

Lost Christianities

There were three highly influential forms of Christianity during the 2nd and 3rd centuries: the Ebionites, a group of Christians who insisted on maintaining their Jewish identity while believing in Jesus; the Marcionites, a group that rejected everything Jewish from its understanding of Jesus; and the Gnostics, a wide-ranging group that understood this world to be an evil place of imprisonment

from which one could escape by learning the truth of one's identity through the secret teachings of Jesus.

Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles over Authentication (see p. 16) also discusses what scholars have termed the proto-orthodox church (so named because the followers held the views that eventually came to be declared orthodox).

PROTO-ORTHODOXY

Proto-orthodoxy refers to a set of beliefs held by people before the 4th century that would become dominant in the 4th century. Most Christians in Rome held proto-orthodox views, and the Roman Church used its influential position to control the agendas of other dioceses.

Apostolic fathers: Early proto-orthodox Church writers, including Ignatius, Clement, Polycarp, and Barnabas, whose works were composed soon after the books of the New Testament.

Church fathers: Christian writers of the early centuries, seen as significant for the development of orthodox theology.

Regula Fidei: Literally, "the rule of faith." A technical term that referred to the proto-orthodox doctrines understood to lie at the heart of Christian theology.

Patristic writings: Writings of the orthodox Church "fathers" (Latin: *patres*) written after the New Testament.

Rather than embrace the Jewish tradition as one of ongoing importance, as the Ebionites did, Marcionites rejected Judaism altogether.

Ditheism: The view that there are two simultaneously existing Gods. Several Christian traditions were ditheistic, such as the Gnostic Bogomilists, the Manicheans, and the Cathars.

Marcion developed his beliefs in two major literary productions, one he wrote and the other he edited. His *Antitheses* contrasted the Old Testament God of wrath with Jesus's God of love and mercy. The book Marcion edited was the first canon of scripture known to be devised by an early Christian. It contained 11 books: 10 of Paul's letters and a Gospel very similar to the Gospel of Luke.

Docetism: The view that Jesus was not a human being but only "appeared" to be, from a Greek word that means "to seem" or "to appear."

MARCIONITES

Marcion was a 2nd-century Christian scholar and evangelist, who was later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods (the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus)—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

EBIONITES

Ebionites were born Jewish or converted to Judaism, kept Jewish customs, and strictly followed the Jewish laws (circumcision, sabbath observance, kosher food), but they believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Ebionites believed that because Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, appointed by the Jewish God as the Jewish savior for the Jewish people in fulfillment of Jewish law, anyone who wanted to be right with God obviously had to become Jewish. As a consequence, they tried to convert other Jews to their faith in Jesus, and when they converted Gentiles, they insisted that the Gentiles also convert to Judaism.

Adoptionism: The view held by the Ebionites that Jesus was not divine but was a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted by God to be his son when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.

The Ebionites claimed to follow the teachings of James, Jesus's brother, who became the head of the Church in Jerusalem after Jesus's death.

Gospel of the Ebionites:

A gospel that appears to have been a conflation of stories found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and was originally composed in Greek.

Gospel of the Nazareans:

A gospel used by the Ebionites that appears to have been very much like our Gospel of Matthew, minus the first two chapters, and possibly written in Hebrew (or Aramaic).

Gospel of Truth: A document from the Nag Hammadi library thought by many scholars to have been written by Valentinus, the founder of the Valentinian Gnostics who was prominent in the 2nd century. It celebrates the joy of salvation provided by the liberating knowledge brought by Christ.

Nag Hammadi: Village in Upper (South) Egypt, near the place where a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, was discovered in 1945.

Separationist Christology: Understanding of Christ typical among Gnostics, which maintained that there was a difference between the man Jesus and the divine Christ.

Gospel of Thomas: The most famous document of the Nag Hammadi library, it contains 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them similar to the sayings of the New Testament, others quite different because they appear to presuppose a Gnostic understanding of the world.

GNOSTICS

Gnosticism comprised a group of ancient religions that were closely related to Christianity. A core belief was that sparks of a divine being had become trapped in the present evil world and could escape only by acquiring the secret *gnosis* (Greek for "knowledge") of who they were and of how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary from the divine realm.

Carpocratians: A group of 2nd-century Gnostics known to us, in part, through the writings of Clement of Alexandria; they were thought to engage in wild, licentious activities as part of their religious practices.