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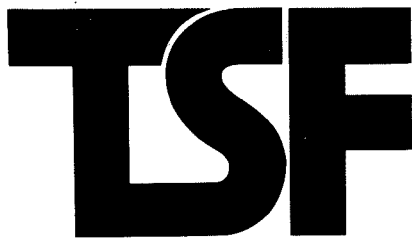
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BULLETIN

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Nag Hammadi and the New Testament

by PHEME PERKINS

The other day a colleague approached me with the question: "This might be impossible, but could you tell me just what difference the Nag Hammadi discoveries make?" Surely that question remains the most important one we can ask about any discovery. This extensive library of Gnostic writings does make a fine addition to our corpus of ancient texts and archaeological remains, but why should the Christian care who is trying to understand the significance of Scripture for his or her life today? Should the preacher or theologian worry over the results that scholars may come up with? A suitable answer requires some evaluation of what is meant by the question.

Some of the publicity about the new discoveries assumes that their view of Christianity is a more pristine version than what became normative Christianity. It suggests that the orthodox bishops repressed Gnostic Christianity because it represented a threat to their power over Christian communities. Consequently, Christians from churches which also emphasize local organization and non-hierarchical patterns of ministry look to these writings to find sponsorship for their views. Or, as happened a few weeks ago, women who have heard that Gnostics have texts which speak of God as Mother-Father come rushing in to ask me where they can read about the Gnostics: as though this new movement would sponsor their demands for equality of women within their church.

Such approaches will not be acceptable to Christians who hold that the canonical Scriptures have a special place in determining our life and theology. They imply that writings which never enjoyed such status should suddenly acquire a normative claim on Christians. Nag Hammadi should not make this kind of difference. What is often overlooked by those who advance the views of the Gnostics is that the Gnostics themselves did not treat the writings we somewhat casually call "Gnostic gospels" as having the same authority as the canonical traditions. The Gnostics claimed they knew the secret, true, oral teaching which the risen Jesus gave his disciples and which had been handed down to them. They claimed they could use that insight to interpret both the Old Testament and the gospels as well as other traditions of Jesus' sayings which they preserved among themselves. Further, some Gnostics appear to have thought that they represented an elite group of Christians—not a mode of discipleship open to all people. (Though we must admit that such elitism may have been fostered by the rejection which their views received from other Christians.)

Why, then, should we bother about these writings? I would like to suggest that there are several areas in which they do contribute to our appreciation of Scripture and consequently should be of concern. First, they provide valuable information about traditions which either influenced or were rejected by the orthodox community. Second, they help us understand the significance of certain fateful choices that underlie the canonical traditions: the choice of faith over knowledge (*gnosis*), the choice of ethical over ascetical obligation, and the choice of narrative gospel over esoteric revelation. Third, they indicate the importance of the ecclesial structures—including the definition of the canon—that emerged in the second and third centuries in response to the "crises" in Christian life created by its quest for a proper self-understanding.

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Background Traditions

First, the traditions which make up the Nag Hammadi writings can be studied using methods similar to those that we use when analyzing the gospels. The most familiar are the traditions of Jesus' sayings such as we find in the Gospel of Thomas. Publication of all the Nag Hammadi codices has not produced another Gospel of Thomas, but we do find other similar sayings in this material. It seems clear that, while the Gnostic versions are not themselves primitive, they developed out of a tradition of Jesus' sayings which had emphasized the wisdom elements in his teaching and which was not dominated by the eschatological perspective that we find in Q. Scholars have recently been turning toward studying the wisdom traditions in the gospel sayings. They argue that we should not allow concern with the criterion of dissimilarity (for evaluating the authenticity of Jesus' sayings) to blind us to traditions in which Jesus uses wisdom material—even though wisdom material of its very nature is similar across broad areas of culture and not dissimilar. By studying the wisdom traditions behind the sayings preserved in Gnostic writings, we may hope to add to our knowledge of the wisdom material in the teaching of Jesus.

We also find another class of traditions embedded in the Gnostic writings which help us understand the milieu in which the New Testament developed: the traditions of heterodox Jewish exegesis. One of

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the peculiarities of many Gnostic writings is an extreme hostility toward the god of the Old Testament—often pictured as the evil creator of the material world; a god whose covenant is slavery and whose hostility toward humanity is perceived in the Genesis stories by those who know how to interpret them.

However, much of the use of Jewish material in the Gnostic writings which make Seth the ancestor of the Gnostic race appears to derive from heterodox Jewish circles. Study of such materials suggests that some of the features of the Johannine and Pauline writings which used to be attributed to Gnostic or proto-Gnostic influence might also be examples of heterodox Jewish traditions in the Syro-palestine area. This observation has a further consequence for the way in which we speak about influences in the environment of the New Testament writings. Older commentaries commonly assumed that any motif, theme or image in the New Testament which could be traced to Jewish sources—say the Dead Sea Scrolls—was therefore not Gnostic. Now, we must ask whether we are not faced with two strains of development out of the same nurturing medium: one toward the canonical writings; another toward the rejection of the Jewish traditions in the development of Gnostic exegesis. The strength of such anti-Jewish sentiment in the Gnostic writings may also place our contemporary laments about the anti-semitism in early Christian writings in a new light. What is amazing is not the anti-Jewish sentiments which develop from such traditions, but the fact that Christians came to see it as a matter of faith that they had to retain that Jewish tradition and its Scripture.

Competing Religious Visions

What of the choices faced by early Christians? We have suggested that three crucial areas are at stake in the debate with Gnosticism: faith, ethics, and narrative gospel accounts. The Gnostic writings and the controversies reflected in them provide us with some sense of the alternatives that might have been selected. Further, variants of such options may well be embodied in alternative religious visions to which people turn today. We have already pointed out that the Gnostics rooted their claim to a superior form of religious insight in esoteric knowledge. One must become "wiser than" the god, gods or philosophies by which others attain truth. Such wisdom is accomplished only if one learns the code that unlocks the truth about the world. Consequently, the plain words of the biblical text have to be read through the glasses of Gnostic myth; read in a way which seems to make them tell quite a different story from the one which appears on the surface. Gnostic writings provide accounts of the myth which the Gnostic would apply to Scripture and to exegeses of some passages. They claim to be based on esoteric traditions which were handed down orally. However, the Gnostic does not produce a commentary such as we might expect—one which follows the narrative line of the text. That concern for narrative sequence has no importance for a religious experience which is grounded in claims of special insight.

Many scholars have hypothesized that the struggle in 1 Corinthians between wisdom and faith operating through a love which builds up the community represents our first example of such a struggle with Gnostic views. They point out that the Corinthians were infected with the severe asceticism and hostility to marriage which is typical of many of the Gnostic writings. For the Gnostic, the body and its passions were the final prison which the creator god designed to keep humanity from coming to know its destiny in a divine world beyond this one. However, others have pointed out that 1 Corinthians shows no evidence of Gnostic mythology; nor do any of the slogans which Paul attributes to his opponents reflect the ascetic slogans of the Gnostics in the second century. What we can suggest, therefore, is that both Paul's opponents in Corinth and later the Gnostic writers derived their norms for religious behavior from a hellenized Judaism which espoused ascetic separation from the passions of the body; viewing knowledge as esoteric interpretation and liturgical practice as experience of divinization through union with the divine.

Paul's vigorous opposition in the Corinthian situation may have played an important role in keeping mainstream Christianity from following that route. At the same time, the conflict with Gnosticism

showed the necessity to move beyond simply citing sayings attributed to the Lord—these could always be given a secret, Gnostic interpretation. It became necessary to insist on the narrative of the gospels as the authoritative context for interpretation. Jesus' teaching had to be understood within the historical context of his life. This step is one which Gnostics never took. There is no realistic narrative in their works. This development suggests that we should understand the canonization of the gospels and Acts in a special perspective. They provide an appropriate context for preserving the teaching of Jesus so that it is interpreted as oriented toward the everyday lives and actions of human beings; as a religious tradition which is to center around a faith and love open to all rather than a secret knowledge available only to a few.

The Impact of Church Structures

The concern for the inclusive nature of the Christian community can thus be seen as related to the choice of the configuration, faith—ethics (love commands)—narrative gospel. The Gnostic option produced elitist, closed communities which could not expand to reach out to all of humanity. Indeed, most Gnostic writings provide some account that suggests that not all humans belong to the Gnostic race. It is clear that the gospels and Acts provide a powerful example of the universal intent of Christianity.

What is less evident to people today is the role which the development of set ecclesiastical teaching offices within the orthodox community played in preserving precisely that universality and inclusiveness mandated in the gospel. Since many people today are suspicious of hierarchical or bureaucratic church structures which appear to preserve themselves by excluding others from power and decision-making, they presume that such structures had the same result in the second century. However, a different image emerges if the teaching offices are seen in contrast to Gnosticism. The elitist and sectarian impulses inherent in the Gnostic understanding of religion as insight and ascetic detachment would move in a more exclusive direction. A tradition based on esoteric enlightenment may provide "equality with the divine" for the few who are privileged to join the sect, but it cannot be addressed as a message of salvation to humanity at large. Consequently, we must learn to evaluate our church structures in terms of how well they are suited to the objectives of the gospel as a universal message of salvation; not how they are structured in an abstract sense. The lack of structure in the Gnostic communities may finally have contributed as much to their demise as any of the opposition mounted by the officials of the orthodox churches.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

The 1982 Annual Meetings of the AAR/SBL will be held in New York, December 19–22, 1982. In addition to the usual array of papers, discussions, panels and receptions, TSF subscribers may be interested in the three sessions sponsored by the Group on Evangelical Theology, which is chaired by Mark Lau Branson. The sessions will include as topics and participants: "The Use of the Bible in Theology" (Clark H. Pinnock, James I. Packer, Robert Webber, John Yoder, Gabriel Fackre, Donald Dayton, Robert Johnston); "New Approaches in Evangelical Biblical Criticism" (Raymond E. Brown, Robert A. Guelich, Robert H. Gundry, Richard N. Longenecker, John T. Meier, James A. Sanders); and "Narrative Hermeneutics in the Light of Recent Research," a roundtable discussion requiring advance registration and preparation (Grant R. Osborne, Gerald T. Sheppard, Anthony C. Thiselton). Inquiries about and registrations for these annual meetings should be sent to Scholars Press, P.O. Box 2268, Chico, CA 95927.

INSTITUTE FOR BIBLICAL RESEARCH

The IBR annual meeting will occur in New York on the afternoon of December 20, 1982. Following the members' luncheon and meeting, Bruce Waltke will present a lecture on "The Schoolmen: Hermeneutics Reconsidered." For more details, contact Carl Armerding, Regent College, 2130 Wesbrook Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1W6.

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The ETS will hold its annual meeting December 16–18, 1982 (just prior to the AAR/SBL) at Northeastern Bible College in Essex Falls, NJ. The theme for the meetings is "Biblical Criticism and the Evangelical." Included among plenary sessions will be a reply to Robert Gundry's new commentary on Matthew (with response by Gundry), papers by Norman Geisler, Robert Stein, Edwin Yamauchi and John Jefferson Davis, and a panel discussion with Clark Pinnock, Robert Johnston and Ronald Nash. Also of interest will be a plenary panel on evangelicalism and anti-semitism, including J. Ramsay Michaels, Robert W. Roth, Belden Menkus and Richard V. Pierard. For more information write Simon Kistemaker, Reformed Theological Seminary, 5422 Clinton Blvd., Jackson, MS 39209.

SOCIETY FOR PENTECOSTAL STUDIES

"Gifts of the Spirit" will be the theme of the Society for Pentecostal Studies annual meeting, to be held at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, November 18–20, 1982. The diverse group of participants will include James D. G. Dunn, Donald Gelpi, J. Rodman Williams, Donald Dayton, Ralph P. Martin and others. For more information contact Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91101.

Comments from Reader Surveys

"I am often frustrated by TSF Bulletin. Many of the articles are next to worthless. Seldom, if ever, does the Bulletin deal with social/corporate dimensions of sin. The Bulletin is not on the cutting edge of theology and its concrete impact, especially in the cities. You need to stop fighting 'liberals' and get on with the kingdom."

"It is too critical of those more conservative and not critical enough of those more liberal—the conservative/liberal dichotomy is valid if there is any truth. Not all who attend conservative schools are Pavlovian in nature—we think too."

"I like the teachable attitude toward a variety of sources. You haven't 'written off' any perspective. I appreciate the emphasis on social justice and spiritual life, too."

"The breathless preoccupation with popular theological issues is wearisome at times, but maybe it is necessary in a mag for students."

"Some of the issues of the seminary world are non-issues in the pastorate or in missions. I suspect the faddishness of theological currents."

"It gets me out of my own little rut and helps me see what is happening on the road. It forces me to think in realms that I would not normally be obligated to."

"[What I like least is the] news from TSF chapters."

"[What I like least are the] articles on spirituality, because I feel I can get material for spiritual life from other sources; focus on what you do best."

"Not enough practical and spiritual formation materials. Not enough on local chapters."

"Have a larger . . . section on spiritual formation, for this area seems to be the most difficult area for the seminarian to deal with—whether s/he knows it or not."

"Even in its intellectually stimulating articles, TSF pastors me, cutting through the murky waters of contemporary theology with refreshing affirmations of our living, self-revealing Lord."

"I found TSF Bulletin a shade too pedantic, a little cliqueish, and overall not interesting enough to do more than glance at a few articles, read some book reviews, and throw on a pile to read later."

"I appreciate the openness to other points of view, yet the solidly orthodox, evangelical stance of the Bulletin."

"I think the 'liberal leaning' stance I sense is appropriate to get all we can from what liberal brothers and sisters . . . have to share with the body of Christ—but the ignoring of more conservative evangelical elements is an emotional bias, I believe."

"The prideful arrogance which is traditional to evangelicals rears its ugly head."

"I would like to see more discussions of the substantive differences between 'evangelical,' 'neo-orthodox,' and 'liberal' theology (without repeating the biblical authority questions)."

"[I like least the] very spotty coverage by, about, for women and minorities. This is a constant irritant. Your commitment to this needs to be more obvious."

"Since you give so much space to feminist ax-grinding, why not challenge a reputable scholar who is not enamored of current views to ordain women to contribute an article on the subject?"

TSF Bulletin Readers

This summer TSF office staff were encouraged and overwhelmed by the reader surveys we received. The response rate was over ten percent, much higher than expected. Several readers complained that the survey was too complex; this summer we paid the penalty for our extravagance: we have had to analyze the complex results! We are not finished, but some of the preliminary results are certainly interesting enough to report.

We enjoyed reading and learning from the comments. These reminded us again what a diverse group of people we are. What one survey singled out for glowing praise would be roundly condemned by the next. One reader would be sure that we are erring in one direction, and another would accuse us of precisely the opposite heresy. We want to share with you the experience of seeing what other readers said, so we have provided here a sampling of the more interesting comments.

In spite of such contrasting reactions, there were still some areas of strong agreement. It is quite clear that most readers consider the bibliographic resources provided by the *Bulletin* to be of first importance. Book reviews were mentioned as a chief reason for reading the journal more frequently than any other. There was also a very definite preference for more tear-out bibliographies, more review articles, and more notes about worthwhile articles in other publications. These bibliographic materials have been a major emphasis for us because seminary students need help gaining access to the best resources. We will continue to work for improvement in this area.

We are now actively seeking a larger number of tear-out bibliographies and survey review articles to publish as the year proceeds. We welcome suggestions from you about what areas are most important to cover in this way. Providing leads on noteworthy articles in other publications will be a little more difficult. In past years we have not had a good system for compiling this information, and it seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. We were surprised to find in the reader surveys how strongly you want more of this, and so we will renew efforts to develop a good system for providing it.

Beginning last spring we have been evaluating our strategy for selecting and publishing book reviews. Since many readers seem somewhat dissatisfied with the short reviews, we should clarify our purpose for including both short and long reviews. By increasing the number of books which receive only short reviews, we are attempting to insure that there is plenty of space for the most important books to receive full reviews. As far as possible, only those books which are receiving wide attention in the seminary world, or which *should be* receiving wide attention but are not, will receive long reviews containing real analysis and critique. Shorter reviews will be given those books which are of narrower interest, and will provide only basic information and some positioning of the books within their fields. This way we can provide resources to a broader spectrum of interest while still focusing on the books of greater general interest. We also seek to be encouraging serious interaction with current literature by welcoming contributions from student reviewers.

The surveys indicated wide agreement among readers concerning the need for more articles "on recent scholarly developments in theology and biblical studies," more articles "describing aspects of the theological task," and "more analyses of theological issues currently being debated." These are important concerns for those trying to discern the role of theology in the church. We will try to provide more in these areas. Several of the articles in this current issue do fall into these categories: Pinnock's discussion of using tradition as one aspect of the theological task; Perkins discussion of the implications of recent developments in Gnostic research; and Branson's report on continuing debates within evangelical theology on the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility.

Several other trends in the reader survey have been thought-provoking for the editors. Although there was great variety in the issues being debated on campus (which reminds us again of the diversity