

Hynenaeus and Gnosticism

by Edward E. Stevens

This article appeared in the 2025 Fall issue of *Fulfilled!* Magazine

THE GOSPEL WAS NEVER without competition in the marketplace of ideas. Even in Palestine, there were several Jewish and Hellenistic influences to contend with, both inside and outside the Church. And when Christianity spread into the Diaspora and Roman world, it encountered numerous other pagan religions, cults, and philosophies.

We see many examples of this in the New Testament: *Judaizers* (precursors of the Ebionites and Nazoreans), *deniers of the Resurrection* at Corinth, *false teachers* at Thessalonica, *Antichrists* in Asia Minor, *Hellenistic philosophy* in Greece (Stoic, Epicurean, and Neo-Platonism), *Hellenistic Judaism* (Philo in Alexandria), Nicolaitans, magic, deep things of Satan, deceitful spirits, doctrines of demons, endless genealogies, *asceticism* and *antinomianism*, plus an early form of Christian *Gnōsis* “*falsely called knowledge*” (1 Tim 6:20). In this article, we will take a closer look at that concept of *Gnōsis*.

Gnōsis Versus Gnosticism

Most patristic scholars agree that *Gnosticism* as a well-developed system of thought was not widespread or well-known until the second century (see H. Wayne House, Thomas R. Schreiner, Kenneth L. Waters, Sr., et al.). However, there were a few first century Jewish and Christian writers who used the Greek word *gnōsis* in a special sense, which many commentaries see as a “Gnosticizing tendency” or early form of “incipient Gnosticism” found within “the larger intellectual-spiritual milieu out of which ... the second-century Gnostic systems emerged” [D. M. Scholer, “Gnōsis, Gnosticism,” *Dictionary of the Later NT & Its Developments*, 400-401. Also see Raymond Bryan Brown’s journal article on Ephesians in *Review and Expositor* 60 (1963)].

Here are a few examples of that special usage of *gnōsis* in first century writings:

- Barnabas (*Epistle of Barn.* 1:5; 6:9-10; 9:8; 13:7)
- Philo in Alexandria (*Immut* 143; *Dreams* 1:60; *Alleg* 3:126)
- Paul (1 Tim 6:20-21)

Notice what Paul said about *gnōsis* in his first letter to Timothy:

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, *avoiding worldly and empty chatter* and the *opposing arguments* of what is **falsely called “knowledge”** [Gk. *gnōsis*] which some have professed and thus *gone astray from the faith* [1 Tim 6:20-21 NAS95].

Here, Paul urges Timothy to guard the truth that Paul had taught him (cf. 1 Tim 1:11, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14; 2:2; Titus 1:3) and to avoid the “worldly and empty chatter” and “opposing arguments” of some **false teachers** there in Ephesus who were claiming to have superior “knowledge” (Gk. *gnōsis*, from which we get “Gnostic” and “Gnosticism”). Paul described their “knowledge” as being “*falsely called gnōsis*,” and he noted that those who were teaching it had “**gone astray from the faith.**”

Thus, those false teachers were not merely peddling harmless opinions. Instead, this false knowledge (*gnōsis*) had led them “astray from the faith” and was causing others to go astray also. So, it was not just disagreement over non-essential opinion issues. It was a matter of essential doctrines of the faith.

Identifying the ‘False Gnōsis’

Paul did not identify those teachers of “*false gnōsis*” in his first letter to Timothy, but he did call them out by name in his second letter which was written about six months later:

But avoid *worldly and empty chatter*, for it will lead to further *ungodliness*, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are **Hymenaeus and Philetus**, men who have *gone astray from the truth* saying that **the resurrection has already taken place**, and they **upset the faith** of some [2 Tim 2:16-18 NAS95].

Here in his second letter, Paul not only names the false teachers, but identifies their false doctrines which were **upsetting the faith** of some saints there in Ephesus. When we compare what he said about the “*false gnōsis*” teachers in his first letter (1 Tim 6:20-21) with what he said about Hymenaeus and Philetus in his second letter (2 Tim 2:16-18), it becomes obvious that Hymenaeus and Philetus (H & P) were the “*false gnōsis*” teachers mentioned in the first letter. Note the following:

1 Tim 6:20-21 –

- Those who profess to have “*gnōsis*” (falsely called), which is a term that clearly associates them with later Gnosticism
- “avoiding [their] worldly and empty chatter”
- “gone astray from the faith”

2 Tim 2:16-18 –

- Hymenaeus and Philetus teach that the “*resurrection is already past*,” which is a well-known doctrine of later Gnosticism.
- “avoid [their] worldly and empty chatter
- “gone astray from the truth”

Note the three parallels:

- Both texts mention false doctrines that are clearly associated with later Gnosticism: “falsely called *gnōsis*” and “the resurrection is already past”
- Both texts say: “avoid [their] worldly and empty chatter”
- Both texts say: “gone astray from the faith or truth”

Thus, these two texts are NOT merely similar, but perfectly parallel. And this confirms that those who were teaching the *false knowledge* (*gnōsis*) were the same ones (H & P) who were teaching that the eschatological resurrection was “already past.” And that identifies H & P as being *proto-gnostic*.

Past Resurrection Was a Gnostic Idea

PHEME PERKINS (*Gnosticism and the New Testament*, 75-76) reminds us that H & P’s “claim that [the] resurrection has already occurred (2 Tim 2:18) is **typical of [the] Gnostic understanding of resurrection.**” Evidently, H & P were “explaining the resurrection in a **spiritual sense**, equating it with *regeneration*, or the *new birth*” (Ralph Earle, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* on 2 Tim 2:18). Many commentaries confirm this:

This view, that the Christian’s **resurrection has already taken place as a spiritual reality**, is advocated in [the **Gnostic** documents entitled] *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, *The Exegesis on the Soul*, and *The Gospel of Philip* in the [Gnostic] Nag Hammadi library. [James M. Robinson (Gen. Ed.). *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*].

Tertullian [mentions] those who said that **the resurrection had already happened** [and that] **the Valentinians [Gnostics] affirm this** [*Prescriptions Against Heretics* 33. LCC 5:54]. Tertullian, in *Resurrection of the Flesh* [19], claims that **they taught that resurrection happens in baptism** [*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (ACCS) on 2 Tim 2:18].

Hymenaeus and Philetus ... were *incipient Gnostics*, who **spiritualized the resurrection**, or rather said that the term was **only applicable to the rising from the death of sin** to the life of righteousness. ... Under the influence of an *incipient Gnosticism* ... they got rid of the reference of the resurrection ... by quibbling about the word ... “rising again” and [that] its meaning was sufficiently met by **what had already taken place** in a Christian believer, viz. **the rising of the soul to newness of life**. ... [*The Pulpit Commentary*].

What Are the Implications?

Now we understand why futurist critics try so diligently to *pin the Gnostic tail on the Full Preterist donkey*. They use evidence like the above to press their point. And even though their arguments do raise critical issues for the Corporate Body View (CBV), they DO NOT affect the Individual Body View (IBV) at all. Let's look at that:

Here is how one of the leading CBV proponents (Don K. Preston, email July 28, 2025) attempts to neutralize the *Hymenean Heresy* charge:

- H & P taught a *spiritual resurrection* which was already fully accomplished.
- Paul also taught a *spiritual resurrection*, but it was still in the process of occurring and would not be fully accomplished until AD 70.
- So, Paul and H & P were essentially on the same page in regard to the spiritual **NATURE** of the resurrection, but were NOT in agreement on the **TIME** of its occurrence.
- And since Paul agreed with H & P on the spiritual **NATURE** of the resurrection, he did not challenge their view on that.
- But he DID correct H & P's **PAST TIMING** of the resurrection.
- And it was **ONLY** that **PAST TIMING** of the resurrection which caused Paul to characterize H & P as “**gone astray from the truth.**”

However, futurist critics (e.g., Douglas Wilson, et al.) would interject here to point out that Paul was extremely concerned about a whole lot more than merely H & P's **TIMING** of the resurrection. Note how Paul characterized their error:

- Rejected *faith and a good conscience* (1 Tim 1:19)
- Suffered *shipwreck of the faith* (1 Tim 1:19)
- Handed over to Satan to be taught not to **blaspheme** (1 Tim 1:20)
- Teaching "**falsely called knowledge** [*gnōsis*]" (1 Tim 6:20)
- Worldly and empty chatter (2 Tim 2:16)
- Leading to further **ungodliness** (2 Tim 2:16)
- Spreading like cancer or gangrene (2 Tim 2:17)
- Their teaching about the **spiritual resurrection** being **past already** was *overthrowing the faith of some* (2 Tim 2:18).

Do you catch Paul's radical condemnation of their false teaching about the resurrection? This shows that H & P were guilty of far more serious error than a mere miscalculation on the TIMING. It was their **false gnōsis** (erroneous concept) of a *spiritual resurrection* which was *overthrowing the faith* of some there in Ephesus.

What Kind of Resurrection?

Furthermore, since Paul condemned their *spiritualized* concept of resurrection, and not just their timing of it, it is obvious that he did not agree with their proto-Gnostic concept. And this is further confirmed by the fact that Paul had already stated at his trial a few years earlier that he agreed with the **Pharisees' view of resurrection** (Acts 23:6, 24:15), which was definitely NOT a spiritualized concept like that of the Gnostics.

Paul described that future resurrection as a real experiential resurrection in the unseen realm which would **raise the souls of all the dead ones** (*both righteous and wicked*) out of Hades for the purpose of final judgment (Acts 24:15, 17:31, 24:25; cf. Rev 20:13-15). Note the fact that this resurrection would include *both righteous and wicked*. That rules out the **CBV** resurrection view which involved only the righteous. This clearly indicates what kind of resurrection Paul was teaching:

- It was NOT a *spiritual resurrection* of the soul at conversion (**Gnostic** view)

- It was NOT a *spiritual-only change* of the collective body (**CBV** view)
- But it WAS a *resurrection out of Hades* in the unseen realm of ALL the dead ones (both righteous and wicked) for the purpose of final judgment (**IBV** view)

