

II. Background

The writer of the epistle didn't identify himself and neither did he identify those to whom he was writing. But his language, concerns and instruction make it clear that he was addressing fellow believers whom he regarded as his children in the faith. They were individuals who'd embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior, but their knowledge and faith were being undermined by wrong notions and misguided influences. These Christians – like all believers within the Graeco-Roman world of the first century – had come to Jesus as people steeped in pagan ideas and practice. Unlike modern western society, there was no division or distinction between the secular and sacred in the first-century world John and his readers inhabited. Religion permeated and informed all of life, whether family, society, culture or politics. John's audience was submerged in a sea of pagan thought and religious practice and it was continuing to affect them in their understanding of Jesus and the way they ordered their lives in relation to Him.

A. Philosophical Dualism

First-century Graeco-Roman religion consisted of many different philosophies and traditions, but they seem to have shared a common *dualistic* foundation. That is, they shared the conviction of a fundamental distinction between the material and immaterial, the real and the apparent. This thinking is present in the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and underlies their views regarding reality. Though their terminology and expression varied, they essentially held that immaterial “ideas” are the true reality – the “ideal form” – which material reality only represents. So, for instance, *blueness* is the reality which finds expression in blue objects.

This dualistic conception of reality extended into the realm of humanness. Following Socrates, Plato believed that the human soul is the true essence of a person; it precedes his physical body and survives it. The immaterial soul is the reality, while the body is only a transient vehicle. Therefore, human destiny involves shedding the body to liberate the soul so that it can at last attain its true perfection. Socrates believed in the immortality of the soul; Plato went further in holding to the soul's preexistence. But both believed the soul is encumbered by the body, not merely in the physical sense, but morally and intellectually. The goal of human existence is wisdom, but wisdom is hampered by one's physicality because knowledge comes through reasoning, not through the physical senses. What is discerned through the senses is neither clear nor accurate, so that the body can only obscure knowledge and distract from it. And the only way to be free of the body's distorting influence is to be free of the body itself.

B. Epicureanism

Epicureanism was one of the three major schools of Hellenist (Greek) philosophy that arose after Plato and Aristotle and continued on into the Christian era. The founder Epicurus was a *materialist* who argued that the gods (as the Greeks conceived of deity) were themselves composed of matter (“atoms”) just as human beings are. He believed that the soul as well as the body is composed of this atomic matter; at death, soul and body disintegrate and return to the elemental material from which they were formed. Unlike Plato and Socrates, the Epicureans rejected the notion of the soul's immortality. They associated the concept of life after death with judgment and punishment and sought to free men from the fear and dysfunction it engenders.

“Epicurus believed that, on the basis of a radical materialism which dispensed with transcendent entities such as the Platonic Ideas or Forms, he could disprove the possibility of the soul’s survival after death, and hence the prospect of punishment in the afterlife. He regarded the unacknowledged fear of death and punishment as the primary cause of anxiety among human beings, and anxiety in turn as the source of extreme and irrational desires. The elimination of the fears and corresponding desires would leave people free to pursue the pleasures, both physical and mental, to which they are naturally drawn, and to enjoy the peace of mind that is consequent upon their regularly expected and achieved satisfaction... Epicurus was aware that deeply ingrained habits of thought are not easily corrected, and thus he proposed various exercises to assist the novice. His system included advice on the proper attitude toward politics (avoid it where possible) and the gods (do not imagine that they concern themselves about human beings and their behavior), the role of sex (dubious), marriage (also dubious) and friendship (essential).” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

As the above citation suggests, Epicurus and his followers conceived of the gods in distant, disinterested terms. (The Deism of the Enlightenment period is a form of Epicureanism.) They acknowledged the existence of gods, but argued that they have no concern for this world and its activities and operations and so are irrelevant to human existence. The implication is that people should be concerned with worthy human pursuits and attainments, not the supernatural realm.

“For Epicurus, the purpose of philosophy was to attain the happy, tranquil life, characterized by ataraxia (peace and freedom from fear) and aponia (the absence of all forms of pain) and by living a self-sufficient life surrounded by friends. He taught that the root of all human neurosis was death denial and the tendency for human beings to assume that death will be horrific and painful, which he claimed causes unnecessary anxiety, selfish self-protective behaviors, and hypocrisy. According to Epicurus, death is the end of both the body and the soul and therefore should not be feared. He also taught that the gods neither reward nor punish humans; that the universe is infinite and eternal; and that occurrences in the natural world are ultimately the result of atoms moving and interacting in empty space.” (Wikipedia)

The Epicureans believed that the highest form of human existence is attained through personal pleasure, *but the rational pleasures of virtue rather than sensual or bodily pleasures*. In seeking and obtaining what is truly pleasurable – that which gives true delight as truly good, humans obtain satisfaction and wholeness and so find deliverance from discontentment, unrest, affliction and fear. While the “divine” exists, it has no real connection with or relevance to human existence. People have a rightful responsibility to pursue virtue and goodness, *but not because of divinely imposed duty or the fear of condemnation and punishment*; rather they follow this course because it brings the greatest benefit to their own lives. So Epicurus himself:

“When we say...that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not by an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not by sexual lust, nor the enjoyment of fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.”

C. Stoicism

Stoicism originated in Athens with the philosopher Zeno. It was contemporary with Epicureanism and paralleled it in important ways. It, too, exalted the virtue of a disciplined life marked by sound reasoning and judgment and it renounced careless, dissipative attitudes and practices. But whereas the Epicureans regarded authentic pleasure to be the key to happiness and fulfillment, the Stoics located that key in a disciplined, conformed will. Both emphasized knowledge and discernment (wisdom), but unto different goals: Epicureans pursued wisdom as illumining true human pleasure; Stoics believed wisdom gives direction and resource to the will as it strives to conform to the truth of “Nature” (that is, things as they really are).

“Stoicism is predominantly a philosophy of personal ethics informed by its system of logic and its views on the natural world. According to its teachings, as social beings, the path to happiness for humans is found in accepting this moment as it presents itself, by not allowing ourselves to be controlled by our desire for pleasure or our fear of pain, by using our minds to understand the world around us and to do our part in nature’s plan, and by working together and treating others fairly and justly. The Stoics are especially known for teaching that ‘virtue is the only good’ for human beings, and that external things – such as health, wealth, and pleasure – are not good or bad in themselves, but have value as ‘material for virtue to act upon.’”

“Stoicism teaches the development of self-control and fortitude as a means of overcoming destructive emotions; the philosophy holds that becoming a clear and unbiased thinker allows one to understand the universal reason (logos). A primary aspect of Stoicism involves improving the individual’s ethical and moral well-being: ‘Virtue consists in a will which is in agreement with Nature.’ This principle also applies to the realm of interpersonal relationships; ‘to be free from anger, envy, and jealousy,’ and to accept even slaves as ‘equals of other men, because all alike are sons of God.’”

“The Stoic ethic espouses a deterministic perspective; in regards to those who lack Stoic virtue, Cleanthes once opined that the wicked man is ‘like a dog tied to a cart, and compelled to go wherever it goes.’ A Stoic of virtue, by contrast, would amend his will to suit the world and remain, in the words of Epictetus, ‘sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy,’ thus positing a ‘completely autonomous’ individual will, and at the same time a universe that is ‘a rigidly deterministic single whole.’” (Wikipedia)

Fundamental to Stoic philosophy is the premise that truth can be known by the process of reasoning. Without this assumption, there is no basis for the Stoic ethic that true happiness and fulfillment are realized through a will conformed to “nature” – that is, to the world and its features, principles and operations as they really are. Unless men are able to discern objective truth through their own human faculties it is absurd to speak of them aligning their wills to it.

Stoicism is often misunderstood because of the contemporary connotation of a “stoic” as a person who shows no emotion. *But Stoicism didn’t teach the suppression of emotion as such, but the informing and directing of human passions such that they become reflections and servants of truth rather than irrational and foolish sentiments untethered from and contrary to truth.*

Emotions are proper and virtuous when they express the person's conscious will as it is informed by and bound over to truth ("Nature"). The Stoic's goal was to bind his emotions and passions to the truth and make them servants of his peace of mind. He sought clear judgment and discipline which will secure his contentment and peace in the face of life's continual challenges.

"For the Stoics, 'reason' meant not only using logic, but also understanding the processes of nature — the logos, or universal reason, inherent in all things. Living according to reason and virtue, they held, is to live in harmony with the divine order of the universe, in recognition of the common reason and essential value of all people. Following Socrates, the Stoics held that unhappiness and evil are the results of human ignorance of the reason in nature. If someone is unkind, it is because they are unaware of their own universal reason which would lead to the conclusion of kindness. The solution to evil and unhappiness then, is the practice of Stoic philosophy — to examine one's own judgments and behavior and determine where they have diverged from the universal reason of nature." (Wikipedia)

The previous quotation indicates a point of seeming compatibility between Stoicism and the Christian faith emerging in the first century: Both spoke of the centrality of the *Logos*. But, whereas the Stoics (and Greek philosophy more generally) understood "Logos" in terms of the true nature of reality – how things really are in themselves, Christians understood it in terms of the human incarnation of the God who is true and His revelation to men. When John spoke of the Logos (John 1:1-14), he was using a concept well familiar to the Gentiles of his day, but he was investing it with new meaning. There is indeed a "Logos" which is the substance of all reality and truth, but it is a person, not a principle.

The Stoics and Epicureans agreed that man, beginning from himself and fully sufficient in himself, is capable of arriving at truth and ordering his life according to it. And, though they expressed it somewhat differently, both agreed that virtue resides in sound judgment and self-discipline – in discerning things as they really are and conforming to that truth. In this way, a person can deliver himself from the evil, unhappiness and misery that fill the world and infect his own life. And because all personal and social evils are the product of bad thinking and misguided actions, the world could be purged of them if all men were to embrace this way of wisdom.

In this respect the Epicureans and Stoics were *humanists*. They weren't strict materialists who denied the existence of all spiritual or supernatural entities or powers, but they placed man and his capacities center stage and believed personal disciplines determine a person's lot.

- Epicurus and his followers acknowledged Greece's gods, but they regarded them as irrelevant since they have no interest or involvement in human affairs. The gods exist, but it's superstitious nonsense to worship them and seek their favor.
- The Stoics were essentially pantheists. They didn't believe in individual divine beings, but conceived of "god" in terms of a universal principle of *reason* ("logos") that determines and defines everything that exists. This Logos is effectively incarnate in the cosmos itself and has impressed its stamp of order in both *structure* (design) and *function* (law) upon every facet of it. This is the sense in which the Stoics understood the concept of "Nature" and they applied themselves to conform to it.

D. Gnosticism

Gnostic philosophy predated the Christian era by at least a century. But being a “mystery religion,” it had its roots in human antiquity. All mystery religions are centered in *esotericism*, which is the belief that enlightenment leading to a perfected state (however that might be understood) is attained through acquiring transcendent knowledge. Thus the term “Gnosticism” is taken from the Greek noun *gnosis* which means “knowledge.”

Though Gnosticism has no strict set of doctrines, it is grounded in the conviction that *spirit* is inherently good and *matter*, in all forms, is inherently evil (or at least imperfect). The transcendent spirituality of Christianity and its concern with the matters of *flesh* and *spirit* made the Christian faith a logical target for the infiltration of Gnostic beliefs. This began in the first century and a hundred years later Gnosticism was well-entrenched in the Christian community. Thus many of the quasi-Christian writings (Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, The Acts of Peter, etc.) that emerged in the second and third centuries are actually Gnostic in their theology.

The following is a summary of Gnostic tenets from the gnosis.org website:

“In the Gnostic view, there is a true, ultimate and transcendent God who is beyond all created universes and who never created anything in the sense in which the word “create” is ordinarily understood. While this True God did not fashion or create anything, He (or, It) “emanated” or brought forth from within Himself the substance of all there is in all the worlds, visible and invisible. In a certain sense, it may therefore be true to say that all is God, for all consists of the substance of God. By the same token, it must also be recognized that many portions of the original divine essence have been projected so far from their source that they underwent unwholesome changes in the process. To worship the cosmos, or nature, or embodied creatures is thus tantamount to worshipping alienated and corrupt portions of the emanated divine essence. The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness (Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully. The Fullness stands in contrast to our existential state, which in comparison may be called emptiness.”

“One of the aeonial beings who bears the name Sophia (“Wisdom”) is of great importance to the Gnostic world view. In the course of her journeyings, Sophia came to emanate from her own being a flawed consciousness, a being who became the creator of the material and psychic cosmos, all of which he created in the image of his own flaw. This being, unaware of his origins, imagined himself to be the ultimate and absolute God. Since he took the already existing divine essence and fashioned it into various forms, he is also called the Demiurge or ‘half-maker.’” (In Gnostic thought, this Demiurge corresponds to the Creator-God of the Scriptures.)

“Human nature mirrors the duality found in the world: in part, it was made by the false creator God and in part it consists of the light of the True God. Humankind contains a perishable physical and psychic component as well as a spiritual component which is a fragment of the divine essence. This latter part is often symbolically referred to as the ‘divine spark.’”

Gnostics embraced the fundamental soul-body dualism of Socrates, Plato, the Epicureans and the Stoics, but their focus was *spiritual* and *salvific* (pertaining to the destiny of the soul after death) rather than *philosophical* and *ethical* (perfecting one's soul in this life through wise living).

“Humans are generally ignorant of the divine spark resident within them. This ignorance is fostered in human nature by the influence of the false creator and his Archons, who together are intent upon keeping men and women ignorant of their true nature and destiny. Anything that causes us to remain attached to earthly things serves to keep us in enslavement to these lower cosmic rulers. Death releases the divine spark from its lowly prison, but if there has not been a substantial work of Gnosis undertaken by the soul prior to death, it becomes likely that the divine spark will be hurled back into, and then re-embodied within, the pangs and slavery of the physical world. Not all humans are spiritual (pneumatics) and thus ready for Gnosis and liberation. Some are earthbound and materialistic beings who recognize only the physical reality. Others live largely in their psyche. Such people usually mistake the Demiurge for the True God and have little or no awareness of the spiritual world beyond matter and mind.”

*“Humans are caught in a predicament consisting of physical existence combined with ignorance of their true origins, their essential nature and their ultimate destiny. To be liberated from this predicament, human beings require help, although they must also contribute their own efforts. From earliest times Messengers of the Light have come forth from the True God in order to assist humans in their quest for Gnosis. Only a few of these salvific figures are mentioned in Gnostic scripture; some of the most important are Seth (the third Son of Adam), Jesus, and the Prophet Mani. The majority of Gnostics always looked to Jesus as the principal savior figure (the Soter). **Gnostics do not look to salvation from sin (original or other), but rather from the ignorance of which sin is a consequence. Ignorance – whereby is meant ignorance of spiritual realities – is dispelled only by Gnosis, and the decisive revelation of Gnosis is brought by the Messengers of Light, especially by Christ, the Logos of the True God. It is not by His suffering and death but by His life of teaching and His establishing of mysteries that Christ has performed His work of salvation.**” (gnosis.org, emphasis added)*

Gnostic influence in the early Church produced several pseudo-Christian sects and movements, two of which were the *Cerinthian* and *Docetic* sects.

1. The Cerinthians

The Cerinthian movement began in the first century as followers of a man named Cerinthus. Consistent with the Gnostic distinction between matter and spirit, Cerinthus held that the man Jesus of Nazareth and the “Christ” were separate entities. He believed that the “Christ” presence (spirit) came upon the man Jesus at His baptism, empowering Him for His miraculous and supernatural ministry, and then departed from Him at the point of His death, returning into the *Pleroma*. (In Gnostic thought, the “Pleroma” consists of the pantheon of gods who act as intermediaries between the one, all-powerful god and the material creation.) Many argue that John was confronting the Cerinthian doctrine (among other things) in his first epistle, pointing particularly to his insistence that *“Jesus is the Christ”* – not a man temporarily endowed with the Gnostic “Christ spirit,” but the Messiah promised in the Scriptures (cf. 1 John 2:21-23, 4:2, 15, 5:1).

2. The Docetists

Starting with the basic Gnostic tenet that all matter is inherently corrupt (if not evil), the Docetists taught that the Christ never possessed human flesh but only appeared to be a man; what people observed was merely an apparition. (The term *docetism* derives from the Greek word denoting an appearance or semblance.) The logic of this is easy to understand: If Jesus of Nazareth truly was divine and without sin, then it was impossible that He could have a physical body; that condition alone would render Him defiled.

The Docetists denied Jesus' humanness in order to uphold their spirit/matter dualism, but the result was that they were forced to reject the central Christian truth that He "suffered in the flesh" (ref. Acts 2:22-32; 3:1-15, 5:12-30; Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Galatians 2:20-3:1, 13-14; Colossians 1:19-20; 1 Peter 4:1-2). Obviously Jesus couldn't suffer and die on a cross if He had no physical body, but the very idea of the "Christ spirit" undergoing any sort of suffering was alien to Gnostic thought and teaching. And if the crucifixion and death of the Christ was a fiction, then so was His bodily resurrection. Whoever the Romans put to death that day at Calvary, it wasn't the Christ; that one had already returned to the Pleroma (in a "spiritual" resurrection) from which it descended. In the end, the Docetic conception of Jesus and the "Christ event" completely redefined the messianic person and work and God's purposes in it (1 Corinthians 15:12-28). Believing themselves to be followers of Jesus the Messiah, the Docetists were actually following after a "Christ" of their own imagination; theirs was an embrace that smothered.

The Docetists must have known that their conception of the "Christ" and His mission differed greatly from the doctrine upheld and proclaimed in the wider Christian community. They believed that the Christ had appeared in the world to show men the path of personal enlightenment that results in deliverance from the corrupt creation, not to liberate and renew God's good creation by His death and resurrection. His goal wasn't the resurrection of the body culminating with the new heavens and earth, but the soul's liberation from the body in view of the eventual destruction of the entire material cosmos. The early Christians agreed with the Gnostics that the world is corrupt, but they ascribed it to man's fall and corruption, not a flawed work of creation brought about by a flawed deity. So they identified the remedy for the creation's condition in God's work of purging and renewal in the Messiah, whereas Gnostics looked to the creation's destruction. And while the early Christians embraced bodily resurrection as man's destiny, the Gnostics spoke of *spiritual* resurrection – the soul's final perfection in deliverance from the body.

Many scholars believe that the apostle John also addressed himself to the Docetic Christians in his first epistle. The one who embraces Jesus Christ in truth must embrace Him as the Messiah who came in the flesh as Israel's Scriptures revealed and promised. The Savior-Christ is the Son of Adam, Abraham and David, not a spirit who descended from the Pleroma to instruct men and then return to it. Jesus is the *way*, not as a spirit-guide, but as the truth and life as God's True Man ("last Adam"). Any spirit that does not confess that "*Jesus the Christ has come in the flesh*" manifests the spirit of *antichrist*: that which supplants Christ, whether by deception or rejection (ref. 1 John 1:1, 4:2-3).