

New Light on the Church of the Second Century: Gnosticism and the Coptic Papyri of Nag-Hammadi

A Review Article

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- Evangelium Veritatis*. Ed. by M. MALININE, H.-CH. PUECH and G. QUISPÉL. Rascher: Zurich, 1956. Folio, pp. xvi + 127, 24 plates. \$25.00.
- The Gospel of Truth: A Valentinian Meditation on the Gospel*. Translation from the Coptic and Commentary by KENDRICK GROBEL. New York: Abingdon, 1960. Pp. 206. \$4.00.
- The Secret Sayings of Jesus*. Ed. by R. M. GRANT, D. N. FREEDMAN and W. R. SCHMOEDEL. New York: Doubleday, 1960. Pp. 206. \$3.50.
- The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. By HANS JONAS. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958. Pp. xviii + 302. \$8.50.
- The Gnostic Problem: A study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy*. By R. MCL. WILSON. London: Mowbray, 1958. Pp. xi + 274. \$8.50.
- Gnosticism and Early Christianity*. By R. M. GRANT. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959. Pp. 227. \$4.50.

THE DISCOVERY of the Gnostic library of Nag-Hammadi immediately after the war is giving rise to a great revival of interest in Gnosticism, which is bound to go on increasing as more and more of the new texts are transcribed and published. Until now, we have been largely dependent for our knowledge of the Gnostic sects and their doctrines upon the hostile accounts given by their opponents, chiefly Fathers of the Church (especially Irenaeus, Tertullian [or Pseudo-Tertullian], and Epiphanius), who were often suspected of unfairness. Of their own writings, only a few minor things were extant—a *Letter of Ptolemaeus to Flora*, preserved by Epiphanius; *Excerpts from Theodotus*, made by Clement of Alexandria; bits and pieces of Heraclion's *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*, included by Origen in his own commentary; the *Pistis Sophia* and the *Books of Jeû* (decidedly inferior specimens); and some apocryphal Gospels and Acts of Apostles. Since 1955, we have also had in our hands the *Apocryphon of John*, from a Coptic papyrus in the Berlin Museum. Now the Nag-Hammadi documents are beginning to be given to the public in transcriptions and translations into

modern languages; and our materials for the study of these systems have increased enormously. It is gratifying to find that the new discoveries do not justify the suspicions of bias that were entertained concerning the accounts of the Christian Fathers; it turns out that Irenaeus in particular gives a remarkably accurate analysis of the Gnostic doctrines.

The first of the Nag-Hammadi documents to be published was the Gospel of Truth, which is of particular interest in that it has been identified by the editors—not with absolute certainty, but with reasonable plausibility—with the writing of this name mentioned by Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* III.11.9) as a composition of the Valentinians, which “they dare to entitle ‘The Gospel of Truth,’ though it is totally unlike those which have been handed down to us from the Apostles.” Professor Grobel agrees with Professor W. C. van Unnik that the author of the work was probably Valentinus himself, who has been described as “a highly cultured person, long familiar with Plato, obsessed by the deepest religious and ethical aspirations of his time, . . . the most daring speculative mind of the second century” (quoted by Grobel, p. 16, from E. deFaye, *Gnostiques et Gnosticisme*). Like the original editors, Grobel dates the document around A.D. 150, at Rome.

The Gospel of Truth is a part of the Jung Codex, now deposited in the Jung Institute at Zurich. A preliminary sketch of its contents and estimate of its significance was given in 1955, in a little book entitled *The Jung Codex*, edited by Professor F. L. Cross of Oxford, with essays by H. C. Puech of Paris and G. Quispel and W. C. van Unnik of Utrecht. In the following year Puech and Quispel, together with M. Malinine (of the Sorbonne) brought out the *editio princeps* of the Gospel of Truth in a sumptuous volume, under the title *Evangelium Veritatis*, with photographs of the Coptic papyrus text, a printed transcription in Coptic with a French version facing it, and some brief notes, followed by translations into German and into English, and indexes of the Greek and Coptic words. Grobel has at least four good reasons for bringing out his own edition. First, the Zurich edition is very expensive. Secondly, the English translation which it contains is simply barbarous; as Grobel remarks, “It is a translation of a translation—the French—with little or no reference to the Coptic, made by a translator whose mother tongue obviously was not English” (p. 29). Thirdly, the document is hardly intelligible to the ordinary reader without relatively extensive annotation such as Grobel has provided (about double the length of the text itself). Fourthly, he is able to give us renderings of four pages of the text which were missing from the Jung Codex.

The notes are acute and learned, and will afford the necessary help to the student. They are not made for casual reading. One could wish that Grobel had allowed himself a good deal more freedom in translating, for his rendering is far too literal and the device of keeping to the original, line for line, has imposed upon him a quite unnecessary handicap.

It should be said that this writing is not a "gospel" in the sense of an account of the ministry and teaching of Jesus or any part of it. It is "the Gospel of Truth" in the sense that Paul's Epistle to the Romans might be called "the Gospel of Justification." In fact, the title of the work is simply its opening words, and does not imply that it contains any part of the story of Jesus.

An account of the Gospel according to Thomas was offered to readers of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* in the April issue. Since that article was written, a new translation of the text, made by W. R. Schoedel, has appeared, with excellent notes by R. M. Grant and D. N. Freedman, under the title, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus*. This book has now appeared in England in a paperback edition (by Collins) at the astonishing price of one half-crown. This is a model of what an edition of such text for general use should be. The meaning of the sayings is illuminated by clear indications of the Gnostic doctrines which they reflect, and by a rich selection of parallel texts from other Gnostic writings.

A third Gnostic "gospel" of the same collection is still to receive its first publication in English—the Gospel according to Philip. This is not the writing cited under that title by Epiphanius (Panarion I.26.13). It is neither a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus, like the Gospel of Thomas, nor a theological meditation, like the Gospel of Truth, but a kind of *florilegium* of Gnostic sayings. The German translator divides it into 127 sections, which seldom show any connection with one another, and are of the most varied character. They exhibit an extraordinarily complex symbolism which makes much use of the language of sex: marriage, virginity, adultery, the bride and the bridegroom and the bridal-chamber. Greek words, transliterated into Coptic, provide a number of the chief themes: *Anapausis* ("Rest"); *Klēronomia* ("Inheritance"); *Anastasis* ("Resurrection"); *Topos* ("Place"); and many others. The "Archons" appear, as in other Gnostic documents, as the planetary spirits who seek to deceive man and make him their slave. It is flatly stated that "the world came into being through a transgression." Its Creator (not the Father of All, but an inferior spirit, a Demiurge) hoped to confer immortality and incorruptibility upon it, but could not do so, as he did not possess them himself. It is hoped that a short selection of the more interesting (and more intelligible) passages from this Gospel may be published in *CJT* before too long.

Hans Jonas, a student of Rudolf Bultmann's long before the War, has been known to the world of learning as an investigator of Gnosticism for a generation. He began the publication of his master-work, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* in 1934. Thanks to Nazi hostility, he was driven from Germany before it appeared in print, and his second volume did not come out until 1954. A third is yet to come. He has since taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at Carleton College in Ottawa, and is now in New York, teaching in the New School for Social Research. He has now

given us a general account of Gnosticism, and an attempt to assess its significance in relation to early Christianity, which is at once brilliant in its learning and charming in its style. No one could fail to enjoy his translation of the "Hymn of the Pearl" (c. 5), and to appreciate his exposition of its imagery and its general significance. This is a major contribution to the study of ancient religion, and of certain important aspects of the development of thought in the ancient church. No student of early church history can afford to neglect it.

Dr. Wilson, now lecturer in New Testament in St. Andrews, has given us a study of Gnosticism which grew out of the Ph.D. dissertation offered by him to the University of Cambridge. It is restricted, as the subtitle indicates, to an examination of the relations between Gnosticism and Hellenistic Judaism. In two introductory chapters, he gives first a general survey of Diaspora Judaism and then a more detailed account of Alexandrian Judaism and of its best-known exponent, Philo. He then comes to a discussion of "Gnosticism and Christianity in New Testament Times," in which he pays attention especially to the language and thought of St. Paul. He recognizes "a close similarity between Paul's language and that of the Gnostics," but holds that "there is a fundamental difference in the idea expressed" (p. 76). Yet there is a more than merely verbal kinship between Gnostic and Christian, and it is precisely this that made Gnosticism so great a danger. "Gnosticism is not entirely foreign to Christianity," he writes, "and this fact added to the danger, since the Gnostic teachers could give a Christian colouring to their doctrines while yet employing to the full the pagan ideas which they drew from their environment. Had Gnosticism been purely pagan it would have been more easily dealt with" (p. 82f). The next two chapters treat of the earlier and later Gnosticism, respectively, always examining the nature of the conflict with Christianity. In some ways the most interesting and useful part of the book is Chapter VI, which introduces two of the new documents—the Gospel of Truth, and the Apocryphon of John. The latter is not yet available in an English translation, and Wilson's brief description will make many aware of its significance for the first time. It has been known for nearly sixty years; the Coptic text was included among a large group of Gnostic texts in the Berlin Museum; but it was never published in full until 1955, when W. Till edited it (*Texte und Untersuchungen*, No. 60), among *Die gnostischen Schriften des koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*. Now among the Nag-Hammadi papyri there are, we are told, no less than three different recensions of the book—a clear indication of the value attached to it by the Gnostics of Egypt. It professes to report a vision granted to John the son of Zebedee upon "the mountain," and great stress is laid on the esoteric character of the revelation. It is not to be made public, but to be transmitted secretly to those who are able to receive it. In substance, it stands close to the "Barbelo-Gnosticism" expounded by Irenaeus, and may itself be the source on which he drew.

This book, like that of Jonas, will be of interest not only to those who are

specially interested in Gnosticism, but to all who study the history of the second-century church, and indeed to all students of Christian origins. It makes important contributions to the whole question of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It must be remarked that the bibliography is unsatisfactory; it does not give sufficiently full information about the works cited; several titles are incorrectly spelled, and sometimes incorrectly given. The index leaves still more to be desired, in that it contains no reference to modern writers.

Professor Grant's book contains his six lectures which were delivered in Trinity College, Toronto, and at a large number of American universities in 1957-58, under the auspices of the Committee on the History of Religions of the American Council of Learned Societies. They are unquestionably a match for the best volumes that have appeared in the same lectureship, which includes such honourable names as Franz Cumont, A. V. Williams Jackson, and C. H. Toy. Far more limited in scope than Jonas' book, it is not inferior to it in brilliance, and the ease and flexibility of the lecture-style makes for simplicity (so far as that can be attained in the discussion of such a complex subject) and for a lucidity which triumphs over the dark and troubled mystifications of the doctrine. Dr. Grant argues that Gnosticism, far from corresponding to Harnack's estimate of it as "the acute Hellenization of Christianity," in fact originated in heterodox Judaism, as a consequence of the collapse of apocalyptic hopes in the first half of the second century, with the final blow coming through the overthrow of the revolt of Bar-Kochba. He holds that "some, at least, of the most significant early Gnostic systems have Jewish roots. . . . For all practical purposes, the Gnostics must have been ex-Jews, renegades from their religion, for they had abandoned the deity of the Creator, the binding character of the law of Moses, and the doctrine of resurrection" (p. 26). Not that he makes the reaction from Jewish apocalypticism a key to unlock all the problems; on the contrary, he explicitly admits that "we cannot insist that everything in Gnosticism can be explained in relation to Jewish apocalyptic hopes" (p. 37). By the second generation, the Gnostics were drawing upon Greek and Oriental theologies of the most varied kinds; and of course the New Testament writings were exploited from the earliest times of which we have any knowledge. "A would-be Gnostic, searching for security in a troubled and evil world, could hardly ignore the claims being made for Jesus by Christians" (p. 35). In this connection, it is interesting to note the remarks of Professor Quispel that "there would appear to be good grounds for supposing that it was from Christianity that the conception of redemption and the figure of the Redeemer were taken over into Gnosticism. A pre-Christian redeemer and an Iranian mystery of redemption perhaps never existed" (*The Jung Codex*, p. 78).

Scholarship, of course, is international; but even so the extent of international co-operation in the very first stages of the study of the new documents is far out of the ordinary. French, Dutch, Belgians, Swiss and

Americans collaborated to procure the Jung Codex in the first instance; English, Scottish and German scholars are even now participating along with Egyptians, Dutch, French and Americans in the further work of publication. Italians and Scandinavians are making important contributions. This is an indication of the interest and significance of the Nag-Hammadi papyri, and it may be anticipated that as publication continues they will receive even more attention from the learned world than has been awakened by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Certainly the Gnostic movements are of infinitely more importance in general history than the sectarians of Qumran.