Understanding Early Gnosticism

The Backdrop to 1 John

Spiritual Good, Material Evil

Gnostics taught a sharp **dualism**: the spiritual realm is pure and good, while the physical world (including the human body) is corrupt and evil, created by a lesser deity.

A Phantom Jesus (Docetism)

Since the flesh was evil, they believed Jesus was a purely spiritual being who only **seemed** (from the Greek *dokeo*) to be human. They denied His true incarnation, suffering, and death.

Salvation by "Gnosis"

Salvation wasn't through faith in Christ's sacrifice, but through receiving secret, esoteric **knowledge** (*gnosis*) that awakens the divine spark within and allows the spirit to escape its fleshy prison.

Ethical Indifference

If the body is evil and irrelevant to the spirit, then sin doesn't matter. This led to two extremes: harsh **asceticism** (punishing the body) or unrestrained **licentiousness** (indulging it).

How 1 John Responds

Against Docetism:
John stresses Jesus' true humanity: "that which we have heard...seen with our eyes...and our hands have handled" (1:1) and that He "has come in the flesh" (4:2).

Against Ethical Indifference:
John insists on obedience and righteousness. To "walk in darkness" and claim to know God is a lie (1:6). True believers keep His commands (2:3-6).