

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you (Gospel of Thomas 70).”
Since I am a minister you might think I’m quoting something from the New Testament or the Hebrew Bible; yet I am not. And although I am no biblical scholar - many people spend their entire lives and careers analyzing, comparing and cross-referencing every line of biblical text - you likely won’t come across many lines like that in the biblical canon – especially in the New Testament.

Why? Because in the New Testament, and in orthodox Christianity that followed, the source of your salvation lies without you...outside you. The source of your salvation in the New Testament is through Jesus. Christian theologies vary. Some believe in universal salvation, that all will be eventually saved. Some believe in predestination, that you’re powerless, that you have no agency, that there is nothing you can do to affect your salvation. Paul, the author of many New Testament letters, says that salvation is available to everyone through faith in Jesus; and through that faith alone, God extends grace to the believer.

No, in the New Testament, you won’t come across many lines like, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you (Gospel of Thomas 70)” because it claims that salvation is something that is sourced within you; something, perhaps hidden within, that needs to be realized, brought forth...made manifest.

This line is taken from the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, found accidentally in 1945 in Nag Hammadi Egypt along with 45 other Coptic texts that date back to the 4th and 5th centuries. The original Greek texts, from which these Coptic translations were created, date back to the 3rd, 2nd and possibly even 1st centuries. Although fragments of Plato’s *Republic* were also found at Nag Hammadi, the texts are categorized as Gnostic by religious scholars. Gnosticism represented a variety of Christian beliefs that are now deemed heretical and unorthodox. Gnostics thought themselves to have special knowledge (i.e. gnosis) that would lead them to salvation.

Keep in mind that up until 313A.D., Christianity itself was outlawed throughout the Roman Empire and it wasn’t until 325 A.D. with the Council of Nicea, that orthodox Christianity began

to develop. Prior to this, many wildly diverse versions of Christianity were forming. No one could claim, let alone enforce, orthodoxy as there was no such thing as orthodoxy; therefore no such thing as heretical or wrongly-believed Christianity.

In the first three centuries after Jesus' death, Christians were still working out what it meant to be a Christian...and these Christians weren't necessarily talking with one another being spread throughout a vast empire. The apostle Paul, in his New Testament letters was always trying to work out theological issues. They were Jews. Did Jesus bring salvation to Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews)? Did Gentiles have to convert to become Jews to be saved? How do we view God's law of the Hebrew Bible (i.e. Old Testament), as set forth by Moses, now that the Messiah has come? Was Jesus God? Fully human? Fully divine? A divine but lesser god? Many Christians thought Paul's teachings were erroneous and dangerous. It's easy to see how many diverse threads of Christianity could develop over a 300-year period.

Gnosticism is essentially an umbrella term categorizing several of these Christian threads that are now deemed heretical. Most, but not all, of these threads generally had a few things in common. Most Gnostics were highly dualistic; they believed that the physical realm, including our bodies, were bad and that the spirit realm was good. They believed that the supreme God was good but that the presence of suffering, disease and evil in this world was the work of a lesser, flawed, imperfect, vengeful god (i.e. not the supreme God). They believed that part of the supreme God's goodness was trapped within each human yet humans fail to realize this. Special knowledge, gnosis, was necessary to realize this so that we could transcend the evil and suffering of this world and reunite with the supreme God in the spirit realm.

Salvation in orthodox Christianity, as I alluded to earlier, could be characterized as a passive pursuit, relying more on faith and grace. Christian Gnosticism, on the other hand, would be characterized as an active pursuit, a seeking of the secret transcendent knowledge of salvation.

In this morning's Wondering Time stories, I told two versions of the parable of Lost Sheep. In the first version, taken from the Gospel of Luke, the single lost sheep, a wayward sheep, is

saved by the shepherd, Jesus. Through no actions of its own, the sheep is saved by the shepherd.

The second version of this parable is taken from the gnostic Gospel of Thomas. In this version, you are the shepherd and you've been given many things in this life yet one of those things is of the highest value, only one of those things should you love more than the ninety-nine: gnosis, and you must toil to find it while leaving the other worldly things behind.

In the parable of the broken jar, the woman is carrying something of great value with her, yet she fails to pay attention, she doesn't know how to toil, and when the handle breaks, she fails to notice. She doesn't realize that she has divinity within her, she has no gnosis of that and as a result, it leaks out and is gone. At the end of her life she will find herself empty.

For orthodox Christians, Easter celebrates the significance Jesus' death and resurrection; that Jesus atoned for, and triumphed over, the sin of humanity through crucifixion and resurrection. He was the sacrificed Passover lamb. For orthodox Christians, salvation is through faith in Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection.

For Gnostics, salvation is something else entirely. The way of the cross, death and resurrection is not significant – gnosis is. Salvation is through active secret knowledge of oneself and in the realization of one's inherent relationship with the divine in a divine spiritual realm. "Jesus said,... 'If you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty.... When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living [God] (Gospel of Thomas, 3).'"