

A Brief Gnostic Interpretation of the Gospel According to Matthew

Part One: Chapters 1-12

By William Pierce

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.

- 1 Cor. 2:6

...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good...

- 1 Thes. 5:18-21

Here, Saint Paul sums up the core task of the Gnostic. “Test everything,” look for the wisdom of the “mature,” of those not of “this age.” As strange as it may seem to begin a paper about the Gospel According to Matthew by quoting Paul, understanding the above two quotes is important to comprehending the entire premise of this paper.

Gnostics have been criticized throughout history for their hermeneutical approach to scripture. Deemed heretical by the Catholic Church Fathers, the Gnostics were judged most harshly for their attempts to interpret multiple layers of meaning from the sacred scriptures by those who considered themselves to be orthodox. It is important for the Gnostic to “test everything” and not limit or “quench the Spirit.” This does not only apply to the works written by Saint Paul, but to all scripture.; This does not even limit itself only to the Christian Scriptures, but to the literature of the world over.

The Gnostic’s attempts to place gnosis on a biblical soil while failing to use the core Christian scripture as their primary source of revelation has always been a major objection of the proto-orthodox Church Fathers. But was this truly the case? Scholars have now proven that one of the root sources of literature used in their making, was the New Testament scriptures themselves! Does this mean that they did not use pre-Christian or alternative religious texts as well in the development? No, it does not. For the Gnostic must “test everything” and “hold fast to what is good.”

So, why did the Gnostics believe the Christian scriptures to be on par with the alternative religious literature previously available? To understand this, you must understand the Gnostic concept of gnosis. Redemption, for the Gnostic, does not come through an unwavering blind faith or by expressing empty platitudes to an unknowable and untouchable deity. For the Gnostic, redemption comes through gnosis. Greek for knowledge, gnosis (γνῶσις) comes in many forms and layers, each building or enhancing the next, much like everything else within the Gnostic system. While literary sources such as the Hermetic writings, Egyptian papyri, and New Testament scriptures are one source of knowledge, they can only be qualified as such through the experiential, spiritual gnosis of the Gnostic. This spiritual gnosis, innate and instinctive within the Gnostic, is

spiritually enlivened through divine revelation. This knowledge is then further verified through observation and contemplation of the literature heretofore spoken. Thus the Gnostic has verified that the pre-Christian literature is equated through the consistency of the gnosis they all reveal.

This knowledge is couched in symbolism, buried within layer upon layer, so that every man may understand the particular knowledge meant for him, depending upon his level of advancement. This stems from the Gnostic belief that man exists within one of three stages: the Hylic, Psychic, and Pneumatic. The Hylic does not concern himself with anything above the physical world. Fully under archontic control, he follows the protocols dictated to him by the physical with no desire to concentrate on his personal evolution. The Psychic on the other hand, seeks to elevate his spiritual nature, placing the physical on its proper level, below that of his proper appointment. However, the Psychic does not realize how far he has truly fallen. Still under the deception of the Demiurge, he ignorantly worships a god, instead of God. The Pneumatic, through divine and revelatory gnosis, recognizes his true station and seeks to transcend his hylic and psychic natures.

This is why the Valentinians claimed that scripture in its base form is written for those who are psychic, for that is as deep as their understanding goes. The Gnostics, well versed in the ancient mystery traditions, learned to read all the scriptures on a symbolic level. The ancient Gnostics criticized the orthodox Christian for using their source material uncritically, being ignorant of the secret traditions which made the true interpretation of the scriptures actually possible. They felt that if all Christians would read the scriptures on the symbolic level instead of making the mistake of reading them only literally, then they would be able to recognize the true gnosis contained within them as well as the alternative religious traditions expounded upon at the time. For the Gnostic, gnosis itself, and not scripture, remains of primary importance. This gnosis serves the Gnostic as the hermeneutical principle.

The practice of interpreting the scriptures (Christian or otherwise) on a symbolic level allows the Gnostic to interpret them in an entirely new way, giving a depth to them that the psychics do not suspect. Most of orthodox Christianity would claim that this technique is used because the literal reading of the text is not in agreement with the Gnostic viewpoint. Untrue. The Gnostic acknowledges the literal message, but designates it as meant specifically for certain people. They do not judge it wrong, just incomplete. Think of the moral and ethical message of the scriptures. No Christian would claim (counter to the message of the scripture) that it is right to murder or steal.

The heresiologists of the second and third centuries liked to combat the Gnostics' liberal interpretation of the New Testament scriptures by claiming that the writers meant for them to be interpreted literally, or that their message was meant for one purpose or another. Actual evidence for such claims is in very short supply, and modern scholars have made great strides in proving that not only was a deeper interpretation meant for the scriptures, but that it was even the norm for the time. We even have Christ's own words, documented throughout the scriptures, speaking in parables using much symbolism.

I am not claiming that the author of the Gospel According to Matthew meant for such an interpretation of the text, or even specifically engineered its writing to produce such interpretations. But as a Gnostic I believe that the Christ, the Revealer of divine gnosis, made it possible for his disciples to present the full scope of gnosis available,

whether intentionally or not. The Light will always pierce the darkness, "...for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known."

There are many Gnostic themes to be explored and expounded upon within the text of the Gospel According to Matthew. In the following exegesis, I will address seven particular pieces of scripture concerning specifically the Gnostic concepts of the Hylic, Psychic, and Pneumatic:

- Chapter 1, verse 17
- Chapter 2, verse 16
- Chapter 3, verses 5-6
- Chapter 5, verse 20
- Chapter 10, verses 40-42
- Chapter 12, verse 29
- Chapter 12, verses 30-32

In these verses I will attempt to show the Gnostic concepts of the three ages of man, mankind's division into three sections, and the division of man into three parts. I will do this by studying the original Greek text of the scriptures, interpreting it in accord with common Gnostic symbolism.

* * *

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

-Matthew 1:17

The Gospel According to Matthew begins with a genealogy of Christ, summed up very succinctly with the above verse. But why conclude the genealogy in this way? The Gnostic will naturally ask this question and with a closer examination of the original Greek text, in accord with traditional numerology and symbology, a number of Gnostic tenets is found within the text.

The reader will first notice that the author of the Gospel intentionally separates the genealogy into three distinct parts:

- 1) From Abraham to David
- 2) From David to the deportation to Babylon
- 3) From the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah

We cannot interpret this genealogy as being an accurate and literal record connecting the physical Christ to the physical Abraham as many of the names given within this record cannot be verified, even through the Old Testament scriptures of which these scriptures are purportedly a continuation. The Gnostic, therefore, would naturally seek to find a metaphysical interpretation of the text.

We then see within the above text evidence of the Gnostic cosmology. Broken into three parts, the Gnostic would interpret the three sets of generations as such:

- 1) Initial emanations from the Absolute to the creation of the Demiurge.
- 2) Creation of the physical world (the Hylic) by the Demiurge.
- 3) Mankind's existence until the revealed gnosis of the Christ.

To understand how the Gnostic can reach such an interpretation, you must understand the basic Gnostic creationary mythos, as well as how an examination of the original Greek text supports such a claim. The Gnostic believes that man is an imperfect creation within an imperfect creation (the physical world). Logic then dictates that if man and the world are imperfectly made, then the creator of them must be imperfect as well. Thus God, the Absolute, cannot be the creator; rather, an inferior and imperfect being is instead responsible for our existence outside of the perfection of God. The words "deportation to Babylon" are key words for the Gnostic, signifying the exile of man from the fullness of the Pleroma. To support this interpretation we look at the original Greek text, and focus in particular on the Greek word γενεαι. It is accurately translated as "generations," but the stem's (γενεα) primary interpretation is "age" or "a portion of time." So here we see the three "ages" or sections of the creation of man, ending with the enlightenment of mankind through Christ.

But there's more. The Gnostics were very familiar with the use of numerology and most early alphabets had a numeric quality for each individual letter. We must remember that at the turn of the era there were many numerological systems at play. The Jews had their own, centered around the Hebrew alphabet (later incorporated as part of the Qabalah), but the most well known system was that perpetuated by the Pythagoreans. So let us search the above text for some basic numerological interpretation. Probably the most obvious thing that sticks out to us is the use of the number fourteen. The Pythagoreans placed special emphasis on the idea that every number could be reduced to a single digit. And as they gave every digit a set of correspondences, by reducing a number to its equivalent single digit, you could equate it with the correspondences associated with that number as well as show a relationship with all other numbers that would reduce to such. This reduction actually occurs through addition. So in the case of the number fourteen, we would add the one and the four to reduce it ($1+4=5$). Thus the Gnostic would then interpret the above scripture as there being three "ages" (as indicated earlier) of man. Why three ages of man? Because the number five numerological corresponds to mankind. To understand this we must look at numbers and symbols to see how they relate. The number five philosophically represents man because of such five-sided symbols as the pentagram, where each of the five points are indicative of the figure of man (two legs, two arms, and the head). It is also a number which represents disharmony (as it disrupts the balance of the two pairs of two in the number four). Within metaphysical discussion, each number is given a stage in creation. The numeral one represents the Absolute in His wholeness; two then signifies an emanation, a division of His self beginning where the two come together to make a third; four is then the point designated to the beginning of the physical manifestation, as it can represent the four cardinal directions as well as the four elements; which brings us to five as representing man, the inheritor of creation. This is even known as an evil number, for it is at this point

that man is given free will, allowing him to make his own choices, including the decision to either recognize or reject God.

Let us explore this concept further. If we take the three ages of man and combine them, and reduce them ($14+14+14=42=4+2=6$ or $5+5+5=15=1+5=6$), we now have the number six. In philosophical and mystical terms, six represents the point at which man looks beyond himself, towards the heavens so to speak, and actively decides to transcend his mortal existence. He seeks to become harmonious. This is represented by the hexagram, a six-pointed star-shaped figure composed of two equilateral intersecting triangles; a symbol of the ancient Hermeticists whose adage was “As Above, So Below.” But we will find further proof of this concept is we look a little deeper into the text. As stated above, the text can be interpreted by the Gnostic as speaking of the three ages of man, terminating in the time of Christ (Χριστου). Christ, the Revealer of divine Gnosis, brings in the age of Regeneration. This is revealed through a numerical breakdown of the Greek word used here for Christ: Χριστου (the numerical value of which is 1680, reducing to 6). Christ brings in the new age, revealing the knowledge (gnosis) that mankind will need to transcend their current state.

* * *

*When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,
he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in
and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under,
according to the time that he had learned from the wise
men.*

- Matthew 2:16

Here we find evidence to support the Gnostic claim that the population of mankind is distinctly divided into three types. As introduced earlier, we speak here of the Hylics, Psychics, and Pneumatics. This is actually stated quite clearly in the above text, as Herod, representative of the Demiurge, orders killed all children two years old and under. “Two years old or under...” is emblematic of the hylics and psychics; with the numeral “one” referring to the hylics, “two” to the psychics, and the unspoken “three” being the pneumatics. This could even be an oblique reference to the Christ as being a pneumatic, as he is not killed along with the “two years old or under.” The Pneumatics, by their spiritual nature, are destined for eternal life in the Pleroma. Those who have yet to transcend their physical and psychical nature are still susceptible to the demiurgical influence. For Spirit alone is incorruptible, and indestructible, all else is doomed to perish in the unquenchable fire that is the Absolute.

We see further evidence for such an interpretation when we examine the original Greek text of the passage. I am speaking in particular about the Greek word οριοις, which translates roughly into “districts” or “territories.” The Gnostic would see here a reference to the zodiac, signifying not only the physical realm, but also the psychical heavens where the Demiurge (Herod) and his archontic forces hold sway. Similar in theme to that stated above, we designate the numerals one, two, and three to the different worlds or realms: one would represent the hylic (physical) realm; two represents the

psychical (astral) realm, and the unspoken three represents the pneumatic (spiritual) realm.

This is further supported through the rest of the text. “He sent and killed all who were the children in and around Bethlehem [the zodiacal districts or territories] who were two years old or under...” The word “under” becomes significant here, as the original Greek word κατωερω, which translates as lower or below, is an adverbial form of κατωτερος, an adverb of the word “place,” indicating a place lower in positional orientation. Thus we have an astrological reference verifying that the existence spoken of is consisting of the physical and psychical realms. We even have the words “according to the time...” to indicate the physical and psychical relationship to the districts of the Demiurge. For time is a temporal concept which only exists outside of the Pleroma. Within the Illimitable, the Eternal, the Absolute, there is not beginning or end, the just IS.

* * *

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

- Matthew 3:5-6

Here the Gnostic will see a clear demarcation of three areas. These can represent a number of designations but we will concentrate on how these verses show a separation of mankind into three distinct parts: Hylics, Psychics, and Pneumatics.

The first people who are mentioned above are those of Jerusalem. This is important for they are mentioned specifically, while the other two groups are referred to in general terms. We have the “people of Jerusalem” along with “all of Judea” and “all the region along the Jordan.” This can be interpreted as that the only people who are of significance are the “people of Jerusalem,” the Pneumatics. Judea represents the Psychics, the masses in which the elect few (the Pneumatics, “people of Jerusalem”) are within. “All the region along the Jordan” is then representative of the Hylic man, as well as of physical matter in general.

Water plays a central role throughout all Christendom. This should be no surprise to any who are familiar with Christianity and the baptismal rites associated with all of its branches. Baptism is even overtly referred to in the above verses, which leads us to automatically begin making such a connection. The Mandaean, a still active cousin to the Gnostic, refer to their baptismal water as the river Jordan (which must be an active, flowing water for the rite). The river Jordan is here symbolic of the river of Spirit, the outpouring given to man directly from the Absolute. While this Spirit comes directly from the Absolute, it is an ever-active influence lying dormant within man. To be fully enlivened, certain Revealers of Gnosis are sent down to man. In this way man is awakened to his true nature. The Pneumatic can then help those around him, through the initiatic rite of Baptism, as evidenced in the above verse. Thus, the above verse tells us that mankind exists in three stages of existence (the Hylics, Psychics, and Pneumatics). But all of mankind has the Spirit of God within them, waiting to be awakened by the washing away of the scales of ignorance.

* * *

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness
exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

- Matthew 5:20

The reader of this verse is urged to be more righteous, more godly, to be more perfect than the so-called authorities of the times. To do so he must look deeper into the scriptures, examine them closer than the religious leaders who possessed the same texts.

Here is where we find further indication that mankind is divided into three parts: the scribes, the Pharisees, and those allowed to enter heaven. If we examine the original Greek text, we will see that the word δικαιοσύνη, translated here as “righteousness” can also be interpreted as “godliness.” Thus, the Pneumatic’s godliness must exceed that of the Hylics (scribes) and Psychics (Pharisees) if he wants to enter the kingdom of heaven (the Pleroma). Man has been granted a divine gift of indwelling spirit; a piece of God, so to speak. We must awaken and embrace this Spirit, transcend our hylic and psychic natures, and join that which comes from God, back to God.

* * *

*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes
me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a
prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s
reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person will
receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives
a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name
of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose
their reward.*

- Matthew 10:40-42

The above verses explain to the Gnostic the different levels of gnosis available to mankind. Christ comes to impart knowledge to mankind, knowledge from God, of God. But each individual can only understand the knowledge permitted to him according to his place upon the Path of Return. How evolved his spiritual nature is will determine the gnosis he will comprehend. The hylic will look to soothsayers and prophets for his answers, more concerned with where he’s going then where he has come from. The psychic has transcended his hylic nature and has a heart-felt desire to be something more. He begins to attack his ignorance with knowledge, which brings about an interest in the Holy Books, leading him to be morally and ethically right. Being righteous is his first step upon this new path. He is still ignorant of his true nature, but he is approaching the point where true gnosis may be given to him. For those becoming pneumatics, this occurs through the spiritual gnosis granted to him through the aid of an existing pneumatic, a true disciple of Christ. This is a true spiritual transformation, brought about through a

process of initiation. Thus the giving of a cup of cold water symbolizes the passing on or transference of Spirit from the current pneumatic to the new initiate. Because the Absolute is infinite and eternal, the gift of His Spirit is as well. So the pneumatic does not lose this “reward” as he “rewards” his fellow pneumatic upon newly entering the ranks of the spiritually elite.

This is why the sacraments are so vital to the Church. It is through the sacraments, such as the Baptism and Eucharist, that the Church can spiritually aid all of mankind, whatever their current spiritual progress may be. But this transference of Spirit, this empowering, can only be enlivened by divine gnosis which each individual receives in his own time.

* * *

*Or how can one enter a strong man's house and
plunder his property, without first tying up the
strong man? Then indeed the house can be
plundered.*

- Matthew 12:29

The Demiurge, imperfect and finite in his existence, seeks to elevate himself above even that of the Absolute. Because of his inferiority, his flaws, he seeks to obtain that which will make him whole, but he is ignorant of what exactly that is. Blind in his ignorance, he seeks completion through creation, but he lacks the divine spark needed to enliven it. The Absolute, in his wisdom and grace, allowed his divine Spirit to descend upon this creation as a Light to shine within the Dark. But the Demiurge, convinced by the power of his delusion, rejects the belief in an authority above himself, and seeks to obtain the power of God for himself. He does this by binding the Spirit of the Absolute within the physical matter of man. Thus the above verse states this explicitly. For the duration of existence, the Demiurge “plunders” the Absolute of His divine Spirit by “tying up the strong man.” But here is where the ignorance of the Demiurge really shows through. He believes to rob the Absolute of his Spirit (pure, eternal, incorruptible) by incarcerating it within physical and psychical matter (impure, finite, corrupted). He has bound the Eternal Fire of God with frayed robes. We find evidence of this fact within the next set of verses.

* * *

Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

- Matthew 12:30-32

Christ, the Revealer of Divine Gnosis, says here that “whoever is not with me is against me.” He is speaking of the Demiurge and his archons, those who would keep us ignorant of the true Light. We are then told of their inferiority to Christ as well as their finiteness: “whoever does not gather with me scatters.” The word “scatters” in the original Greek is σκορπίζει, which translates closer to “dissipates.” Thus, whoever is not with Christ ceases to exist, not just materially, but psychically as well. The Pneumatics (the Spiritually discerning) are destined to reside in the Pleroma. The Hylics (materialists and existentialists), those who don’t acknowledge the psychical and spiritual elements within themselves, are destined for death, each of his constituent parts returning to that from which it was derived; his physical, psychical, and pneumatic parts returning back to the pools from which they had been drawn. The death we speak of here refers to the death of his consciousness, the singularity of his “Self.” The Psychics are those who have a belief and faith in a higher power but have yet to receive the divine Gnosis that will allow them to abandon their worship of a flawed creator and instead worship directly the true God. These are the people the Christ is speaking to in the above passage. The Psychics (and the Demiurge, along with his archons who reside in the psychic realms) have the chance to elevate their being into the realm of the Pneumatics. This will result in eternal life within the fullness of the Pleroma. If they do not elevate themselves in this life (or the successive lives after) then they too will experience death at the end of the cycle of emanation.

We also see here verification of the Gnostic’s goal: reintegration with the Absolute. The indwelling Spirit of man must “gather” together and unite itself with God. From whence we came, we must return.

We must remember that the above scripture is aimed at the Psychics, and as such it proves that the Psychic has the freedom to choose life over death. He can choose to join with Christ, or reject the Holy Spirit. The Demiurge, failing to recognize the true authority of the Absolute, blasphemes against the Spirit by imprisoning it within matter. His continued attempts to keep man ignorant of his true origins ensure his eventual destruction. But those who are under the delusions of the Demiurge and his archons, the Psychics, who know no better and “speaks a word against the Son of Man” (Christ, the pure incarnation of God’s Spirit), will not be judged as harshly. They will still exist, “in this age” and “in the age to come.” For man’s base essence is pure, incorruptible Spirit. Given time, this Spirit will enable man to transcend his psychic nature. The Grace of divine Gnosis, brought by Revealers of Light, will help man enter a new age of enlightenment.

However, those who “speak against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” This is a significant statement. Those who have been revealed the truth by divine Gnosis (the Pneumatics) yet reject the truth and seek to thrive in their lower natures are faced with certain death; a death that will seem even worse under the revealed light of Eternal Life.

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If we truly wish to understand this text, then we must go beyond the actual words and literal message of the Gospel, and try to make sense of it within the linguistic and cultural context. Thus, the above exegesis shows that a consistent symbolic interpretation covering key Gnostic tenets does exist within the Gospel According Matthew. For the purpose of this paper I chose to only cover specific scripture concerning the multiple facets of the Gnostic concepts of the hylic, psychic, and pneumatic.

In Chapter 1, verse 17, we see that mankind was created in three stages, entering the “age” of Christ, beginning a time of newly revealed gnosis. We then see in Chapter 2, verse 16, that man exists within the world on one of three stages of enlightenment. We are also shown in this verse that the demiurgic forces are in direct opposition to the enlightenment of mankind. So Chapter 3, verses 5 and 6 introduce the psychics and pneumatics to the rite of Baptism. This prepares the reader for initiation into the higher mysteries, to be more righteous, more godlike (Chapter 5, verse 20). In Chapter 10, verses 40 through 42, this initiation is spoken of again. The “initiate” is referred to the disciples, the pneumatics, and told to partake of their Spirit. This is the Spirit of the Absolute, bequeathed to man in His Grace, bound with the physical and psychical matter of man (Chapter 12, verse 29). We are finally told in verses 30 through 32 of Chapter 12 that man, possessor of the divine Spirit, is destined to reunite with the Absolute, “in this age or the age to come.

The message delivered here is clear. We live in a world driven by forces in direct opposition to God. A world designed to keep man lost within his ignorance. Driven by pain, greed, and misery, mankind stumbles through the passions of the world, desiring a way out, blind to the exit. But a Light has pierced the darkness, and it is for each man to find his way to its origins.