

From remembering the birth of Jesus (Christmas!), we turn for a moment to remembering his death. I recently received this question, in response to my statement that some Christians did not think the death of Jesus mattered for salvation, and others maintained that he never actually died.

QUESTION:

Can you give some reference to where I can explore this idea of the Crucifixion being unimportant or not happening at all?

RESPONSE:

I will take two posts to answer this question, since they involve two different sets of “Gnostic” belief, which, in brief, was a distinctive and “declared-heretical” understanding of the Christian faith that stressed that the ultimate divine realm was not closely connected with this material world (the highest God was not the Creator), a world that was to be escaped, not one that would be redeemed. One document that embraces the view that the death of Jesus had no bearing on salvation is the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, which provides an alternative understanding of what happened at Jesus’ death – as witnessed by Peter himself (given to attack the proto-orthodox view that Jesus’ death brought salvation). Here is how I discuss it in my book Lost Christianities:

Among the gnostic attacks on the superficiality of proto-orthodox views, none is more riveting than the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter discovered at Nag Hammadi. This is not to be confused with the proto-orthodox Apocalypse of Peter in which Peter is given a guided tour of heaven and hell. The Nag Hammadi “apocalypse” or “revelation” portrays the true nature of Christ and castigates the ignorance of the simple minded (= the proto-orthodox) who do not recognize it.

The book begins with...

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