul’s Writings could be given to show where he was combatting legalism. Much of the Books of Romans, Galatians and Colosians are dealing with this issue. It is not the scope of this present paper to deal with this immense subject here other than to only mention it.

MISC. CONCEPTS

— **Tit. 1:14 Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.** *Jewish fables* could refer to Jewish Gnostic concepts which were very prevalent at the time, or to various non-Scriptural

Pharisaic pre-Talmudic oral traditions which could be termed as “commandments of men” or as Yeshua said in Mt. 15:6 and again in Mk. 7:7 “traditions of men by which the word of God is made of non-effect.” Nowhere does Scripture refer to the Torah-commandments of YHWH as being “commandments of men.”