

# THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST & DEFENDING THE FAITH IN THE 2ND CENTURY

*In a day when many deny the central tenets of Christianity—the incarnation, the resurrection—we can learn much from men like Ignatius and Polycarp in their defence of such foundational truths*

**W**hile not as well known as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the 1945 find of a large cache of Gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi in the Egyptian desert was, and still is, an extremely important event.<sup>1</sup> Here, in the words of Gnostics themselves, students of the ancient church have documented proof of the threat posed by Gnosticism to the life and thought of early Christianity. Gnosticism—which derives its name from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*—took many different forms, comprising a wide variety of teachings and teachers. Common to nearly all of them, though, was a cluster of fundamental characteristics.

Basic to the Gnostic world-view, first of all, was what one can describe as a radical dualism. This was the belief that creation and the material realm—everything from snails to galaxies—were inherently evil. Opposed to them was the realm of the spirit, which was considered to be essentially good. In the words of the apocryphal *Gospel of Philip*, one of the documents found at Nag Hammadi, “the soul...is a precious thing and got into a despised body.”<sup>2</sup> The goal of life was thus defined in terms of escape from the material realm.

This escape, or “salvation” to use theological language, came through knowledge not via faith, as the New Testament maintained.<sup>3</sup> This saving knowledge, in turn, entailed a recognition of the supposedly divine element within one’s body. This divine element was the real self and thus salvation was the realization that within one’s being is a divine spark. Salvation was thus defined in terms of self-enlightenment. It was definitely not understood in the categories of the thinking of the New Testament, where salvation was ultimately deliverance from sin and sin’s penalty. It is fascinating to note that this line of thinking is not too



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dissimilar from that of some contemporary New Age devotees. Finally, for most Gnostics, though not all, this work of enlightenment is the work of Jesus. But the Gnostic Jesus is quite a different person from the incarnate Son of God of the New Testament. Christ's incarnation, His death and resurrection are downplayed, ignored, and even clearly rejected. Instead, emphasis is placed on Jesus as a teacher.

## “SAYING THE RESURRECTION HAS ALREADY HAPPENED”

The roots of the Gnostic heresy stretch back to the very period in which the New Testament Scriptures were being written. Before the ink on these infallible texts was dry, Gnosticism was assailing the church. For instance, there is little doubt that Paul, in the Pastoral Epistles, and John, in 1 and 2 John, consider teachings essentially the same as those of Gnosticism as a distinct and present danger.<sup>4</sup>

In 2 Timothy, for example, Paul mentions a dangerous teaching, put abroad by two men named Hymenaeus and Alexander, which he likens to the spread of “gangrene.” Hymenaeus and Alexander were maintaining that the resurrection has “already happened” (2 Timothy 2:16-18). Bible students are not in complete agreement about exactly what these men were teaching. Most probably, it is the view that the only resurrection which the Christian should expect is that of the soul, and this takes place at conversion, when the chains of spiritual death are broken and the Christian is made alive in Christ. Consequently, the error of Hymenaeus and Alexander is that they rejected the idea of a bodily resurrection.

## THE GNOSTIC DENIAL OF THE RESURRECTION

By the time we come to the second century, Gnosticism in its various forms was a major problem for the church. The aforementioned *Gospel of Philip*, for example, derides those who believe in the resurrection of the body. “Some are afraid lest they rise naked,” he quips about the orthodox assertion of the reality of bodily resurrection. “Because of this,” he goes on, “they wish to rise in the flesh.” “Ah,” he says with an air of superiority, “they do not know that it is those who wear the flesh who are naked. It is those who...unclothe themselves who are not naked.” And in support of his position, he turns to the Pauline words of 1 Corinthians 15:50, “Flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>5</sup>

This Gnostic author has, of course, misinterpreted Paul. By the phrase “flesh and blood,” the Apostle is affirming that weak and fallible humanity cannot, in its own strength, enter the Kingdom of God. It is the person indwelt by the Spirit, under the Spirit's direction and control, who will inherit that kingdom. The whole tenor and direction of the chapter in which this verse is found speaks against the Gnostic interpretation.

That this Gnostic writer is clearly attacking the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body is seen in another text from the *Gospel of Philip*, where the following is asserted: “Those who say that the Lord died first and (then) rose up are in error [that is, orthodox Christians], for he rose up first and (then) died.”<sup>6</sup> This enigmatic statement appears to be similar to the error of Hymenaeus and Alexander, namely that, for the believer, the resurrection has already taken place.<sup>7</sup>

One early Christian author who responded to this vital error was Polycarp of Smyrna (c.69-155), an important Christian pastor who was mentored by the Apostle John. In a letter to the church in Philippi, he warned the believers there about those who perverted the words of Holy Scripture and argued that there was no such thing as the resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

## IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH ON THE RESURRECTION

Another early Christian opponent of those who denied the resurrection was Ignatius, bishop of the church in Antioch of Syria. What we know of Ignatius comes primarily from seven letters that he wrote after he had been arrested in Antioch somewhere between A.D. 107 and 110 and who was on his way to Rome for trial as a Christian. We have no real details of the

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persecution in which he was arrested, though Ignatius does mention others who were probably arrested during the same persecution and who had preceded him to Rome. He was brought across the great roads of southern Asia Minor in the custody of ten Roman soldiers, whom he likens to “savage leopards.”<sup>9</sup>

For Ignatius, the resurrection of Christ was a genuine historical event that took place during the governorship of Pontius Pilate.<sup>10</sup> His resurrection was for His people,<sup>11</sup> and has been set up as a banner “for all time to call together His saints” into the “one body of His Church.”<sup>12</sup> The resurrection of the Lord Jesus, His incarnation and death are thus the heart of the gospel, Christianity’s distinguishing marks.<sup>13</sup>

But Ignatius had to confront some who claimed to be Christians, yet who denied the reality of the defining event of Christ’s bodily resurrection and who argued that it was a total illusion. Conscious that the gospel was at stake in this denial of the resurrection, Ignatius would not listen to such heresy. “For my own part,” he declared, “I know and believe that He [i.e. Christ] was in actual human flesh, even after His resurrection.” Ignatius finds proof for this declaration in the resurrection accounts in Luke 24, where Christ appeared to His disciples, challenged their unbelief, and urged them to eat and drank with Him.<sup>14</sup>

Just as Christ was truly born, and “ate and drank,” and was really put to death by crucifixion, so He was “truly raised up again from the dead, for His Father raised Him.”<sup>15</sup> This event is of vital significance for Christ’s people since God the Father will raise from the realm of death all who believe in the risen Lord Jesus.<sup>16</sup> Only those in union with this Risen One will rise again, for “apart from Him there is no true life.”<sup>17</sup>

With regard to those who stood opposed to this central tenet of the Christian faith, Ignatius urged his readers to “flee for your very life” from such teachers. Ignatius likens them to “poisonous” plants whose fruit is fatal to all who consume it!<sup>18</sup> Lest one think that Ignatius was unique—and a little ornery—in the way he talked about these Gnostic errorists, it is noteworthy that Polycarp had similar remarks. According to him, those who denied the resurrection were nothing less than “the firstborn of Satan”!<sup>19</sup>

Reading Ignatius’ words about the resurrection of Christ, there is little doubt of its vital significance for him as a Christian. To claim to be a Christian and deny this cardinal Christian affirmation was for him an utter contradiction in terms. Would that the church in more recent days had declared the faith with such firmness and resolve! To deny Christ’s resurrection was to contradict the clear witness of the Apostles. Moreover, as Ignatius rightly affirmed, without the risen Christ “there is no true life.”<sup>20</sup> 

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1 For the details of this discovery and the nature of the manuscripts, see PHEME PERKINS, “Nag Hammadi” in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (2nd ed.; New York/London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 796-797. For further details about Gnosticism and the church’s struggle against this heresy, see Michael A.G. Haykin, *Defence of the Truth: Contending for the truth yesterday and today* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 2004), 31-45.

2 *The Gospel of Philip* 22 [trans. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1962), 32, altered].

3 See, for example, Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 4:5; 1 Peter 3:21.

4 See, for instance, Paul’s argument in 1 Timothy 4:1-5, where he refutes those who rejected marriage and argued that certain foods should not be eaten. In 1 John 4:1-5 and 2 John 7, the Apostle John stoutly maintains that the denial of the incarnation is nothing less than heresy.

5 *Gospel of Philip* 23 (trans. Wilson, *Gospel of Philip*, 32). But, it has to be noted, the author of this Gnostic document is not fully consistent. A little further on in this section of the text, the author declares that “it is necessary to rise in this flesh, in which everything exists” (trans. Wilson, *Gospel of Philip*, 33). At first reading, this assertion appears to declare a commitment to the resurrection of the body. Wilson speculates it might have in view the notion that “the Gnostic must rise in the flesh in order to be stripped of the garment of flesh and clothed in his heavenly robe.” Wilson believes that the writer of the *Gospel of Philip* is here wrestling, though not

successfully, with the Pauline doctrine of the resurrection as it is found in Corinthians epistles (*Gospel of Philip*, 87-89).

6 *Gospel of Philip* 21 (trans. Wilson, *Gospel of Philip*, 32).

7 See Wilson, *Gospel of Philip*, 86.

8 Polycarp, *Philippians* 7.1.

9 Ignatius, *Romans* 5.1. This is the earliest occurrence of the word for leopard in Greek.

10 Ignatius, *Magnesians* 11.

11 Ignatius, *Romans* 6.1. See also Polycarp, *Philippians* 9.2.

12 Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 1.2 [trans. in Maxwell Staniforth, trans., *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (1968 ed.; repr. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), 101].

13 Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 9.2. See also his *Smyrnaeans* 7.2.

14 Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 3.1-2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 101).

15 Ignatius, *Trallians* 9.1-2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 81, altered).

16 Ignatius, *Trallians* 9.2.

17 Ignatius, *Trallians* 9.2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 81).

18 Ignatius, *Trallians* 11.1.

19 Polycarp, *Philippians* 7.1.

20 Ignatius, *Trallians* 9.2 (trans. Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*, 81).