

# Gnosticism: Has Nag-Hammadi Changed our View?

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*Not persecution but Gnosticism was the most deadly challenge to second-century Christianity. Yet many questions about the Gnostics have long been difficult to answer. Hardly any of their writings had survived, and they seemed so strange that at times it was difficult to take them seriously. Then just after the end of the Second World War, a year or so before the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, a major cache of the Gnostics' own texts was discovered in a jar in upper Egypt, near Nag-Hammadi.*

*How has this dramatic discovery changed our understanding of Gnosticism? This question is tackled by one of the leading scholars in the field.*

## Gnosticism: What and Who?

The Gnostics were followers of a variety of religious movements which stressed salvation through *gnosis* or 'knowledge', especially knowledge of one's origins. Dualism was an essential feature of Gnostic thought – an opposition between the spiritual world and the evil, material world. Gnosticism was attacked in the writings of the early Church Fathers, who regarded the various Gnostic groups as heretical perversions of an originally pure Christianity.

Modern scholars believe that Gnosticism was a religious phenomenon which was in some cases independent of (but not necessarily earlier than) Christianity. There is as yet no consensus as to when and how it originated. Many scholars have recently sought to derive Gnosticism from Jewish fringe elements. One problem that faces this view is the need to explain the anti-Jewish cast given by the Gnostics to Old Testament references such as the caricature of Jehovah as a foolish or malevolent *demiurge* (that is, craftsman or maker).<sup>1</sup>

Until recently for our knowledge of Gnosticism we were entirely dependent upon the descriptions of the Gnostics found in the Church Fathers. In some cases the patristic sources (*i.e.*, the writings of the Fathers) preserved extracts of the Gnostic writings but for the most part they were polemical in nature. Our most important sources include Justin Martyr from Samaria (d. 165), Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c. 200), Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235), Tertullian of Carthage (d. c. 225), Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215), Origen of Alexandria and Caesarea (d. 254), and Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus (d. 403).

Especially valuable is Irenaeus' account in *Against Heresies*, which has been preserved in a Latin translation. The *Philosophoumena* of Hippolytus was rediscovered only in 1842. Clement and Origen were in many ways sympathetic to the Gnostic emphases. Though Epiphanius had some firsthand contact with

Gnostics in Egypt, his *Panarion* while comprehensive is not very reliable. Some of the observations of the Fathers, especially of Irenaeus, have been confirmed by the discovery of original Gnostic documents from Nag-Hammadi. On the other hand, we have nothing as yet from the Gnostic sources themselves which corresponds to the patristic description of a licentious form of Gnosticism.

The Church Fathers were unanimous in regarding Simon of Samaria as the arch-Gnostic, though our earliest source, Acts 8, describes him only as a *magos* 'magician'. According to the later sources Simon claimed to be divine, and taught that his companion, a former prostitute, was the reincarnation of Helen of Troy. Those who accept the Fathers' view of Simon believe that Acts has not given us an accurate portrayal of Simon. Most scholars, however, believe that the Church Fathers were mistaken.<sup>2</sup>

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According to the Church Fathers Simon was followed by a fellow Samaritan, Menander, who taught at Antioch in Syria toward the end of the first century. He claimed that those who believed in him would not die. His claims were nullified when he himself died. Also teaching in Antioch at the beginning of the second century was Saturninus, who held that the 'incorporeal' Christ was the redeemer. That is, held a 'docetic' view of Christ which denied the incarnation by teaching that Christ only appeared to be truly human (*cf.* 1 Jn. 4:3).<sup>3</sup>

Teaching in Asia Minor in the early second century was Cerinthus, who held that Jesus was but a man upon whom Christ descended as a dove. As Christ could not suffer, he departed from Jesus before crucifixion. Another early Gnostic teacher, this time in Alexandria, was Basilides, to whom we have attributed both a dualistic system by Irenaeus and a monistic system by Hippolytus.

An important though atypical Gnostic was Marcion of Pontus (northern Turkey), who taught at Rome from 137 to 144. He contrasted the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament. Marcion drew up the first 'canon' or 'list' of New Testament books, consisting of a truncated Gospel of Luke

and ten Pauline letters. He omitted the nativity stories in Luke 1 and 2. Jesus simply appeared as a fully-grown man; his body was a 'phantom'. Marcion's 'church' spread to Egypt, Mesopotamia and Armenia. His docetic teachings were sharply rebuked by Tertullian.

The most famous Gnostic teacher was Valentinus, who came from Alexandria to Rome in 140. He taught that there were a series of divine 'aeons', intermediary powers or spheres, emanations from the supreme divinity. He divided mankind into three classes: *hylics* or unbelievers immersed in nature and the flesh, *psychics* or common Christians who lived by faith, and *pneumatics* or the spiritual Gnostics. The later Valentinians divided into an Italian and an Oriental school over the question of whether Jesus had a *psychic* or *pneumatic body*. The many outstanding Valentinian teachers included Ptolemaeus, Heracleon, Theodotus, and Marcus. The earliest known commentary on a New Testament book is Heracleon's on the Gospel of John.

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#### The Mandaeans

The Mandaean communities in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran are today the sole surviving remnants of Gnosticism. Their texts, though known only through late manuscripts, were used by the History-of-Religions scholars and Rudolph Bultmann to reconstruct an alleged pre-Christian Gnosticism. In addition to the manuscripts there are earlier magic bowl texts (A.D. 600) and some magical lead amulets which may date as early as the third century A.D. There is no firm evidence to date the origins of Mandaeanism earlier than the second century A.D.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Nag-Hammadi Library

In the nineteenth century the contents of two Coptic Gnostic codices (*i.e.* manuscripts in book form) were published: the *Codex Askewianus* containing the Pistis Sophia, and the *Codex Brucianus* containing the books of Jeu – both relatively late Gnostic compositions. (Coptic is a late form of Egyptian written mainly in Greek letters.) A third work, the *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae* (in Berlin – the other two are in London), though acquired in the nineteenth century was not published until 1955. It contains a Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), a Sophia of Jesus, Acts of Peter and an Apocryphon of John – a work mentioned by Irenaeus.

In 1945 a cache of eleven Coptic codices and fragments of two others were found by peasants near Nag-Hammadi in Upper Egypt, 370 miles south of Cairo where the Nile bends from west to east. Unfortunately some of the papyrus leaves and covers were burnt in an oven after the lot was brought back to the village of al-Qasr.<sup>5</sup>

The prices for the codices gradually escalated. Originally they were offered for sugar and tea and then for a few piastres as their true value was not realised. Jean Doresse, a young French scholar, was the first to authenticate the codices in 1947. A

Belgian antiquities dealer learned of the discovery and served as a middleman in selling Codex I. Through the noted Dutch scholar, Gilles Quispel, the Jung Institute in Zurich (named after the psychoanalyst, Carl Jung) paid \$8,000 for this codex in 1952. It was from this 'Jung Codex' that the first translation of a tractate from Nag-Hammadi, that of *The Gospel of Truth*, appeared in 1956. After various vicissitudes an English translation of the fifty-one treatises appeared in 1977 largely through the efforts of James M. Robinson.<sup>6</sup>

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The Nag-Hammadi Library, as the collection has come to be called, contains a variety of texts: non-Gnostic, non-Christian Gnostic, and Christian Gnostic. The most famous example of the latter is the Gospel of Thomas, an apocryphal Gospel probably composed c. A.D. 140 in Syria. This contains over a hundred purported sayings of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> In 1897 and in 1904 the British scholars B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt had discovered at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt non-canonical sayings or the so-called 'Logia' of Jesus. We now know that these papyri came from copies of the Greek text of the Gospel of Thomas. Scholars are divided over authenticity of the sayings preserved in this Gospel, and over whether it is independent of our canonical Gospels. There are some such as J.M. Robinson and H. Koester, who have compared the sayings preserved in Thomas with one of the sources of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (known to scholars as 'Q') and have esteemed their independent value. On the other hand, G. Quispel, who has written most prolifically on the subject, now regards Thomas, while independent of the canonical Gospels, as an anthology based upon two second-century apocryphal Gospels. A recent study by C. Tuckett concludes that parallels found in other Nag-Hammadi tractates apart from the Gospel of Thomas are quite clearly secondary adaptations from the Synoptics.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars who believe that Gnosticism was a pre-Christian phenomenon have cited especially *The Apocalypse of Adam* and *The Paraphrase of Shem* as non-Christian Gnostic works from Nag-Hammadi. But the assertion that these are actually non-Christian works has been challenged; they certainly do not appear to be pre-Christian compositions.<sup>9</sup> Some have claimed that *The Trimorphic Protennoia* gives us the prototype for the prologue of the Gospel of John. But the presence in the Coptic text of the word *skéné* ('tent, tabernacle') seem clearly to echo *eskénōsen* ('tabernacled') in the Greek of John 1:14.<sup>10</sup>

#### Gnosticism and the New Testament

Despite the lack of Gnostic texts prior to Christianity, many scholars (Robinson, K. Rudolph) have assumed a pre-Christian origin for Gnosticism. They also believe that they can detect references to Gnosticism in the New Testament, especially in the writings of John and Paul.<sup>11</sup>

**BIBLICAL BACKGROUND**

Bultmann explained the Gospel of John as the revision of an originally Gnostic document which contained traditions similar to those of the Mandaeans. Following R. Reitzenstein, he also held that the New Testament was dependent upon a pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth. But such a myth is found only in Manichaeism, a late form of Gnosticism. Most scholars are today convinced that such a redeemer myth is a post-Christian development patterned after the person of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

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Because Paul spoke about *gnosis* and *sophia* ('wisdom') in his letters to Corinth, the possibility of a Gnostic background looms the largest here. That this was the case has been most fully developed by W. Schmithals.<sup>13</sup> Schmithals has a tendency to overstate his case and finds Gnostics everywhere in Paul's letters, even in Thessalonians, Galatians, and Philipians.

Other scholars have concluded that it is not necessary to understand Paul's opponents in Corinth as Gnostics, e.g. H. Conzelmann in his recent *Hermeneia* commentary on 1 Corinthians. R.A. Horsley has attempted to illuminate the *gnosis* of Paul's opponents from Hellenistic Judaism as illustrated by Philo and the Wisdom of Solomon rather than from Gnosticism. He concludes, 'What Paul responds to, therefore, is not a Gnostic libertinism, but a Hellenistic Jewish *gnosis* at home precisely in the mission context'.<sup>14</sup> R. McL. Wilson has also come to the same conclusion: 'What we have at Corinth, then, is not yet Gnosticism, but a kind of *gnosis*'.<sup>15</sup>

**An incipient or rudimentary form of Gnosticism may well have been combated in the Pastoral and Johannine letters, but it is anachronistic to read back into the New Testament period the fully developed Gnosticism of the second century.**

Many scholars, including the great Bishop J.B. Lightfoot, have suspected that the Colossian heresy was a form of Gnosticism. Not a few preachers have expounded the 'pre-eminence of Christ' in Colossians 1:18 against the background of a series of 'aeons', a concept developed in Valentinian Gnosticism. But it is quite possible with E. Lohse, E. Schweizer, and P. O'Brien to

interpret Colossians as combating a non-Gnostic heresy.<sup>16</sup>

An incipient or rudimentary form of Gnosticism may well have been combated in the Pastoral and the Johannine letters, but it is anachronistic to read back into the New Testament period the fully developed Gnosticism of the second century. To underline the difference between the apparently inchoate phenomena in the first century and the fully articulated Gnostic systems in the second century, R. McL. Wilson has suggested that we use the term 'Gnosis' for the former and reserve 'Gnosticism' for the latter.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

Has Nag-Hammadi changed our view of Gnosticism? The answer is not a simple Yes or No. The Nag-Hammadi texts bear witness to the dominant ascetic wing of Gnostics but are silent about the libertine wing described by the Church Fathers. They demonstrate the vitality and the variety of Gnostic viewpoints including an unsuspected anti-docetic strain.

Some scholars such as J.M. Robinson and K. Rudolph are convinced that the Nag-Hammadi texts have served to confirm Bultmann's thesis of a pre-Christian Gnosticism which is both assumed and attacked by the New Testament. But as Robinson himself concedes, 'At this stage we have not found any Gnostic texts that clearly antedate the origin of Christianity'. G.W. MacRae, who also shared Robinson's view of the significance of the Nag-Hammadi texts, wrote: 'And even if we are on solid ground in some cases in arguing that the original works represented in the (Nag-Hammadi) library are much older than the extant copies, we are still unable to postulate plausibly any pre-Christian dates'.<sup>18</sup>

**Only the perspective of a messiah conceived as a divine manifestation, as a divine incarnate person, already present in the faith of the New Testament and of the Church, but interpreted by the Gnostics on the basis of ontological presuppositions of the Greek mysteriosophic doctrine of *somesema* and of the split in the divine, could allow the development of new Gnostic theology where the God of the Bible, the creator, became the *demiurge*....**

At the 1966 Messina conference on Gnostic origins the lone scholar who was willing to argue for the traditional view of Gnosticism as a post-Christian heresy was Simone Petrément. More scholars are now willing to acknowledge the indispensable assumption of Christianity as a basis for a fully developed Gnosticism. They include M. Hengel, B. Aland, K.W. Tröger, and most significantly U. Bianchi, the editor of the Messina conference. He concludes:

Only the perspective of a messiah conceived as a divine manifestation, as a divine incarnate person, already present in

the faith of the New Testament and of the Church, but interpreted by the Gnostics on the basis of ontological pre-suppositions of the Greek mysteriosophic doctrine of *soma-sema* ('body-tomb') and of the split in the divine, could allow the development of new Gnostic theology where the God of the Bible, the creator, became the *demiurge*....<sup>19</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See E. Yamauchi, 'The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism', *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978), pp. 140-71.

<sup>2</sup>W.A. Meeks, 'Simon Magus in Recent Research', *Religious Studies Review* 3 (1977), pp. 137-42.

<sup>3</sup>See E. Yamauchi, 'The Crucifixion and Docetic Christology', *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (1982), pp. 1-20.

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<sup>6</sup>J.M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag-Hammadi Library* (San Francisco, 1977); see also B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY, 1987).

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<sup>11</sup>For a survey of this issue, see R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1968).

<sup>12</sup>E. Schweizer, 'Paul's Christology and Gnosticism', in M.D. Hooker and S.G. Wilson, *Paul and Paulinism* (London, 1982), pp. 115-23; A.F. Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and Their Environment', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.23.2, (Berlin, 1980), pp. 1333-94.

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<sup>14</sup>R.A. Horsley, 'Gnosis in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 8.1-6', *New Testament Studies* 27 (1980), pp. 48-49.

<sup>15</sup>R. McL. Wilson, 'Gnosis at Corinth', in Hooker and Wilson, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup>See F.O. Francis and W.A. Meeks, eds., *Conflict at Colossae* (Missoula, 1973); E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, 1971); E. Schweizer, *Der Brief an die Kolosser* (Neukirchen, 1976); P. O'Brien, *Colossians. Philemon* (Waco, 1982).

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