

# The Nag Hammadi Library

## BIBLIOTHÈQUE DE NAG HAMMADI



### Introduction from « The Gnostic Gospels »

by Elaine Pagels

In December 1945 an Arab peasant made an astonishing archeological discovery in Upper Egypt. Rumors obscured the circumstances of this find — perhaps because the discovery was accidental, and its sale on the black market illegal. For years even the identity of the discoverer remained unknown. One rumor held that he was a blood avenger; another, that he had made the find near the town of Naj 'Hammâdi at the Jabal al-Târif, a mountain honeycombed with more than 150 caves.

Originally natural, some of these caves were cut and painted and used as grave sites as early as the sixth dynasty, some 4,300 years ago. Thirty years later the discoverer himself, Muhammad 'Alî al-Sammân; told what happened. Shortly before he and his brothers avenged their father's murder in a blood feud, they had saddled their camels and gone out to the Jabal to dig for **sabakh**, a soft soil they used to fertilize their crops.

Digging around a massive boulder, they hit a red earthenware jar, almost a meter high. Muhammad 'Alí hesitated to break the jar, considering that a **jinn**, or spirit, might live inside. But realizing that it might also contain gold, he raised his mattock, smashed the jar, and discovered inside thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather. Returning to his home in al-Qasr, Muhammad 'All dumped the books and loose papyrus leaves on the straw piled on the ground next to the oven. Muhammad's mother, 'Umm-Ahmad, admits that she burned much of the papyrus in the oven along with the straw she used to kindle the fire.

A few weeks later, as Muhammad 'Alí tells it, he and his brothers avenged their father's death by murdering Ahmed Isma'il. Their mother had warned her sons to keep their mattocks sharp: when they learned that their father's enemy was nearby, the brothers seized the opportunity, "hacked off his limbs . . . ripped out his heart, and devoured it among them, as the ultimate act of blood revenge."

Fearing that the police investigating the murder would search his house and discover the books, Muhammad 'Alí asked the priest, al-QummusBasiliyusAbd al-Masih, to keep one or more for him. During the time that Muhammad 'Alí and his brothers were being interrogated for murder, Raghib, a local history teacher, had seen one of the books, and suspected that it had value. Having received one from al-QummusBasiliyus, Raghib sent it to a friend in Cairo to find out its worth.

Sold on the black market through antiquities dealers in Cairo, the manuscripts soon attracted the attention of officials of the Egyptian government. Through circumstances of high drama, as we shall see, they bought one and confiscated ten and a half of the thirteen leather-bound books, called codices, and deposited them in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. But a large part of the thirteenth codex, containing five extraordinary texts, was smuggled out of Egypt and offered for sale in America.

Word of this codex soon reached Professor Gilles Quispel, distinguished historian of religion at Utrecht, in the Netherlands. Excited by the discovery, Quispel urged the Jung Foundation in Zurich to buy the codex. But discovering, when he succeeded, that some pages were missing, he flew to Egypt in the spring of 1955 to try to find them in the Coptic Museum. Arriving in Cairo, he went at once to the Coptic Museum, borrowed photographs of some of the texts, and hurried back to his hotel to decipher them. Tracing out the first line, Quispel was startled, then incredulous, to read: "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and

which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down." Quispel knew that his colleague H.C. Puech, using notes from another French scholar, Jean Doresse, had identified the opening lines with fragments of a Greek **Gospel of Thomas** discovered in the 1890's. But the discovery of the whole text raised new questions: Did Jesus have a twin brother, as this text implies? Could the text be an authentic record of Jesus' sayings?

According to its title, it contained the **Gospel According to Thomas**; yet, unlike the gospels of the New Testament, this text identified itself as a **secret** gospel. Quispel also discovered that it contained many sayings known from the New Testament; but these sayings, placed in unfamiliar contexts, suggested other dimensions of meaning. Other passages, Quispel found, differed entirely from any known Christian tradition: the "living Jesus," for example, speaks in sayings as cryptic and compelling as Zen koans:

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." What Quispel held in his hand, the **Gospel of Thomas**, was only one of the fifty-two texts discovered at Nag Hammadi (the usual English transliteration of the town's name). Bound into the same volume with it is the **Gospel of Philip**, which attributes to Jesus acts and sayings quite different from those in the New Testament:

. . . the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] . . . They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as (I love) her?"

Other sayings in this collection criticize common Christian beliefs, such as the virgin birth or the bodily resurrection, as naïve misunderstandings. Bound together with these gospels is the **Apocryphon** (literally, "secret book") **of John**, which opens with an offer to reveal "the mysteries [and the] things hidden in silence" which Jesus taught to his disciple John.

Muhammad 'Alí later admitted that some of the texts were lost — burned up or thrown away. But what remains is astonishing: some fifty-two texts from the early centuries of the Christian era— including a collection of early Christian gospels, previously unknown. Besides the **Gospel of Thomas** and the **Gospel of Philip**, the find included the **Gospel of Truth** and the **Gospel to the Egyptians**, which identifies itself as "the [sacred book] of the Great Invisible [Spirit]." Another group of texts consists of writings

attributed to Jesus' followers, such as the **Secret Book of James**, the **Apocalypse of Paul**, the **Letter of Peter to Philip**, and the **Apocalypse of Peter**.

What Muhammad 'Alí discovered at Nag Hammadi, it soon became clear, were Coptic translations, made about 1,500 years ago, of still more ancient manuscripts. The originals themselves had been written in Greek, the language of the New Testament: as Doresse, Puech, and Quispel had recognized, part of one of them had been discovered by archeologists about fifty years earlier, when they found a few fragments of the original Greek version of the **Gospel of Thomas**.

About the dating of the manuscripts themselves there is little debate. Examination of the datable papyrus used to thicken the leather bindings, and of the Coptic script, place them c. A.D. 350-400. But scholars sharply disagree about the dating of the original texts. Some of them can hardly be later than c. A.D. 120-150, since Irenaeus, the orthodox Bishop of Lyons, writing C. 180, declares that heretics "boast that they possess more gospels than there really are," and complains that in his time such writings already have won wide circulation — from Gaul through Rome, Greece, and Asia Minor.

Quispel and his collaborators, who first published the **Gospel of Thomas**, suggested the date of c. A.D. 140 for the original. Some reasoned that since these gospels were heretical, they must have been written later than the gospels of the New Testament, which are dated c. 60-110. But recently Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University has suggested that the collection of sayings in the **Gospel of Thomas**, although compiled c. 140, may include some traditions even **older** than the gospels of the New Testament, "possibly as early as the second half of the first century" (50-100)-as early as, or earlier, than Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

Scholars investigating the Nag Hammadi find discovered that some of the texts tell the origin of the human race in terms very different from the usual reading of Genesis: the **Testimony of Truth**, for example, tells the story of the Garden of Eden from the viewpoint of the serpent! Here the serpent, long known to appear in Gnostic literature as the principle of divine wisdom, convinces Adam and Eve to partake of knowledge while "the Lord" threatens them with death, trying jealously to prevent them from attaining knowledge, and expelling them from Paradise when they achieve it. Another text, mysteriously entitled **The Thunder, Perfect Mind**, offers an extraordinary poem spoken in the voice of a feminine divine power:

For I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one.

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin....

I am the barren one, and many are her sons....

I am the silence that is incomprehensible....

I am the utterance of my name.

These diverse texts range, then, from secret gospels, poems, and quasi-philosophic descriptions of the origin of the universe, to myths, magic, and instructions for mystical practice. Why were these texts buried—and why have they remained virtually unknown for nearly 2,000 years? Their suppression as banned documents, and their burial on the cliff at Nag Hammadi, it turns out, were both part of a struggle critical for the formation of early Christianity. The Nag Hammadi texts, and others like them, which circulated at the beginning of the Christian era, were denounced as heresy by orthodox Christians in the middle of the second century.

We have long known that many early followers of Christ were condemned by other Christians as heretics, but nearly all we knew about them came from what their opponents wrote attacking them. Bishop Irenaeus, who supervised the church in Lyons, c. 180, wrote five volumes, entitled **The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Knowledge**, which begin with his promise to set forth the views of those who are now teaching heresy . . . to show how absurd and inconsistent with the truth are their statements . . . I do this so that . . . you may urge all those with whom you are connected to avoid such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ.

He denounces as especially "full of blasphemy" a famous gospel called the **Gospel of Truth**. Is Irenaeus referring to the same **Gospel of Truth** discovered at Nag Hammadi? Quispel and his collaborators, who first published the **Gospel of Truth**, argued that he is; one of their critics maintains that the opening line (which begins "The gospel of truth") is not a title. But Irenaeus does use the same source as at least one of the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi—the **Apocryphon (Secret Book) of John** — as ammunition for his own attack on such "heresy." Fifty years later Hippolytus, a teacher in Rome, wrote another massive **Refutation of All Heresies** to "expose and refute the wicked blasphemy of the heretics."

This campaign against heresy involved an involuntary admission of its persuasive power; yet the bishops prevailed. By the time of the

Emperor Constantine's conversion, when Christianity became an officially approved religion in the fourth century, Christian bishops, previously victimized by the police, now commanded them. Possession of books denounced as heretical was made a criminal offense. Copies of such books were burned and destroyed. But in Upper Egypt, someone; possibly a monk from a nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, took the banned books and hid them from destruction — in the jar where they remained buried for almost 1,600 years.

But those who wrote and circulated these texts did not regard **themselves** as "heretics. Most of the writings use Christian terminology, unmistakable related to a Jewish heritage. Many claim to offer traditions about Jesus that are secret, hidden from "the many" who constitute what, in the second century, came to be called the "catholic church." These Christians are now called gnostics, from the Greek word **gnosis**, usually translated as "knowledge." For as those who claim to know nothing about ultimate reality are called agnostic (literally, "not knowing"), the person who does claim to know such things is called gnostic ("knowing").

But **gnosis is** not primarily rational knowledge. The Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge ("He knows mathematics") and knowing through observation or experience ("He knows me"), which **is gnosis**. As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as "insight," for **gnosis** involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny. According to the gnostic teacher Theodotus, writing in Asia Minor (c. 140-160), the gnostic is one who has come to understand who we were, and what we have become; where we were... whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.

Yet to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of **gnosis**. Another gnostic teacher, Monoimus, says: Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, "My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body." Learn the sources of sorrow; joy, love, hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him **in yourself**.

What Muhammad 'All discovered at Nag Hammadi is, apparently, a library of writings, almost all of them gnostic. Although they claim to offer secret teaching, many of these texts refer to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and others to the letters of Paul and the New

Testament gospels. Many of them include the same **dramatic personae** as the New Testament — Jesus and his disciples. Yet the differences are striking.

Orthodox Jews and Christians insist that a chasm separates humanity from Its creator: God is wholly other. But some of the gnostics who wrote these gospels contradict this: self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.

Second, the "living Jesus" of these texts speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance, like the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead of coming to save us from sin, he comes as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. But when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as his spiritual master: the two have become equal — even identical.

Third, orthodox Christians believe that Jesus is Lord and Son of God in a unique way: he remains forever distinct from the rest of humanity whom he came to save. Yet the gnostic **Gospel of Thomas** relates that as soon as Thomas recognizes him, Jesus says to Thomas that they have both received their being from the same source:

Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out.... He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him."

Does not such teaching — the identity of the divine and human, the concern with illusion and enlightenment, the founder who is presented not as Lord, but as spiritual guide sound more Eastern than Western? Some scholars have suggested that if the names were changed, the "living Buddha" appropriately could say what the **Gospel of Thomas** attributes to the living Jesus. Could Hindu or Buddhist tradition have influenced gnosticism?

The British scholar of Buddhism, Edward Conze, suggests that it had. He points out that "Buddhists were in contact with the Thomas Christians (that is, Christians who knew and used such writings as the **Gospel of Thomas**) in South India." Trade routes between the Greco-Roman world and the Far East were opening up at the time when gnosticism flourished (A.D. 80-200); for generations, Buddhist missionaries had been proselytizing in Alexandria. We note, too, that Hippolytus, who was a Greek speaking Christian in Rome (c. 225), knows of the Indian Brahmins — and includes their tradition among the sources of heresy:

There is . . . among the Indians a heresy of those who philosophize among the Brahmins, who live a self-sufficient life, abstaining from (eating) living creatures and all cooked food . . . They say that God is light, not like the light one sees, nor like the sun nor fire, but to them God is discourse, not that which finds expression in articulate sounds, but that of knowledge (**gnosis**) through which the secret mysteries of nature are perceived by the wise.

Could the title of the **Gospel of Thomas** — named for the disciple who, tradition tells us, went to India — suggest the influence of Indian tradition? These hints indicate the possibility, yet our evidence is not conclusive. Since parallel traditions may emerge in different cultures at different times, such ideas could have developed in both places independently. What we call Eastern and Western religions, and tend to regard as separate streams, were not clearly differentiated 2,000 years ago. Research on the Nag Hammadi texts is only beginning: we look forward to the work of scholars who can study these traditions comparatively to discover whether they can, in fact, be traced to Indian sources.

Even so, ideas that we associate with Eastern religions emerged in the first century through the gnostic movement in the West, but they were suppressed and condemned by polemicists like Irenaeus. Yet those who called gnosticism heresy were adopting — consciously or not — the viewpoint of that group of Christians who called themselves orthodox Christians. A heretic may be anyone whose outlook someone else dislikes or denounces. According to tradition, a heretic is one who deviates from the true faith. But what defines that "true faith"? Who calls it that, and for what reasons?

We find this problem familiar in our own experience. The term "Christianity," especially since the Reformation, has covered an astonishing range of groups. Those claiming to represent "true Christianity" in the twentieth century can range from a Catholic cardinal in the Vatican to an African Methodist Episcopal preacher initiating revival in Detroit, a Mormon missionary in Thailand, or the member of a village church on the coast of Greece.

Yet Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox agree that such diversity is a recent — and deplorable — development. According to Christian legend, the early church was different. Christians of every persuasion look back to the primitive church to find a simpler, purer form of Christian faith. In the apostles' time, all members of the Christian community shared their money and property; all believed the same teaching, and worshipped together; all revered the authority of the apostles. It was only after that golden age that



conflict, then heresy emerged: so says the author of the Acts of the Apostles, who identifies himself as the first historian of Christianity.

But the discoveries at Nag Hammadi have upset this picture. If we admit that some of these fifty two texts represents early forms of Christian teaching, we may have to recognize that early Christianity is far more diverse than nearly anyone expected before the Nag Hammadi discoveries.

Contemporary Christianity, diverse and complex as we find it, actually may show more unanimity than the Christian churches of the first and second centuries. For nearly all Christians since that time, Catholics, Protestants, or Orthodox, have shared three basic premises. First, they accept the canon of the New Testament; second, they confess the apostolic creed; and third, they affirm specific forms of church institution. But every one of these—the canon of Scripture, the creed, and the institutional structure — emerged in its present form only toward the end of the second century.

Before that time, as Irenaeus and others attest, numerous gospels circulated among various Christian groups, ranging from those of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to such writings as the **Gospel of Thomas**, the **Gospel of Philip**, and the **Gospel of Truth**, as well as many other secret teachings, myths, and poems attributed to Jesus or his disciples. Some of these, apparently, were discovered at Nag Hammadi; many others are lost to us. Those who identified themselves as Christians entertained many — and radically differing-religious beliefs and practices. And the communities scattered throughout the known world organized themselves in ways that differed widely from one group to another.

Yet by A. D. 200, the situation had changed. Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the only "true faith." The majority of churches, among which the church of Rome took a leading role, rejected all other viewpoints as heresy. Deploring the diversity of the earlier movement, Bishop Irenaeus and his followers insisted that there could be only one church, and outside of that church, he declared, "there is no salvation."

Members of this church alone are orthodox (literally, "straight-thinking") Christians. And, he claimed, this church must be **catholic** —that is, universal. Whoever challenged that consensus, arguing instead for other forms of Christian teaching, was declared to be a heretic, and expelled. When the orthodox

gained military support, sometime after the Emperor Constantine became Christian in the fourth century, the penalty for heresy escalated.

## **The Nag Hammadi discovery of manuscripts**

In December 1945, two peasants, Muhammed and Khalifah 'Ali of the al-Samman clan were digging for fertiliser at the base of the Jabal al-Tarif cliff, using the saddle-bags of their camels to carry the earth back. The cliff is about 11km north-east of Nag Hammadi. They tethered their camels to a boulder, and came upon a buried jar as they were digging around the base of the boulder. Muhammed 'Ali told J.M. Robinson that at first he was afraid to break the jar — the lid may have been sealed with bitumen, as a blackish substance is present on the lid — for fear a jinn might be inside, but he thought that gold might be contained instead, he broke it with his mattock. Out flew particles of papyrus.

The jar was of red slip ware, with four small handles near the opening. It was large, approximately 60cm or more in height, with an opening of some 1520cm widening to 30cm in the side. The jar had been closed by fitting a bowl into its mouth. The bowl survives, and is Coptic red slip ware of the 4-5th century, with a rim decorated with four fields of stripes. The diameter at the outer edge is 23 3-24.0 cm, with inside diameter of 182-18.7cm.

The books were divided among the 7 camel-drivers present. According to 'Ali there were 13 (our 'codex XIII' was not included in this number, as it was inside codex VI). Thus a codex was lost more or less at the site. Seven lots were drawn up. Covers were removed and each consisted of a complete codex plus part of another. The other drivers, ignorant of the value and afraid of sorcery and Muhammed 'Ali, disclaimed any share, whereon he piled them all back together.

'Ali wrapped his books in his tunic and took them home, to his hovel in the hamlet of al-Qasr, built on the site of ancient Chenoboskion. The books, loose covers and loose pages were dumped in the straw, next to the oven. A blood-feud was in progress, for which reason Muhammed 'Ali was very careful not to venture back later to the area. Muhammed deposited the books with a local coptic priest, Basiliyus 'Abd al-Masih, as the police were searching his house almost nightly for weapons.

The priest's wife had a brother, Raghīb Andrawus, who went from village to village teaching English and history in the local coptic church schools. He came to visit, and, on seeing one of the books,

recognised it might be valuable and took it to Cairo. There he showed it to a Coptic physician interested in the Coptic language, George Sobhi, who called in the authorities from the Department of Antiquities. They seized the book, agreeing to pay Raghib £E 300. After endless haggling, he got £E 250, on condition he donated the remaining £E 50 to the Coptic Museum. The book was deposited in the museum, according to the register, on 4th October 1946.

Thinking the books were worthless, or maybe even unlucky to have, 'Ali's widowed mother 'Umm Ahmad had burned part of those lying in the straw in the oven (probably the covers and most of the pages of codex XII, of which only a few leaves remain, but also the cover of X, and loose leaves: 1 in codex II, 9 in III, 1 in VI, 3 in VIII and 2 in IX, and large and small fragments from otherwise intact sequences of fragments), as she conceded to Robinson. Illiterate Muslim neighbours bartered or purchased them for next to nothing. NashidBisadah had one and entrusted it to a gold merchant of Nag Hammadi to sell in Cairo, dividing the profit between them.

A grain merchant supposedly acquired another and sold it for such a price that he was able to set up his shop in Cairo. Bahij 'Ali, a one-eyed outlaw of al-Qasr, got a number of the books. Escorted by a well-known antiquities dealer of the region, DhakiBasta, he went to Cairo. They first offered the books to Mansoor's shop at Shephard's hotel, and then to the shop of Phokion J. Tano, a Cypriot dealer, who bought the lot and then went to Nag Hammadi to get whatever was left. Once the news of the value of the books reached al-Qasr, the 'Ali brothers tried to lay hands on the remainder.

Most of Codex I was exported from Egypt by a Belgian antiques dealer, Albert Eid. He offered it for sale in New York and Ann Arbor in 1949, and then his widow sold it on 10th May 1952 to the Jung Institute of Zurich. It was returned to Cairo bit by bit after publication. Meanwhile Tano's collection was seized by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities to prevent it being exported; when Nasser came to power, it was 'nationalised', a paltry £E 4,000 being paid as compensation.

Today all the Nag Hammadi codices are in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. Publication was obstructed by the desire of various scholars to publish works first, with a full (and so lengthy to prepare) commentary. US scholar James Robinson became interested in the 1960's, and using contacts at UNESCO was able eventually to bypass this exhibition of obscurantism. The full collection was published in facsimile by Brill between 1972-1984 as the *Facsimile edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*.

There is a 17-volume English edition, entitled *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, and full English translations in the *Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Robinson also visited Nag Hammadi in the 1960's and 1970's, and tracked down those who found them and wormed out them the story of the find. All the codices are fourth century papyrus. The find consists of 12 codices, plus 8 leaves from a 13th, and contains 52 texts. Duplications mean the number of unique works is 45. The Berlin Papyrus 8502 is grouped with them, although found separately, because of its related contents. The texts were originally written in Greek, and later translated into Coptic, not always very well (e.g. the passage of Plato). The passage of Plato in fact has been reworked also.

The largest leaves — in codex VII — are 17.5cm tall. All of the codices are single-quire, apart from codex I.

### **Bibliography**

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J.M.ROBINSON et al, Various articles, *Biblical Archaeologist* 42.4 (Fall 1979). Includes plates. Checked. A very valuable account of how the texts came to found. Robinson relates the story of the discovery, as obtained by himself from those involved in what was plainly a wearisome and lengthy process of cross-examination. He makes a plea for free access to material of public interest — ironically, now buried in this copyrighted journal and accessible to almost no-one! The publishers ignored a letter I wrote suggesting they make the material available online.

# An Introduction to Gnosticism and The Nag Hammadi Library

## What is Gnosticism?

Gnosis and *gnosticism* are still rather arcane terms, though in the last two decades the words have been increasingly encountered in the vocabulary of contemporary society. *Gnosis* derives from Greek, and connotes "knowledge" or the "act of knowing". (On first hearing, it is sometimes confused with another more common term of the same root but opposite sense: *agnostic*, literally "not knowing", a knower of nothing.) The Greek language differentiates between rational, propositional knowledge, and the distinct form of knowing obtained not by reason, but by personal experience or perception. It is this latter knowledge, gained from experience, from an interior spark of comprehension, that constitutes *gnosis*.<sup>i</sup>

In the first century of the Christian era this term, *Gnostic*, began to be used to denote a prominent, even if somewhat heterodox, segment of the diverse new Christian community. Among these early followers of Christ, it appears that an elite group delineated themselves from the greater household of the Church by claiming not simply a belief in Christ and his message, but a "special witness" or revelatory experience of the divine. It was this experience, this *gnosis*, which — so these Gnostics claimed — set the true follower of Christ apart from his fellows.

Stephan Hoeller explains that these Gnostic Christians held a "conviction that direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings, and, moreover, that the attainment of such knowledge must always constitute the supreme achievement of human life." <sup>ii</sup>

What the "authentic truths of existence" affirmed by the Gnostics were will be briefly reviewed below. But a historical overview of the early Church might first be useful. In the initial decades of the Christian church — the period when we find first mention of "Gnostic" Christians — no orthodoxy, or single acceptable format of Christian thought, had yet been defined. During this first century of Christianity modern scholarship suggests Gnosticism was one of many currents sweeping the deep waters of the new religion. The ultimate course Christianity, and Western culture with it, would

take was undecided at that early moment; Gnosticism was one of forces forming that destiny.

That Gnosticism was, at least briefly, in the mainstream of Christianity is witnessed by the fact that one of the most prominent and influential early Gnostic teachers, Valentinus, may have been in consideration during the mid-second century for election as the Bishop of Rome. <sup>iii</sup>

Valentinus serves well as a model of the Gnostic teacher. Born in Alexandria around A.D. 100, in his early years Valentinus had distinguished himself as an extraordinary teacher and leader in the highly educated and diverse Alexandrian Christian community. In the middle of his life, around A.D. 140, he migrated from Alexandria to the Church's evolving capital, Rome, where he played an active role in the public life of the Church.

A prime characteristic of the Gnostics was their propensity for claiming to be keepers of secret teachings, gospels, traditions, rituals, and successions within the Church — sacred matters for which many Christians were (in Gnostic opinion) simply either not prepared or not properly inclined. Valentinus, true to this Gnostic penchant, professed a special apostolic sanction. He maintained he had been personally initiated by one Theudas, a disciple and initiate of the Apostle Paul, and that he possessed knowledge of teachings and perhaps rituals which were being forgotten by the developing opposition that became Christian orthodoxy.<sup>iv</sup>

Though an influential member of the Roman church in the mid-second century, by the end of his life some twenty years later he had been forced from the public eye and branded a heretic. While the historical and theological details are far too complex for proper explication here, the tide of history can be said to have turned against Gnosticism in the middle of the second century.

No Gnostic after Valentinus would ever come so near prominence in the greater Church. Gnosticism's secret knowledge, its continuing revelations and production of new scripture, its asceticism and paradoxically contrasting libertine postures, were met with increasing suspicion. By A.D. 180, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, was publishing his attacks on Gnosticism as heresy, a work to be continued with increasing vehemence by the orthodox church Fathers throughout the next century.

The orthodox catholic church was deeply and profoundly influenced by the struggle against Gnosticism in the second and third centuries. Formulations of many central traditions in orthodox theology came as reflections and shadows of this confrontation with

the Gnosis. <sup>v</sup>But by the end of the fourth century the struggle with the classical Gnosticism represented in the Nag Hammadi texts was essentially over; the evolving orthodox ecclesia had added the force of political correctness to dogmatic denunciation, and with this sword so-called "heresy" was painfully cut from the Christian body. Gnosticism, which had perhaps already passed its prime, was eradicated, its remaining teachers murdered or driven into exile, and its sacred books destroyed.

All that remained for scholars seeking to understand Gnosticism in later centuries were the denunciations and fragments preserved in the patristic heresiologies — or so it seem, until a day in 1945....

### **Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library**

It was on a December day in the year of 1945, near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, that the course of Gnostic studies was radically renewed and forever changed. An Arab peasant, digging around a boulder in search of fertilizer for his fields, happened upon an old, rather large red earthenware jar. Hoping to have found buried treasure, and with due hesitation and apprehension about the jinn, the genie or spirit who might attend such a hoard, he smashed the jar open with his pick. Inside he discovered no treasure and no genie, but books: more than a dozen old papyrus books, bound in golden brown leather. <sup>vi</sup>

Little did he realize that he had found an extraordinary collection of ancient texts, manuscripts hidden up a millennium and a half before (probably deposited in the jar around the year 390 by monks from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius) to escape destruction under order of the emerging orthodox Church in its violent expunging of all heterodoxy and heresy.

How the Nag Hammadi manuscripts eventually passed into scholarly hands is a fascinating even if too lengthy story to here relate. But today, now over fifty years since being unearthed and more than two decades after final translation and publication in English as *The Nag Hammadi Library*<sup>vii</sup>, their importance has become astoundingly clear: These thirteen beautiful papyrus codices containing fifty-two sacred texts are the long lost "Gnostic Gospels", a last extant testament of what orthodox Christianity perceived to be its most dangerous and insidious challenge, the feared opponent that the Patristic heresiologists had reviled under many different names, but most commonly as Gnosticism. The discovery of these documents has radically revised our understanding of Gnosticism and the early Christian church.

## Overview of Gnostic Teachings

With that abbreviated historical interlude completed, we might again ask, "What was it that these "knowers" knew?" What made them such dangerous heretics? The complexities of Gnosticism are legion, making any generalizations wisely suspect. While several systems for defining and categorizing Gnosticism have been proposed over the years, none has yet gained any general acceptance. <sup>viii</sup>So with advance warning that this is most certainly not a definitive summary of Gnosticism and its many permutations, we will outline just four elements generally agreed to be characteristic of Gnostic thought.

The first essential characteristic of Gnosticism was introduced above: Gnosticism asserts that "direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings," and that the attainment of such knowledge is the supreme achievement of human life. *Gnosis*, remember, is not a rational, propositional, logical understanding, but a knowing acquired by *experience*.

The Gnostics were not much interested in dogma or coherent, rational theology — a fact which makes the study of Gnosticism particularly difficult for individuals with "bookkeeper mentalities". (Perhaps for this very same reason, consideration of the Gnostic vision is often a most gratifying undertaking for persons gifted with a poetic ear.)

One simply cannot cipher up Gnosticism into syllogistic dogmatic affirmations. The Gnostics cherished the ongoing force of divine revelation — *Gnosis* was the creative experience of revelation, a rushing progression of understanding, and not a static creed. Carl Gustav Jung, the great Swiss psychologist and a lifelong student of Gnosticism in its various historical permutations, affirms,

*we find in Gnosticism what was lacking in the centuries that followed: a belief in the efficacy of individual revelation and individual knowledge. This belief was rooted in the proud feeling of man's affinity with the gods...*

In his recent popular study, *The American Religion*, Harold Bloom suggests a second characteristic of Gnosticism that might help us conceptually circumscribe its mysterious heart. Gnosticism, says Bloom, "is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the self, and [this] knowledge leads to freedom...." <sup>ix</sup>Primary among all the revelatory perceptions a Gnostic might reach was the profound awakening that came with knowledge that something within him



was uncreated. The Gnostics called this "uncreated self" the divine seed, the pearl, the spark of knowing: consciousness, intelligence, light. And this seed of intellect was the self-same substance of God, it was man's authentic reality; it was the glory of humankind and the divine alike. If woman or man truly came to gnosis of this spark, she understood that she was truly free: Not contingent, not a conception of sin, not a flawed crust of flesh, but the stuff of God, and the conduit of God's immanent realization.

There was always a paradoxical cognizance of duality in experiencing this "self-within-a-self". How could it not be paradoxical: By all rational perception, man clearly was not God, and yet in essential truth, was Godly. This conundrum was a Gnostic mystery, and its knowing was their greatest treasure.

The creator god, the one who claimed in evolving orthodox dogma to have made man, and to own him, the god who would have man contingent upon him, born *ex nihilo* by his will, was a lying demon and not God at all. Gnostics called him by many names — many of them deprecatory -names like "Saklas", the blind one; "Samael", god of the blind; or "the Demiurge", the lesser power.

Theodotus, a Gnostic teacher writing in Asia Minor between A.D. 140 and 160, explained that the sacred strength of gnosis reveals "who we were, what we have become, where we have been cast out of, where we are bound for, what we have been purified of, what generation and regeneration are." <sup>x</sup>

"Yet", the eminent scholar of Gnosticism, Elaine Pagels, comments in exegesis, "to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God: this is the secret of *gnosis*.... Self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical." <sup>xi</sup>

The *Gospel of Thomas*, one of the Gnostic texts found preserved in the Nag Hammadi Library, gives these words of the living Jesus:

*Jesus said, 'I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out...'* <sup>xii</sup>

*He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him'*<sup>xiii</sup>*He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am:* What a remarkably heretical image! *The Gospel of Thomas*, from which we take that text, is an extraordinary scripture.

Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University notes that though ultimately this Gospel was condemned and destroyed by the evolving orthodox church, it may be as old or older than the four

canonical gospels preserved, and even have served as a source document to them. <sup>xiv</sup>This brings us to the third prominent element in our brief summary of Gnosticism: its reverence for texts and scriptures unaccepted by the orthodox fold. The Gnostic experience was mythopoetic — in story and allegory, and perhaps also in ritual enactments, Gnosticism sought expression of subtle, visionary insights inexpressible by rational proposition or dogmatic affirmation.

For the Gnostics, revelation was the nature of Gnosis: and for all the visions vouchsafed them, they affirmed a certainty that God would yet reveal many great and wonderful things. Irritated by their profusion of "inspired texts" and myths — most particularly their penchant for amplifying the story of Adam and Eve, and of the spiritual creation which they viewed as preceding the material realization of creation <sup>xv</sup>-Ireneaus complains in his classic second century refutation of Gnosticism, that

*every one of them generates something new, day by day, according to his ability; for no one is deemed perfect [or, mature], who does not develop...some mighty fiction.* <sup>xvi</sup>

The fourth characteristic that we might delineate to understand classical Gnosticism is the most difficult of the four to succinctly untangle, and also one of the most disturbing to subsequent orthodox theology. This is the image of God as a diad or duality. While affirming the ultimate unity and integrity of the Divine, Gnosticism noted in its *experiential encounter* with the numinous, dualistic, contrasting manifestations and qualities.

Consider the Gnostic affirmation that man, in some essential reality, is also God. This is a statement tinged with duality: Man, though not God, is. Another idea, offered by the Manichaean gnostic Faustus, that both matter (*hyle*) and the divine spirit are uncreated and coeternal was violently attacked by Augustine in his essay *Contra Faustum* as heretical, dualistic thinking. <sup>xvii</sup>

In many of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts God is imaged not just as a duality, or diad, but as a unity of masculine and feminine elements. Though their language is specifically Christian and unmistakably related to the Jewish tradition, Gnostic sources continually use sexual symbolism to describe God. Prof. Pagels explains,

*One group of gnostic sources claims to have received a secret tradition from Jesus through James and through Mary Magdalene [who the Gnostics revered as consort to Jesus]. Members of this group prayed to both the divine Father and Mother:*

*'From Thee, Father, and through Thee, Mother, the two immortal names, Parents of the divine being, and thou, dweller in heaven, humanity, of the mighty name...'* <sup>xviii</sup>

Several trends within Gnosticism saw in God a union of two disparate natures, a union well imaged with sexual symbolism. Gnostics honored the feminine nature and, in reflection, Prof. Elaine Pagels has argued that Christian Gnostic women enjoyed a far greater degree of social and ecclesiastical equality than their orthodox sisters. Jesus himself, taught some Gnostics, had prefigured this mystic relationship: His most beloved disciple had been a woman, Mary Magdalene, his consort. The Gospel of Philip relates

*"...the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended... They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us? the Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as I love her?"*

<sup>xix</sup>

The most mysterious and sacred of all Gnostic rituals may have played upon this perception of God as "duality seeking unity." The *Gospel of Philip* (which in its entirety might be read as a commentary on Gnostic ritual) relates that the Lord established five great sacraments or mysteries: "a baptism and a chrism, and a eucharist, and a redemption, and a bridal chamber." <sup>xx</sup>

Whether this ultimate sacrament of the bridal chamber was a ritual enacted by a man and women, an allegorical term for a mystical experience, or a union of both, we do not know. Only hints are given in Gnostic texts about what this sacrament might be:

*Christ came to rectify the separation... and join the two components; and to give life unto those who had died by separation and join them together. Now a woman joins with her husband in the bridal [chamber], and those who have joined in the bridal [chamber] will not reparate.* <sup>xxi</sup>

We are left with our poetic imaginations to consider what this might mean. Orthodox polemicists frequently accused Gnostics of unorthodox sexual behavior. But exactly how these ideas and images played out in human affairs remains historically uncertain.

Classical Christian Gnosticism vanished from the Western world during the fourth and fifth centuries. But the Gnostic world view — with its affirmation of individual revelation granting certain knowledge; comprehension of humankind's true uncreated nature and inherent affinity or even identity with God; and its perception of

duality, or even in an extreme statement, of masculine and feminine elements seeking union within the divine — was not so easily extinguished. Such perceptions continued in various forms to course through Western culture, though, perforce, often in very occult ways. Gnosticism was, and remains today, a living tradition, a tradition eternally reborn in the gnosis kardia of humankind.

Lance S. Owens

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<sup>i</sup>Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York, 1987), p.9. Hereafter cited as GS

<sup>ii</sup>Stephan A. Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung* (Wheaton, Ill., 1982), p.11.

<sup>iii</sup>Layton, p. 220.

<sup>iv</sup>Layton, pp. 217-221.

<sup>v</sup>Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>vi</sup>We should here note, given recent extensive discussions about the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the Nag Hammadi find is entirely separate and different from that much publicized discovery of ancient Jewish texts. Discovered beginning in 1947, two years after the Nag Hammadi texts were found, these records now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls were apparently the possessions of Essene communities residing near Qumran in Palestine at a time around the beginning of the Christian era.

<sup>vii</sup>J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York, 1st ed., 1977; 3rd ed., 1988). Hereafter cited as NHL.

<sup>viii</sup>An excellent summary of these appears in: Stephan Hoeller, "What is a Gnostic?" *Gnosis: A Journal of Western Inner Traditions* 23 (Spring, 1992), pp. 24-27.

<sup>ix</sup>Bloom, p. 49.

<sup>x</sup>Clemens Alexandrinus, *Exerpta ex theodoto* 78.2.

<sup>xi</sup>Pagels, pp. xix-xx.

<sup>xii</sup>Gospel of Thomas, 35.4-7, NHL.

<sup>xiii</sup>Gospel of Thomas, 50.28-30, NHL.

<sup>xiv</sup>Helmut Koester, "Introduction to The Gospel of Thomas", in NHL, p. 124 f..

<sup>xv</sup>Irenaeus, *Adversushaereses*, 1.17.1

<sup>xvi</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.18.1

<sup>xvii</sup>Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XXI, 1. Translation from: Willis Barnstone, ed., *The Other Bible: Jewish Pseudepigrapha, Christian Apocrypha, Gnostic Scripture* (San Francisco, 1987), p. 680.

<sup>xviii</sup>Pagels, p. 49.

<sup>xix</sup>Gospel of Philip, 63.32-64.5, in NHL

<sup>xx</sup>Gospel of Philip, 67.27, in GS.

<sup>xxi</sup>Gospel of Philip, 70.12-20, in GS.