

The Gnostic Gospels Study Guide

The Gnostic Gospels by Elaine Pagels

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Introduction

Elaine Pagels wrote *The Gnostic Gospels* after working as part of an international team dedicated to studying and translating into English the ancient Gnostic books found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. These texts, which date from about A.D. 120 to 150, are considered by many religious experts to be as important a discovery as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Gnostics were early Christians whose beliefs and practices put them at odds with orthodox Christianity. In fact, orthodox Christian church leaders considered the Gnostics to be heretics and made a concerted effort after the second century to destroy Gnostic writings.

Pagels argues in her 1979 book that the primary dispute between the orthodox Christians and the Gnostics was not necessarily theological but centered on the Gnostics' refusal to accept the hierarchy and authority of the church as an institution. Gnostics emphasized an individual's relationship with God and believed that self-knowledge was the key to understanding God. This concept undermined the authority and power of the orthodox church. The Gnostics also rejected the literal death and resurrection of Jesus, through which, Pagels argues, the orthodox church found its authority. As well, the orthodox church embraced nearly anyone who would profess faith in Christ, participate in the church's rituals, and recognize the church's authority; the Gnostics required a member to display signs of spiritual maturity and holiness, and, often, to undergo difficult and time-consuming initiations. According to Pagels, the orthodox church's hierarchical structure and wide-spread acceptance helped it to surpass Gnosticism and remain a powerful force for many centuries.

Pagels uses many passages from the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere as well as the New Testament. Her goal in writing the book, according to the first chapter, was to give the layman an understanding of how many of the controversies underlying early Christianity are still relevant for discussions today.

Author Biography

Elaine Pagels's career as an academic interested in religion has been highlighted by numerous publications and awards. An Episcopalian, Pagels was born on February 13, 1943, in Palo Alto, California, to William McKinley, a research biologist, and Louise Sophia van Druen Hiesey. She received her bachelor's degree in 1964 and a master's degree in 1965, both from Stanford University. Harvard University awarded her a doctorate in 1970. In 1969, Pagels married Heinz Pagels, a theoretical physicist who died nine years later. They had three children together, one of whom died in 1987. In 1995, she married Kent Greenwalt, a law professor.

After receiving her doctorate, Pagels began teaching at Barnard College and Columbia University. Later, she served as a professor of religion and department head at Princeton University, where she is currently the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion. In 1978, she was part of an international team of scholars involved in studying and translating the Nag Hammadi texts, a collection of ancient Gnostic and other documents found in Egypt in 1945, for the publication *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. This work informed the writing of her third book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, an effort to make the complicated religious texts more accessible to a wider audience.

The 1979 publication of *The Gnostic Gospels* received varying responses from critics and scholars. Many objected to her proposition that the main difference between the orthodox Christians and the heretical Gnostics was an argument over the structure of the church. Others have argued that Pagels's picture of Gnostics supporting women's participation in religious activities is far too ideal and is not necessarily supported by the source material she cites. Some have lauded her efforts to present the difficult but important findings in the Nag Hammadi texts to non-academic readers.

In 1980, *The Gnostic Gospels* received the National Book Award. Pagels has received numerous awards for her works, including a MacArthur Prize in 1981. She currently lives in New York City.

Plot Summary

Introduction

Pagels begins her book by describing how, in 1945, an Egyptian peasant, Muhammad 'Ali al- Samman accidentally discovered an earthenware jar containing thirteen papyrus books. These texts were later found to include four gospels that offer accounts of Jesus and his times that are strikingly different from the stories in the New Testament. Included in the discovery at Nag Hammadi are texts purportedly written by Jesus' followers, such as the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Truth*. Experts have estimated that the texts were written between A.D. 120 and 150.

The books express ideas about Christianity that were considered heretical in the middle of the second century. Evidence shows that the texts were hidden, as the possession of heretical books was considered a crime in the second century, and the orthodox authorities destroyed any texts they found.

While the books refer to the Old and New Testaments and include many of the same key figures as the New Testament, the Gnostic Christians (from the Greek term *gnosis*, meaning "knowing") who wrote and followed the teachings in these books believed in a religion dramatically different from the orthodox Christianity and Judaism of that period. For example, orthodox believers understood that "a chasm separates humanity from its creator." Gnostics, on the other hand, believed that "self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical." In another example, the New Testament Jesus speaks of sin and repentance, while the Gnostic Jesus speaks of "illusion and enlightenment," according to Pagels.

Pagels also describes how the rediscovered Gnostic texts were illegally sold to various parties on the black market and how personal rivalries and complicated litigation prevented the general public and scholars from examining their contents. Pagels's stated intention in writing this book is to examine why the Gnostic form of Christianity was discarded in favor of the version that survived.

Chapter 1: The Controversy over Christ's Resurrection: Historical Event or Symbol?

In the first chapter, Pagels examines the story of Christ's resurrection and how the Gnostic and orthodox versions differ. The orthodox Christian authorities adopted the literal view of the resurrection, while the Gnostic texts reveal a more symbolic interpretation, claiming that those who experienced Christ's resurrection did so in a spiritual rather than a physical manner.

Pagels notes, however, that the New Testament includes interpretations of the resurrection similar to the Gnostic view. She argues that one of Jesus' followers, Paul,



experienced the resurrection in this fashion and describes the event as a mystery and "the transformation from physical to spiritual existence." Ultimately, Pagels believes, the "doctrine of body resurrection serves an essential *political* function" in that only those men who claimed to have witnessed Christ's bodily resurrection "exercise exclusive leadership over the churches as the successors of the apostle Peter." Orthodox teaching on the resurrection gave ecclesiastic authority to a limited group of men through whose leadership successive leaders would emerge, limiting the routes and approaches to God.

Chapter 2: "One God, One Bishop": The Politics of Monotheism

In this chapter, Pagels examines how the orthodox Christian doctrine of monotheism set the stage for the adoption of church hierarchy, in which the laity is at the bottom and a "sole leader" rules and makes final judgments.

In the Nag Hammadi books, poet and Gnostic teacher Valentinus wrote of a God of "oneness." Privately, though, Valentinus's followers asserted that God was more than the image of a creator, master, and ruler—he was "understood as the ultimate source of all being," according to Pagels. This concept was heretical because it challenged the governance of the church by "one bishop." Clement, the Bishop of Rome between about A.D. 90 and 100, addressed a crisis of leadership in the Corinthian Christian community by stating that God delegates his authority only to church leaders—bishops, priests, and deacons. Ignatius, a bishop writing a generation later, argued that these three church positions reflected the structure of heaven's divine hierarchy, as well.

Valentinus's Gnostics believed that the God who was master and creator was a lesser "divine being," a demiurge, and that those who worshipped this image of God were mistaken in their devotion. This God was simply one who served "as the instrument of the higher powers," notes Pagels. Through special initiations and a secret sacrament, Gnostics could receive the *gnosis*, or insight, that would free them from the demiurge's power and allow them to worship "the higher powers." Orthodox Christianity had every reason to fear this for, according to Pagels, the *gnosis* "offers nothing less than the theological justification for refusing to obey the bishops and the priests!"

Chapter 3: God the Father/God the Mother

Despite the fact that many religions contemporary with Christianity feature a female divinity, Christianity has none. In the Gnostic texts, however, God is often a "dyad" who displays both male and female characteristics. According to Pagels, the Gnostic texts are diverse in their descriptions of the divine Mother but align along three main lines: first, "the divine Mother is part of the original couple"; second, she is one-third of the Christian trinity as a spirit; and third, she represents wisdom and enlightens humans through her actions.



Pagels wonders why nearly all female imagery had disappeared from Christianity by the end of the second century. She notes that the heretical Gnostics derived positive consequences from their inclusion of the feminine in God. Specifically, the Gnostic sects attracted many women as members, for they often allowed women to participate more directly in teaching, prophesying, and leadership activities than did orthodox Christians. The second century was a period of social change involving gender roles and Christianity's "move up the social scale from lower to middle class." The Gnostic gospels reflect these changes when describing the relationship between Jesus' male and female followers.

Chapter 4: The Passion of Christ and the Persecution of Christians

Early Christians interpreted Christ's death on the cross in a number of different ways. Many Gnostic Christians believed that Christ did not die an actual physical death, as he was not truly a physical (human) being but a purely spiritual being who only appeared to have a physical body. This view is found in one of the Gnostic texts, the *Acts of John*, discovered before the find at Nag Hammadi. Other Gnostics, such as the followers of Valentinus, believed that, because Christ encompassed both humanness and divinity, he suffered and died like a human but "the divine spirit within him could not die." In a sense, Christ transcended death. Orthodox Christianity required that its followers believe that Christ suffered as a human, that his crucifixion was an historical and literal event, and that any other interpretation was heretical.

During the first and second centuries, Roman authorities persecuted and put to death many Christians—both orthodox and Gnostic. Pagels writes that both groups had members who responded variously to the possibility of torture, death, and martyrdom, based on their interpretation of Christ's death and martyrdom. Martyrdom, however, rarely occurred among the Gnostics. Furthermore, Gnostics believed that Christ's crucifixion was "an occasion for discovering the divine within," while orthodox Christians believed that it redeemed humanity from sin. Pagels argues that the orthodox view of martyrdom and of Christ's death prevailed because the news of Christian persecutions served to unify the far-flung members of the orthodoxy and also to impress and ultimately convert many who watched and wondered at the Christians' devotion to Christ. The orthodox teachings of Christ's life and death focused on his body and humanness, and "far more people identified with the orthodox portrait than with the 'bodiless spirit' of Gnostic tradition."

Chapter 5: Whose Church Is the "True Church?"

Some of the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi have revealed that the Gnostics condemned orthodox Christianity. Both sides believed strongly that their church and their approach to spirituality was singularly correct.



The orthodox Christians accepted as members anyone who would profess to a belief in Christ, take baptism, participate in worship, accept the New Testament, and, most importantly, respect the authority of the church's hierarchy. The Gnostics, on the other hand, saw these requirements as invalid. They limited their membership to those who could show evidence of "spiritual maturity, insight, or personal holiness." According to Pagels, the orthodox church—seeking to be more universal, or catholic— "rejected all forms of elitism, attempting to include as many as possible within its embrace." She indicates that their successful efforts at unification and inclusion helped to suppress Gnosticism and maintain an institutional form of Christianity for centuries to come.

Chapter 6: Gnosis: Self-Knowledge as Knowledge of God

Both Gnostic and orthodox Christians used the New Testament's *Gospel of John* as a teaching source, but each interpreted the text very differently. Orthodox Christians found support in *John* for their argument that one can find God and enlightenment only through Jesus and the institution of the church. The Gnostics included *John* along with other Gnostic texts, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Dialogue of the Savior*, to support their view that men and women can find God and direction within themselves.

Gnostics also believed that ignorance was the cause of man's suffering—not sin, as the orthodox Christians believed. If man could incorporate selfknowledge, then suffering would be limited or cease. Pagels notes that in this sense, "the gnostic movement shared certain affinities with contemporary methods of exploring the self through psychotherapeutic techniques." Along those same lines, Gnostics often ridiculed the orthodox assumption that the kingdom of God was an actual place and that its arrival would be an actual historical event. Pagels argues that Gnosticism, though, must be seen as more than a mere rebellion against orthodoxy but instead as "a religious perspective that implicitly opposed the development of the kind of institution that became the early catholic church." Gnosticism was "no match" for the highly organized institution into which the orthodox church matured, "for ideas alone do not make a religion powerful, . . . equally important are social and political structures that identify and unite a people into a common affiliation," Pagels asserts.

Conclusion

Pagels notes that "it is the winners who write history—their way" and that the Nag Hammadi books suggest that had Christianity remained "multiform" and not Catholic, it might have developed very differently or might even have died centuries ago. The Gnostics followed a line of thought that encouraged individual pursuit of religious enlightenment, while the orthodox Christians pursued one that was more communitarian—and this was its strength and reason for success. The Nag Hammadi books highlight the controversies that marked early Christianity and still define much of contemporary religious discussion.



Introduction

Introduction Summary

One of the most important archeological events took place in Upper Egypt in December of 1945 when some Arab peasants found a red, earthenware jar that contained momentous records of Early Christianity. This discovery, made by Muhammed 'Ali al Summan and his brothers, who were digging for sabekh, a soft soil used for fertilizer, would revolutionize scholarship about the teachings of Jesus Christ. When their tools struck the jar, they were not far from the town of Naj Hammadi near a mountain honeycombed with caves. Thus, the find became known as Naj or Nag Hammadi find.

Mohammed 'Ali, a superstitious fellow, at first did not want to break the jar. Perhaps there was a jinn (a powerful, unhappy spirit) inside, protecting the treasure. On the other hand, perhaps there was gold in that red jar. Mohammed 'Ali broke up the jar with a powerful blow of his mattock (knife). Sadly, there was no gold and Ali went home with thirteen, leather-bound papyri, which he indifferently threw on a pile of kindling straw near the oven. The result of this casual act of desecration would lead to the irreparable destruction of a portion of the greatest religious discovery of the century. It also was used as kindling to cook a peasant meal.

The irony of Mohammed 'Ali and his brother's actions is further enhanced by the fact that these brothers, shortly after they found these hidden spiritual records, holy to a number of repressed Christian sects, embarked on a blood feud to avenge the death of their father. They were successful in killing their father's enemy, hacking off his limbs, tearing out and devouring his heart in an orgy of blood lust.

Murder of this sort was not popular with the authorities so Mohammed 'Ali feared an investigation might lead to the pillaging of his humble dwelling. Having been informed by a local history teacher, Raghieb, that these decrepit little things might have some value, he gave one or more to a local priest, al-Qummus Basiliyus. The priest then, at one point, gave one to Raghieb to evaluate its monetary potential.

Apparently the priest was successful in determining some value for the ancient papyri because many of these books found their way into the black market in Cairo, where they were ultimately spotted by officials in the Egyptian government. Ten and half of the scrolls wound up in the Coptic museum in Cairo. But five of these codices did not stay in the museum and were smuggled out of the country.

Much later, Professor Giles Quispel, a religious professor at Utrecht in the Netherlands, managed to persuade the Jung Foundation, an organization founded by the gnostically-inspired psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, to buy the codices. In 1955, disturbed by the absence of a few critical pages, Quispel had flown to Cairo to look at the Coptic Museum's codices, which he promptly photographed and brought back to his hotel to translate. There he read the startling words, "These are the secret words which the



living Jesus spoke, and which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down." Portions of this text, the *Gospel of Thomas*, had been found previously, but Nag Hammadi yielded the whole gospel.

Another Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Phillip* highlights the relationship with Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Sacred doctrines of the church reel before this lost and scorned manuscript as the ancient writer or writers deride the concept of the physical Resurrection and the Virgin birth. Other gospels abounded in the Nag Hammadi collection- *the Apocalypse of Paul*, *the Apocalypse of Paul*, *the Secret Book of James*, *the Gospel of Truth*, *the Gospel to the Egyptians*, a book which focuses on the Great, Invisible Spirit.

The collection was composed of Coptic copies of more ancient manuscripts. They were themselves composed around 1500 years ago, around c. 350-400 BC. Scholars didn't argue extensively about the dates of the Coptic texts. The original were in Greek, as were the few pages we have just cited of the *Gospel of Thomas*, which had been found fifty years before. The dating of Greek originals provoked animated discussion and debate.

The dating of these original Greek gospels by various scholars enhanced the controversy. This was hidden, however, from the public by the shroud of mystery surrounding the first wave of scholarships when the manuscripts were first read in the original Coptic. Quispel himself dated the Greek *Gospel of Thomas* as c. A.D. 140. Still, Harvard professor, Helmut Koester, daringly suggested that these works may have been written c 50-100 A.D., possibly predating the synoptic gospels and the gospel of St. John, a very challenging hypothesis.

Heresy after heresy confounds the alert reader. In the *Testimony of Truth*, the very foundations of the orthodox church are confounded with a benign serpent and a guileful Jehovah. Why is this so terrible, this retelling of the Gnostic Garden of Eden? Because what is there to redeem if Adam and Eve are good and Jehovah an evil personae? In the *Testimony*, the Creator, concerned about Adam and Eve's potentially gain of immortality, cruelly and jealously expels them from Eden. *Thunder, Perfect Mind* has the audacity to present the divine power as concretely feminine. The black Madonna of the Templars- of Isis, of Diana- seems hidden in these gospels along with many other heretical anomalies. No wonder they were destroyed along with the bodies of the errant heretics who dared cherish them.

Who were the culprits, the destroyers of this strange, alternative Christianity? One can speculate about the particulars, but the finger of time points assuredly at people like Bishop Irenaeus whose *The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Knowledge* is a relentless five-volume litany against the Gnostic conspiracy. In fact, he attacks the Nag Hammadi, the *Apocryphon of John*, as one of the errant texts. A half a century later, the orthodox Roman sage, Hyppolytus, wrote *Refutation of All Heresies*, another assault against these Gnostic writers.



We have learned so far that Early Christianity was not so monolithic as the Church and modern history have suggested and that Gnosticism was far more abundant than recognized in the first few centuries after Jesus' death. Then it faded out of sight.

The history of this period was opened a tiny crack many, many centuries later, when a Scottish tourist bought a Coptic codex near Thebes in 1769. But it wasn't till over a century later that James Bruce' find was published, consisting of a remarkable conversation between Jesus and a collection of male and female disciples. Four years after Bruce's find, another manuscript also turned up in Egypt consisting of another "co-ed" discussion of the "mysteries" between Jesus and his disciples. Finally, in 1896, a German Egyptologist found a manuscript that contained the extraordinary *Gospel of Mary* and the *Apocryphon of John*, texts that were later found in the Nag Hammadi collection.

Unlike the Dead Sea scrolls, the Nag Hammadi discovery, of cardinal importance to early Christian history, did not surface to the public immediately. Considering the vastness of the find compared to the celebrated Dead Sea discoveries, this seems, in retrospect, quite unusual. The Dead Sea scrolls, despite their importance, only focused on a small sect of Essenes, whereas the Nag Hammadi papyri cast their shadow over all of Christian history. This new suppression was due to economic, political and social factors outside the scope of religious persecution, the originating source of the texts' obscurity for over 1500 years.

Jean Doresse, a French Egyptologist, first examined the manuscripts in the Coptic Museum two years after their discovery at the request of the Museum Director, Togo Mina. He then reported to Mina that these were, indeed, profoundly important manuscripts. Mina began to make efforts, following Doresse's counsel, to keep the manuscripts in Egypt and attempted to procure a manuscript owned by Albert Eid, a Belgian dealer. But these efforts were partially in vain, owing to the activities of Phocion Tano, an antiquities dealer, who bought them from Bahij Ali, a one-eyed bandit, who had found them in Nag Hammadi. Tano had his own ideas.

When the government eventually tried to procure the manuscripts from Tano, he stated that they were the property of a Miss Dattari, an Italian collector living in Egypt. The Egyptian government nationalized the manuscripts in 1952 and collected them from Miss Dattari, who engaged in a lawsuit to try and recover her lost property. She lost.

Albert Eid, however, was more clever and smuggled the manuscript out of Egypt by hiding it in a large shipment of antiques. He tried, in vain, to sell it and wound up putting it in a safety deposit box in Belgium, where he stayed until his death. During this time, he was indicted for smuggling antiquities by the Egyptian government. But by the time these events had concluded, Eid had died and government had to tax his Estate. During this time, Mrs. Eid, the widow, made attempts to sell the codex. These events triggered the involvement of Professor Giles Quispel, who helped cement the deal with the Jung Foundation, claiming, despite the intrigue of the sale, he had no knowledge of its potential illegality.



The next stage of events, which further hid the manuscripts from the public eye, occurred when the scholars began to work with the manuscripts. Some of this occurred because of the controls and secrecy exercised by Dr. Pahor Labib at the Coptic Museum, who gave limited access to a few scholars, who fiercely guarded their contents. In the 1960's, UNESCO, the United Nations' organization became involved, demanding that the discovery be made public. This resulted in a photographic edition finely reaching the international community. The monopoly was broken.

Elaine Pagels, the author of this book, first heard of Nag Hammadi in 1965. Three years later, her professor received the photocopies from UNESCO. After receiving a professorship from Barnard, she later on, through grants, had the opportunity to work on transcribing some of the original works at the Coptic museum. She attended the First International Conference on Coptic Studies in Cairo. She helped prepare the first complete collection in English, which was published in 1977. Now, not only was the monopoly of certain scholars broken, the findings now leapt out into the world.

The modern investigation of Gnosticism preceded the wonderful discoveries at Nag Hammadi. After some of the earlier findings in the 19th century, the German professor of history, Adolph von Harnack accused the Gnostic theologians of "hellenizing" Christianity. The English Arthur Darby Nock characterized the movement as "Platonism run wild."

But a few decades later, scholarship put on another face. Gnosticism was not really Christian- as scholars like Bousset, Reitzenstein and Friedlander contended. It was Babylonian and Persian, pre-Christian; Iranian and Zoroastrian in origin and even Jewish, they contended respectively. In the thirties, Professor Hans Jonas developed a kind of existential Weltanschauung for the Gnostics, comparing them with Heidegger. Walter Bauer, however, contended that maybe, in fact, the early Church, that is, the Christian church was more diverse than one had originally imagined. Research continues to day hoping to unmask further secrets of the Nag Hammadi find.

Introduction Analysis

Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* is a revolutionary assessment of the realities of Early Christianity based on the findings at Nag Hammadi. It is tale thick with intrigue and daring, filled with elements of black marketeering, treasure hoarding, smuggling and theft, elements of which could even rival portions of Jerry Bruckheimer's *National Treasure*, a fanciful film about a hunt for Masonic treasure, which included mind-boggling documents from the ancient past.

When Professor Giles Quispel read the words, "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down," the opening lines of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the world of conventional Early Christian scholarship began to magically change. True, a few pages of this text had been discovered in the 1890's. But this was different. This was a whole text with certain conventional Jesus quotations but



also with a peculiar phrasing that reminded one of Zen koans, those paradoxical seventeen syllable Japanese poems of concise paradox and lyrical mysticism.

"Split wood, I am there. Lift up a rock, you will find me there," a marvelous little excerpt from this gospel, finds a prominent place in the remarkable 1999 film, *Stigmata*, celebrating a lost gospel, supposedly written by Jesus. The "Split wood" quote comes directly from Thomas, precisely suggesting an alternative form of emphasis than the Pauline doctrine of belief and salvation. God can be known directly, not just through faith.

Another text, the *Gospel of Phillip*, exquisitely brings out another division of the church- the prominence of Mary Magdalene, who has popularly been associated with the *DaVinci Code*, a novelized version of the non-fiction work, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which actually purports a lineage extending from a fleshly union between the Magdalen and Jesus. The *Gospel of Philip* doesn't go quite that far. But it does present the disciples of Jesus imploring the Master to explain why he loves the Magdalene more than they, often kissing her on the mouth. What heresy! What a radical deviation from the unyielding, repressive, male-dominated Church of Peter, with its emphasis on masculine authority and its equal love of non-sexuality!

What then was "Gnosticism?" It was a thread of thinking that wove through these and other lost gospels, whatever their specific doctrines. It was a viewpoint that defined religious consciousness as a form of *gnosis* ("knowing" from the ancient Greek) as opposed to *doxa* (a Greek for belief). This was not mental knowledge, head knowledge, but something else- perhaps more akin to the Socratic "Sophia," sometimes translated as Divine Wisdom. *Gnosis* was direct cognition of reality.

The Gnostic gospels presented a mystical Gospel, not a gospel of sin and redemption; a gospel of introspection and self knowledge rather than one of self-contempt and self-flagellation; a gospel whose goal was divine union not escape from the lurid flames of Hades. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says heretically, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream, which I have measured out." The goal of the apostleship is not discipleship but union with the cosmic stream, the great expanse of consciousness that is the Gnostic god. Are these Gnostics just recapitulating Buddhist thoughts or regurgitating half-digested Hindu influences? Or are they, indeed, recounting their direct experience of some objective, universal sea of light that these Gnostic authors and their forgotten, suppressed or imagined Jesus navigated so expertly, with such poetry?



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Pagels begins by pointing out how the Resurrection may be the key building block of orthodox Christianity. That "Christ rose from the dead" is the essence of the creeds recited by Christians for several thousand years. The Resurrection was a "turning point in world history." The author believes that this cardinal point of dogma sets Christianity apart from other faiths, which deal with cycles of birth and death, not rebirth. She focuses on the physical reality of the event, recounting how Jesus in Luke challenges his disciples to handle him- to show he is flesh and bones. Amazingly, he eats a broiled fish before their very eyes. This was not like Plato's doctrine of the soul's immortality, taught in Greece only five hundred years before. This was real flesh, reconstituted and reborn.

Tertullian, who wrote c. 190 A.D., an exponent of Orthodoxy, points out that "this flesh, suffused with blood, built up with bones, interwoven with nerves, entwined with veins, (a flesh) which... was born, and... dies, undoubtedly human." Jesus mortal flesh was brought back to life, an "absurdity" which demands belief by the true followers of Jesus.

In such a manner, Tertullian rails against the heretics who embraced Jesus but denied his Resurrection. The Gnostics, who he decried, had various alternative versions of what happened to Jesus, interpreting his post-mortem appearances to apparitions that appeared to those in a dream state, in a trance or spiritual illumination, but not to a fully resurrected body.

But although the orthodox canon and the orthodox doctrines are emphatic on the physical Resurrection, there are some puzzling, more amorphous, descriptions of the resurrected Jesus that could raise some questions about the physicality of the event, at least suggesting that the process of restoring the physical form to its original appearance took a matter of time. On two separate occasions, two disciples of Jesus- and the Magdalene herself did not recognize Jesus when he first appeared to them. In the first instance, when the disciples suddenly do recognize Jesus (they are breaking bread with him), he suddenly vanishes. In the second, Jesus orders Mary not to touch him.

Paul's statements about the Resurrection are clear and very physical. Nonetheless, he also says, "I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, no does the perishable (that is, the mortal body) inherit the imperishable." Two separate versions of Paul's experience of Damascus have spectators hearing the voice, but only in one do they see the light. And was the light a vision or the actual, resurrected Jesus?

If there were such anomalies in the orthodox canon, why did the claim of Resurrection develop such importance? Pagels speculates that it became important because the dogma of the physical Resurrection had a function that exceeded religious dogma. It



was useful politically. It consolidated the authority of those who believed literally in the Resurrection from dissenters and heretics. It was a lynchpin of power for the rulership.

Whoever Jesus was, he was now gone from the Earth. Now, dozens of men with their individual interpretations of his teachings vied for power and represented their opponents as frauds. Debated topics were drawn like battle lines and belief became the driving force behind social acceptance, authority and even physical survival. But now, as the power of the orthodox church grew and their beliefs consolidated, there was no more room for theological debate on the subject of authority. Those who claimed Jesus had given the keys to Peter in his post-resurrection state became Christ's only true apostles.

Sometimes beliefs became preeminent that weren't entirely logical. For instance, a tradition developed that Peter was the first to see the resurrected Jesus, despite the Magdalen's first sight of the newly born Jesus in two of the orthodox gospels. This tradition indicated the direction of the Church more than the importance of the doctrine. The Church of Peter, which was partially based on a certain view of Biblical history, was closing its doors to theological alternatives. Certain post-resurrection encounters with Jesus ranked higher than others and those who claimed their pedigrees from those lucky few would rule the restructured orthodox church.

The twelve disciples, according to the orthodox theory, uniquely had the authority to pass on their power. And this power was based on their monopoly on the life and post-resurrection experience of the person of Jesus. After Judas' death, the only real candidate for succession to the twelve was Mathias, who had also walked with Christ. The Catholic Church bases its authority on the shoes of the Fisherman and the Pope today is the only legitimate heir of these humble vestments of Peter.

The Gnostics begged to differ, calling the orthodox view "the faith of fools." The orthodox had made a canon of physical vision. They believed in spiritual vision, as indicated by *the Gospel of Mary*. In *Mary*, Jesus, in a vision, explains to the Magdalene that the Resurrection as an action of "the mind" or "the soul," not a physical reality. In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, Jesus enshrined in a radiant light, explains to Peter that he is an "intellectual spirit."

In an effort to explain the Resurrection, the author of *Treatise on Resurrection* explains it is not so much that the Resurrection is an apparition, but that, in the Buddhist manner, that the world itself is an apparition. *The Gospel of Philip* enjoins its readers to receive the Resurrection in this lifetime, not the next. In the *Gospel of Mary*, Peter and Andrew scorn Mary's experience of Jesus in a vision, denying his continuing presence. In fact, this debate represents a challenge to Peter's authority. Who should hold the reigns to the Church- one who relegates the vision of Jesus to an irretrievable past or one who continues to receive his presence in dreams or apparitions? If Mary's continuing revelation is to be believed, perhaps her authority exceeds Peter.

The Gnostics point to several key passages of the orthodox canon, where Jesus asserts that only the select can truly receive his teaching. In Matthew, he tells the apostles, "To



you it has been given to know the secrets (literally, mysteries) of the Kingdom of Heaven.' In Mark, Jesus indicates the same. Valentinus, a Gnostic teacher who lived c. 140 A.D., believed that these sayings illustrated how the orthodox church fell back on the public teachings and missed the core of Jesus' ministry.

In fact, Paul's statements in his letters indicate his awareness of certain secrets or mysteries and speak of his ascension to "the third heaven," "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know." According to Valentinus, indeed, Paul was a Gnostic, whose teachings he himself was exposed to through Theudus, one of Paul's disciples.

The Gnostic gospels, in certain ways, reverse the telling of the Jesus story, emphasizing the appearance of Jesus in visions, dreams and apparitions, as in the *Apocryphon of John* and the letter of *Peter to Phillip*. In these visions, Jesus would not necessarily appear in normal physical form, but as a light, or a great angel or even as a child.

Irenaeus challenged these Gnostic gospels as being illegitimate, attributed to, but not really written by, the true historical apostles. And many Gnostics would agree that their works were written in the spirit of those deceased apostles, but not by them literally. Irenaeus further accuses them of poetic fantasy and, in effect, of a kind of blasphemy against the true church. He says, "They consider themselves 'mature,' so that no one can be compared to them in the greatness of their *gnosis*, even if you mention Peter or Paul or any other of the apostles."

Still, despite the self-admitted creativity of some Gnostics in composing their works, many claimed they possessed a historically-based, historical tradition that had passed on the true teachings of Jesus. Some implied the true lineage lay with Mary, at least spiritually, as described in *Dialogue of the Savior*; others, like Valentinus, with Paul. *The Secret Book of James* targeted James and Peter as receptors of this special knowledge, over and above the other apostles.

But as Bishop Irenaeus held firm to his doctrinal purity of the physical Resurrection and the succession of Peter, a certain Nag Hammadi text suggests another story. In *The Apocalypse of Peter*, an older Nag Hammadi text, Peter decries those who have developed an "imitation church." The experience of *gnosis*, to Peter, transcended hierarchy and those who reveled in the power of orthodox tradition were victims of their own fantasy of succession.

Chapter 1 - Analysis

In this Chapter, Pagels affirms the reality of the physical Resurrection as a defining element in Church history, not only in the doctrine of the orthodox church, but also in its authority. The Gnostics, who challenged the reality of a physical Resurrection, in general, still believed that Jesus appeared to his disciples after death. They just interpreted the nature of the appearance differently. They believed in a direct apperception of the risen Christ. But it was the Spirit of Christ that the apostles saw, not his true physical form. In the Gnostics' view, visionary experience was considered as a



valid condition of the human experience and a criterion for entering into the true brotherhood of Jesus.

True revelatory experience was also a firm criterion for establishing true authority in the Church. In the *Gospel of Mary*, the Magdalene challenges Peter's stronghold on authority. These types of claims of authority were dangerous to the success of the orthodox church. The uniqueness of the codices found in Nag Hammadi demonstrates how the suppression of these Gnostic claims became one of their most successful historical agendas.

For when the Church went the way of the Reformation, both the Catholic and Protestant world, long relieved of the Gnostic heretics, rallied around certain common parameters of "true faith" – one, the canon of the New Testament; two, the apostolic creed and three, they affirm a certain form of Church organization. But, as Nag Hammadi proves- these three "pillars" of the Early Church were only the foundations of one part of a huge pot of diversity.

This winners of this historical battle are now called orthodox; namely of "right opinion" (from the Greek, ortho meaning right and doxa- meaning opinion). They may have defined themselves as being of "right opinion" but they established themselves ultimately by force and have the blood of the Gnostics on their hands. Around 200 AD, the churches of Rome, closed ranks on other Christian churches, regarding outsiders as heretics

The Gnostics had different theories of hierarchical succession- James, Peter, Mary, among others, vied for the power in the Nag Hammadi text. But we only knew this in the twentieth century. For hundreds of years, these works lumbered in a red jar, consigned to oblivion- only to be awakened by an illiterate peasant, seeking to fertilize his crops. For hundreds of years, the Christian community knew nothing of the Gnostic claims or theories. They had been burned or otherwise destroyed. What was left was buried with that jar or in other places still yet to see the light of day.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

"I believe in One God, Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." This is the Christian creed, which some say was created to exclude Marcion (c. 140 A.D.) and his followers from participating in the orthodox church.

Offended by the brutality of the God of Genesis in the Old Testament and attracted by the compassionate God of the New Testament, Marcion, a Gnostic teacher, concluded that there were actually two different and separate gods. Accordingly, Irenaeus accused Marcion of dualism.

Marcion wasn't alone in his disdain for the God of Genesis. This Gnostic tendency to disparagingly describe the God of Genesis is substantiated by some recently discovered texts- like *Hypostasis of the Archons*, which characterizes the "Creator," called Samael, as a "god of the blind" and places the weight of the Absolute in the true God, the "Entirety." A Nag Hammadi text, *On the Origin of the World*, concurs. Samael (again), the "Creator" does not even precede mankind. In fact, there is an immortal *anthropos* or humanity that precedes him.

The Gnostic teachers tell the story of the Garden of Eden differently than their orthodox brethren. The Gnostic texts often position God as jealous and even evil in punishing Adam and Eve for obtaining spiritual wisdom from the benign serpent. The orthodox foundations of salvation are shaken to the core. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Eve is elevated to be the spiritual mother of Adam.

Were all the Gnostics dualists? Clement of Alexandria speaks of a *monadic gnosis*, promoted very explicitly by the Valentinians. The *Tripartate Tractate*, a Nag Hammadi work, speaks of "a sole Lord and God." A *Valentinian Exposition* speaks of God as "a Monad, and no one was before him." A Valentinian text, the *Interpretation of Knowledge* mirrors the monotheistic *Schma* of Judaism, when it proclaims, "Your Father, who is in Heaven, is One." The *Schma*, often called the Watchword of the Jewish faith, proclaims, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

To Irenaeus, this "monotheism" of the Valentinians was a kind of veil, a hoax that would allow them to participate in the fullness of the orthodox church. He said they were "wolves," masquerading as sheep. *His Refutation and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Gnosis* directly targeted these adversaries. For the Valentinians, despite their monotheism, God was not to be confused with a judge or monarch. He was the "Depth," an ocean to plummeted, a great cosmic being to be experienced. This threatened the orthodox view that was grounded on faith. In the *Gospel of Philip*, the Valentinian author derides shallow orthodox interpretations of profound words like "the Holy Spirit," "life," "light." The Gnostics were experiencers, not believers and were despised by orthodox



theologians like Iraneaus. Gnosticism, based on direct, immediate cognition, on visions and on dreams, challenged their authority.

Authority was now the issue of the day for the orthodox church. This focus was highlighted by a letter attributed to the Bishop of Rome around c. 90-100 A. D. The letter focused on the holy authority of the Church and, created, in official language for the first time, the distinction between laity and priesthood that had begun to define reality in the Roman church. Ignatius of Antioch took the doctrine of the Roman bishop a step further, enshrining the doctrine of priesthood in heavenly sanctioned holiness. "One God, One Bishop" became the doctrine of the Church. By adopting this doctrine, Ignatius helped spur his own death sentence for treason. The Romans believed in divine authority also for their gods.

Implicit in the Valentinian creed was an attenuated form of dualism, for Valentine did distinguish between the creator, architect of this World, also known as the Demiurge, and the actual foundational spirit of the universe, the Father and Mother of All Things. It was to this Father and Mother to which one's real allegiance belonged. Once committed, the candidate undertook the secret sacrament of *apolytrosis* (release). This entailed the officious renunciation of the Demiurge. Only then could the true gnosis with God take place.

Tertullian claimed that Valentinus' theology was driven by jealousy. According to Tertullian, Valentines was scorned as Bishop and voluntarily broke off from the Church. But Pages denies Tertullian's claim about Valentinus. She points out that it was the Church that ultimately expelled the Valentinians who, in fact, strove to maintain their membership in the Church.

The orthodox church grew increasingly suspicious of those among them who claimed the secret *gnosis*. They began to realize that, to their Gnostic brethren, they, the orthodox priesthood, were the usurpers. Iranaeus told of a group that would draw lots that would define the congregants' role in each service- whether priest, bishop or prophet. At the next service, lots would determine their position again. Tertullian noted also, with horror, the way women were so eagerly accepted in all facets of church society. Through their homage to equality, they were overthrowing the divine order, following Simon Magus, the magician, the enemy of Peter. Iraneaus and his colleagues were sharpening their theological weapons. It was still the early days of the Church before Constantine. The weapons that would follow later would be made of steel, not words.

Chapter 2 Analysis

To the Romans, the orthodox Christians were the heretics and were looked at as conspirators and traitors. This view often escalated into unspeakable horror and martyrdom. Yet, the orthodox church, vulnerable and martyred as it was, had no scruples about challenging members of their own flock with the same emotional fury that characterized the Roman oppression of their own hierarchy. In this Chapter, Elaine



Pagels develops the concept of an orthodox monotheism slowly beginning to use its doctrine to consolidate its power through the church hierarchy.

The Gnostics, who claimed their religion was experience-driven, sought an oceanic experience, which somehow led them to a highly democratic version of Christianity. One might be tempted to even use the 1960's phrase, "participatory democracy." This democratization of the Church by the Gnostics was an almost blasphemous slap in the face to their hierarchically-grounded orthodox brethren. Imagine a church service, perhaps even a Catholic or Episcopalian service, where the priests were chosen by lots every week by the laity. To some, even now, this would be an unspeakable affront to the Divine Order.

Irenaeus and Tertullian knew that the Gnostics among them took affront at their theology and their hierarchy. They considered their sacred books to be frauds and their concept of tradition to be demon-driven and Satanic. Still, these men had only a very restricted power. Theology was their major weapon.

And so this clash of religious dogma, surrounding the Resurrection and the "One Bishop" began to define the Early Church, a house divided within itself. It was only later that the power of Orthodoxy could crush the opposition so completely that history itself would become a blank page. Until, of course, Mohammed Ali and his brothers stumbled on the red urn with the strange books.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

According to Pagels, theologians of the Western religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, contend that God is beyond gender. But still, even in the trinity of Christianity, only one of the three principals is genderless (the Holy Spirit). In Judaism, Christianity and Islam's prayer and in worship services, God is supremely masculine in his characteristics. God is "king, lord, master, judge and father." This is in strict contrast to the way that many other religious traditions depict God. In Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, North American Indian, Roman, and East Indian faiths, among others, the feminine principle is a conspicuous component of God's nature, sometimes to the exclusion of the masculine.

In the Gospel of Thomas, Peter tells Mary to leave them because "women are not worthy of life." But Jesus responds by saying, "I myself will lead her, in order to make her male so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." This view, however repugnant, is a heretical twist on the normal patriarchal extremism of the Church. It is not, however, reflective of the theological point of view of all of the Gospels found at Nag Hammadi.

The language of many of the texts, although respecting the feminine principle, are not expressed in pagan terms, but merely in the form of presenting God as a Mother/Father dyad. There are several groups of texts representing variants of these points of view. One focuses on a lineage of secret teachings from James and the Magdalene. Followers of this group prayed, "From Thee, Father and From Thee, Mother..." Among these authors, there is some speculation about the use of the "We" (or, in Hebrew, *eloheem*), when the Biblical text affirms, "Let *us* make man in our image..." Was the plural, "We," used to indicate that God was both Male and Female?

Valentinus, the Gnostic poet and teacher, presents a further breakdown of each part of the Dyad. With the Father, there is the Ineffable, the Depth, and the Primal Father; with the Mother, there is the Grace, the Silence, Womb and the "Mother of All." Marcus the Magician, his follower, received his visions in feminine form and in his Gnostic masses represented her blood as wine. In that ceremony, he proffers the cup and says, "into which Grace may flow."

Gnostic teachers debated whether or not the Dyad was an actual unified monad, consisting of its male/female nature or if the male/female division was purely illusory although descriptively accurate of its nature. Sometimes, they developed a Trinity- like Father, Son and Mother, where the Mother was the Holy Spirit, as in the *Apocryphon of John*. There, John, emotionally distraught over the Crucifixion has a vision of this masculofemine Trinity, which announces itself as the Father/Mother/Son.



In the traditional orthodox canon, the term, "*pneuma*" or "spirit," is neuter. In the Secret Book, the author prefers the term in Hebrew for spirit, "*ruah*," which is feminine. Jesus himself addresses God as "my Mother, the Spirit" in the Gospel to the Hebrews. *In the Gospel of Philip*, the Virgin birth of Jesus is described as the Spirit, characterized as feminine, unifying with the Father in the body of Mary, but, of course, with the co-operation of Joseph. Actually, there are two Virgins, the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Earth,

collaborating in this process. But the author is contemptuous of claims that would raise this event out of the realm of normal, human procreation. It is the mixing of the divine with normal humanity that engenders this interpretation of the birth of Jesus, but not one that defies the laws of Nature.

Pagels speaks of three Gnostic interpretations of the divine- as the Silence, as the Holy Spirit and as Wisdom (Greek, *sophia*; Hebrew, *hokhmah*). In one passage, Valentinus tells the story of how the Feminine Principal, as Wisdom, tries to conceive by itself, but conceives a monstrosity. Only by partnering with the masculine, Demiurge, can she balance her creation. Taking this less abstractly, some Gnostic authors see Sophia as the serpent benevolently having provided the gift of self-awareness, the gift of learning how to seek food and the gift of conception itself (as Adam and Eve conceive their third and fourth children- Seth, a son, and Norea, a daughter. Sophia further assists by saving Adam and Eve's descendents through Her intervention with Noah and his ark.

A newly discovered Nag Hammadi text the *Trimorphic Protennia* celebrates an androgynous nature, "I am androgynous. [I am both Mother and] Father since [I copulate] with myself.... I am the Womb...the All." In *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, the Feminine Principal says, "I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the (mother) and the daughter."

Both Irenaeus and Tertullian, by all accounts, were mortified by the larger role of women in the Gnostic congregations. Irenaeus paints a portrait of Marcus as a seducer of women and speaks with horror of his ceremonies, creating prophetesses on an initiatic assembly line. Tertullian is disgusted by the role of women- in teaching, in healing, in exorcizing and, with even more repulsion, in baptizing. After 200 AD, the Orthodoxy, according to Pagels, had expunged the participation of women in the hierarchy, normal throughout the Early Christian era. This was further exacerbated by the Pauline writings, which negated the role of women. Women's roles are stoutly defended in the *Gospel of Mary* where Mary wins over Peter's objections the right to teach and in the *Pistis Sophia* where Peter is rebuked by Levi for trying to stifle Mary. As almost the sole exponent of women on behalf of the orthodox camp, Clement of Alexander praised the role of women in Biblical and philosophical history. On the other side, there were Gnostic elements that held out for male dominance.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Gnostic systems develop systems utilizing Pythagorean and Platonic language (as in the discussion of monads, dyads, the Demiurge) and are characterized by a diversity of



names to describe the Deity. Systems of this nature have proliferated in recent centuries in modern magical, alchemical and Kaballistic teachings. Many of these have some elements of the Mother/Father dyad in their theory and their practices. Often, authors like Elaine Pagels speculate if the function of these modern systems, which are Western in nature, are merely making an effort to balance the masculine and the feminine as perhaps was attempted in the Gnostic era.

The modern systems all represent attempts to accomplish at least two things simultaneously with the same system. As in the symbol of the Zodiac, used in certain magical systems; as in the order of the metals as used in alchemy and as in Kabalistic Tree of Life's Sephira (or branches, from the Hebrew), these elements can simultaneously denote *centers of consciousness* (like the spinning vortexes of energy called *Chakras*, or wheels, in Sanskrit) or *states of consciousness*. It is not too much of a leap to speculate that some of these Gnostic systems may have the same intent.

For instance, on a more cosmic level, the *Great Announcement*, quoted by Hippolytus in the *Refutations of All Heresies*, creates a divine Creation scenario involving the masculine "mind" (*nous*, Greek) and feminine intelligence (*epinoia*, also Greek). On a microcosmic level, these forces, according to the text, exists within us, generating in a certain sequence an order within, perhaps an order of divine consciousness.

In modern times, we associate the feminine principle with practices like *Wicca* or witchcraft. It is clear, though, that the integration of the feminine and the masculine in portraying the Divine Nature not only is highly resident in most so-called Western occult systems, but was a conscious choice of many of the Gnostic teachers so many years ago.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Most scholars, including the ancient writers, Josephus, a Jewish historian, and Tacitus, the Roman, agree that Jesus Christ was crucified by Pontius Pilate. This was during a tenuous time of Roman/Jewish relations. Not long after his death, a Roman soldier, expressing contempt for the Jews by exposing himself in the Temple courtyard during a Passover feast, triggered a riot, killing 30,000 people. Although not many doubt the basic history of Jesus and the Jews' relationship to the Romans, the meaning of the actual crucifixion itself has created great controversy among scholars and in the world.

In Nag Hammadi's *Apocalypse of Peter*, Peter sees Jesus "glad and laughing above the cross," a depiction that would infuriate the orthodox, who see the crucifixion as a matter demanding extreme suffering. Furthermore, Peter, in this work, distinguishes between the fleshly, suffering Christ and the living Christ, casting a further shadow on the doctrine of physical Resurrection. Again, in the Nag Hammadi text, the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, Jesus is depicted as laughing as the Romans mocked, flogged and crowned surrogates of Jesus. This implies a separation between the physical and spiritual Jesus and casts doubt on the traditional concept of the Atonement. In the Acts of John, a Gnostic work discovered before Nag Hammadi, the image John and James sees seems to fluctuate and to appear differently to each of them, sometimes a child, sometimes a handsome young man and sometimes as balding with a beard. The vision does not blink nor leave footprints. This is not the orthodox version of the Risen Christ.

During the first few centuries of Christianity, the Roman Empire was not sure of how to deal with Christians, in general. Clearly, this relatively new sect followed a man who was accused treason and magic. Clearly, these Christians saw the pagan gods, including the Emperor's divine spirit- as demonic. To the Romans, the Christians were heretics. Clearly, as Christians, they were also part of an illegal organization.

The confusion of how to treat the Christians is demonstrated in correspondence between Secundus Pliny, governor of Bythynia (in Asia Minor) and Emperor Trajan. In addressing Pliny's concerns, Trajan praises his handling of the Christians. Pliny, although confused as his responsibilities, routinely executed those who admitted membership in the Christian faith. However, those who denied their membership would be freed, provided they would give homage to Emperor Trajan's statue with wine and incense.

Justin, a philosopher who had converted to Christianity, wrote to the Emperor Antonius Pius and his philosopher son, Marcus Aurelius, protesting the treatment of a Christian woman. He cited how, after conversion by her teacher, Ptolemy, she put aside her illicit sexual behavior. This was mentioned to illustrate her growth in virtue, following her acceptance of the new faith. Subsequently, the lady had been targeted by her enraged husband after she had left him, following her conversion. When her trial was delayed,



her husband targeted her teacher, Ptolemy. Immediately, the Judge ordered Ptolemy's execution. A bystander named Lucias protested. He pointed out that the husband was an adulterer and fornicator, not Ptolemy and therefore was the one who should trigger the court's interest. Upon hearing this, the judge asked if Lucias were a Christian. When Lucias affirmed he was, he was also put to death. Ultimately, Justin, who wrote the letter to the Emperor, on another occasion, was put to death as well. Before his death, Justin wrote how his conversion was driven by watching the Christian martyrs exhibit bravery and dignity under horrible torture. An orthodox exponent, he railed in his lifetime against his Gnostic brethren for evading the Roman persecution.

Citizens were beheaded immediately, but non-citizens were tortured in public stadiums. Often Roman officials tried to persuade Christians to recant and make the sacrifice. The Romans were stunned by Christian behavior. Polycarb, Bishop Iranaeus's teacher, then in his eighties, refused the sacrifice and was burned alive. In circa 180 A.D., a group of Christians were given an extra month to reconsider their fate if they refused to pay homage to the Roman gods. Thirty days later, they happily went to their death, further confounding their Roman judge.

A young Christian women named Blandina was subject to torture for such a prolonged period that her pagan torturers marveled at her capacity for pain. They ultimately managed to kill her by tossing her into a net and exposing her to a bull.

It was the Orthodoxy, in particular, who extolled martyrdom. As an example, Ignatius of Antioch, a virulent opponent of the Gnostic heretics, plead with his Christian brothers to let him "be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become pure bread of Christ." Ignatius scorned the Gnostics' view that Christ had not truly suffered. He asked... "Why do I long to fight with the wild beasts? In that case, I am dying in vain."

Marcus Aurelius, upon assuming the throne, sneered at the Christians as exhibitionists. And during this time, as they were being killed en masse, there was no end for their opportunities to exercise their public response to torture and humiliation. . As an example, in Iranaeus' home in Lyons, Christians were banned from public places, "assaulted, beaten and stoned." Many ultimately became victims of the stadiums, especially when the Roman state allowed the civil authorities to substitute the torture of prisoners for the lavish athletic spectacles they had to provide each year for the August 1st celebration of the Emperor. So economics drove more Christians to their death.

Irenaues, having seen so much of his brethren die in his hometown, still chose to castigate the Valentinians rather than the townspeople, who collaborated with officials in destroying Christian life. Tertullian suggested that the Gnostics were cowardly attempting to evade death and torture by changing the story of the Passion, which elevated Christ into a god.

Hyppolytus, enemy of the Gnostics, made it clear that only an orthodox theology of the passion would serve martyrdom. He lived and died, under arrest and exiled to Sardinia by his own words. And in one sense, he may have been right. The attitude towards Christ's suffering and death did affect one's view of martyrdom.



Some Gnostics, however, like the author of the *Secret Book of James*, believed in the suffering on the cross and believed that a martyr should endure that suffering in Christ's name. The more traditional view was shared by authors of the *Second Apocalypse of James* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. All three authors were alleged by some to be Gnostic martyrs.

Other Gnostics adopted a rather different view, such as the author of the *Testimony of Truth*, mocks the "empty martyrs" who surrender to "principalities and authorities" because they think it will gain them salvation. The author denies they truly know their destination or the God they worship for "They do not know the Word that gives [life]."

In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the author is distressed how the Orthodox create the Romans as their executioners by holding "fast to the name of a dead man." Salvation from hell is not necessarily the fruit of martyrdom. According to the author, the Gnostic awareness of the Christ is the true fruit of his teachings anyway.

Valentinian texts like *The Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* look at the Passion differently. The crucifixion appears to have a purpose but not precisely the orthodox redemptive function. Instead, Christ hangs on the cross for the sake of awakening the divine gift of *gnosis* in suffering mankind. "I became very small, so that through my humility I might take you up to a great height, whence you had fallen."

Heracleon, a Gnostic teacher, took a mediate position. While far from extolling martyrdom, he allowed it as "necessary" and "reasonable" for a select few. He is far more concerned with a Christian "confessing" the Word within, then confessing to a magistrate in a court of law. He cites Christ's saying, "And when they bring you before men, the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer..."

Pagels thinks that the pro-martyrdom attitude of the Orthodox functioned to consolidate the hierarchy at the end of the second century. Martyrdom, perhaps also attracted members to the Church. As Tertullian says of the spectators to the martyrs' suffering, "... as soon as they come to the truth, they immediately enroll themselves as its disciples."

The Orthodoxy, Pagels concludes, had a vested power in the majority's ability to identify with the hope vested in the physical Resurrection. For unlike the vagaries of *gnosis*, the hope for a future with the same physical body as before, at least was something concretely desirable. The masses could also appreciate and empathize with the sufferings of the physical body endured by Jesus on the cross.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Suffering is the cornerstone of the orthodox belief system. Suffering is the price that Jesus paid to rescue man from the consequence of the fall of Adam. For centuries after centuries, the Christian teaching, before and after the Reformation, was based on belief in Jesus as the Son of God, the third party of the Trinity, who rose from the dead. This was the defining doctrine that set Christianity apart from other religions.



With the Nag Hammadi texts, we find that this view of Christianity, stressing the Passion and atonement, was confined to a certain group of orthodox Christians who won the historical battle to survive. Part of their victory was because, over the centuries, they managed to eliminate their opposition, the Gnostics, first by theological argumentation and later by force. Moreover, in an amazing historical coup, they managed to suppress and destroy dozens, possibly hundreds, of ancient texts to win their battle.

Not that the Orthodox didn't have their share of nobility. During the period of Roman persecution, they showed a great deal of courage in the face of isolation, death and torture. Unlike the Gnostics, who were divided in their attitude towards accepting the Roman demands for libations to Roman gods, the Orthodoxy extolled suffering and martyrdom. This was, no doubt, in part to imitate their version of the historical Jesus.

Unlike within the orthodox community, a great debate rippled through the Gnostic churches. Did Jesus really suffer and was his suffering a form of atonement or an opportunity to overcome death through a unification or at-one-ment with the Supreme Deity? The Gnostics, in general, promoted *gnosis* as a means to enter in the spiritual life, not a belief in or commitment to Jesus as Savior. Martyrdom was, at best, a necessary evil, not an opportunity for a first class ticket to the heavenly kingdom.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

For thousands of years, the orthodox Christians had a monopoly on their doctrines. Most of what we knew of the Gnostics came from their side- from Tertullian, from Hippolytus, from Iranaeus, the vituperative Fathers of the orthodox church. Recently, we are finding that the ancient Gnostic writers also had a measure of vituperation themselves. In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, the author asserts that not only were the Gnostics attacked by pagans but also by those who advanced "the name of Christ," not realizing they were "unknowingly empty...like dumb animals." The *Apocalypse of Peter* echoes this attack. The orthodox church is an imitation church, which unknowingly claims "exclusive legitimacy." The *Testimony of Truth* does not confine its attacks to the Orthodoxy, but also directs its attentions to the deficiencies of supposedly immature Gnostics like Basilides, Simon and Valentinus.

With all this dissension, what kind of criteria would help identify a true Christian?

To the Gnostics, it was spiritual maturity. They would point to the orthodox text, "by their fruits ye shall know them." In the *Gospel of Philip*, the author laughs at the baptism of water as a test of spiritual sufficiency. People go into the water and come back, having received nothing.

The Orthodoxy strove against any kind of subjective criteria. Professing the creed, the baptism of water, attendance on services and obedience to clergy made Christianity an easy reach for the masses and consolidated power in the Church. Ignatius placed the presence of the bishop as the legitimizing force in administering the sacrament, in holding meetings. For Iranaeus, it was the holy canon of the church and the structure of ecclesiastical authority. This was in sharp contrast to the Gnostics, who stressed not so much obedience to authority, but, as stated in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, "the spiritual fellowship with those united in communion." *The Second Treatise of Seth* speaks of "the friendship of friends forever." *Gnosis* united the Gnostic brethren with each other. Brotherhood was paramount, not obedience to the clergy.

The Church of the *Gnostics* was, in general, confined to the *knowers, the experiencers of God*. To them, the body of the orthodox church, the mass of "dumb" believers was outside the true Church.

But when it came to discriminate as to the true Church, irony pervaded even the sanctum of the orthodox. Hippolytus, a great enemy of agnostics, wound up attacking the Bishop of Rome, Callistus. He accused Callistus of criminality, claiming much of the punishment he underwent at the hands of the Romans was not as a Christian martyr but as a common criminal. And so Hippolytus broke away from the group he had given his polemical skills to for so long and with such passion.



Tertullian, in another great historical irony, also turned against the Orthodoxy. He joined the Montanist movement that featured "a new prophecy." He spoke of "a spiritual church for spiritual people, not a church of bishops."

In the *Testimony of Truth*, the Gnostic author offers "sexual abstinence and economic renunciation" as components of the holy life. In this manner, he echoed the sentiments of his orthodox colleagues. But his goals are completely different. He prefers "the baptism of truth" for the baptism of water; the salvation of self-knowledge and direct cognition of God over creeds and psychological Resurrection through the enlightenment of *gnosis* over the physical Resurrection.

Authoritative Teaching rails against external acts of worship as making so-called Christians "worse... than the pagans." At least the Christians had been called, unlike the pagans who could be excused for their ignorance. So what is the argument against the orthodox? First, the refusal to truly seek after God, who could only be found in the fulfillment of *gnosis*. Secondly, the sad self-deception of promoting their own authority, when, in fact, they know nothing. The unknown author would have had nothing but contempt for Tertullian, who railed against the so-called "seeking of truth." Christian truth was simple, monolithic and dogmatic, a matter of fixed belief. So he had nothing but contempt for a congregation of seekers who sought, by their action of seeking, to avoid the firm citadel of Christian confession.

Looking at these Gnostic groups, one thing remains certain. There wasn't really total unanimity between them or among them. For instance, take the Valentinians. Although they took a mediating position vis-à-vis the Christian church, they had internal problems as to how to view the Orthodox. The Eastern Valentinians did not accept the Orthodox as part of the church, for the church, in essence, was purely spiritual. The Western branch, led by Ptolemy and Heracleon, were more accepting.

Heracleon offers an analogy to the Church's relationship to the two groups. The Orthodox were like the Levites, worshipping outside, in the courtyard of the Temple. The Gnostics were like the priesthood, who were permitted inside to worship the Holy of Holies, "where those who are spiritual worship God." Although their worship was different, they were in the same temple. Heracleon saw himself as mediator, as a Pauline presence among the disputatious flock. The orthodox Christians saw him quite differently- as an enemy of the Church.

Chapter 5 Analysis

All religions have their form of mysticism. In Judaism, the Chasidic movement represents a popular movement of a mystical nature. In Islam, Sufi sects abound, the Mevlevi, the Naqshbandi, the Chistri and many others. Islamic culture has produced some greatest poetic renderings of the mystical experience of all times from seers such as Rumi, Hafez, Khayaam and Attar. In Christianity, we hear of mystics such as St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, lone mystics whose lives were buried in the bosom of the Church. One reason that Catholic mysticism is such a lonely affair is the



strict guidelines that have permitted any form of divine union to be present in the Church. These guidelines, with their emphasis on the Passion of Christ, would have excluded participation by most of the Gnostics. It is no wonder that we identify the "stigmata" or marks of the cross, the thorns, and the spear, as the mark of a Christian mystic.

Although there has been a wide historical flowering of mysticism with a Christian direction, such as Rosicrucianism, Templar mysticism, Masonic teachings, hermetic and alchemic systems in the West, these occurred outside the orthodox church. Templars, like the Cathars, were destroyed en masse with the co-operation of the Church. With the Gnostic and Cathar destructions behind them, it is no wonder that Christian mysticism, of a popular nature, seemed to flourish in secret societies, which did not have a public history.

At this very moment, with the popularity of the *Da Vinci Code*, still another version of the secret history of Christianity is professing its challenges to the Resurrection and the Passion. The *Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown by is roughly based on the findings of the researchers of the book, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, as well as other researchers, tracing the lineage of Jesus back to a supposed physical union of Mary Magdalene and Jesus and yielding the bloodline of the Merovingian kings.

Although the Gnostics may have been suppressed, traces of their beliefs never died and still live to make us question and hope to answer Ms. Pagels striking question: Whose Church is the True Church? Or do we just turn away and to accept the orthodox solution, which has been before us, uninterrupted, for almost 1800 years?



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In the traditional *Gospel of John*, Jesus responds to Thomas' passionate request for directions to the next level, the level to which Jesus is about to embark, by telling him, "...no one comes to the Father, but by me." It is partly because of this small phrase that this Gospel, so attractive to the Gnostic, also became a major pillar of the orthodox canon. This saying, suggesting a very strict and narrow road to God, only through Jesus Christ, was an important doctrine, one that underscored the role of belief, rather than *gnosis*, in the Church. This doctrine persists to this day as the very foundations of evangelical belief.

Some of the Gnostic texts provide other answers to the same question- how do we get where Jesus is going? In the *Dialogue of the Savior*, Jesus says, when you get to "the place which you can reach, stand there." In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus speaks of "a light within man" that can light up the whole world."

Irenaeus himself favored *John* as a text, to follow the synoptic Gospels. Pagels points out that the orthodox church's agenda was not so much as to eliminate all controversy or debate from the church, but to bring as much in as possible that would conform to certain basic institutional and doctrinal elements. As an example, she cites the monastic movement, which consisted of many Gnostic-type excesses- of abstinence, celibacy and deprivation in order to obtain a type of ecstatic vision, yet was tolerated by the Church.

Frederik Wiss, a scholar cited by Pagels, speculates that perhaps the Nag Hammadi find is the result of monks at St. Pachomius. At first, their scholarship was fully sanctioned by the Church. At one point, though, they were ordered by Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, to destroy "heretical" texts, along with other monastic brethren. Perhaps the texts of Nag Hammadi, found within eyesight of the ancient monastery, were buried by some monks in Mohammed Ali's little jar, perhaps in defiance of that holy order.

Although the Church's tolerance for certain movements and theologies could wax and wane, the structure of the Church remained intact for hundreds of years, even surviving the harsh winds of the Reformation. For the most parts, the Protestant sects of the Reformation kept to the doctrine of salvation developed as the creed of the early Orthodox Church.

What united the Gnostics, as diverse as they were? Not the views about the Resurrection or the subject of martyrdom or the nature of the Passion not even their resistance to ecclesiastical authority. Rather, Pagels, suggest their belief that the truth and the Path to God lay within man's own mind, within his own nature. There is even some suggestion that man himself creates the world of God, a doctrine perhaps lying on



the radical outskirts of Gnostic belief. In general, God is reached through cognition, not belief.

The orthodox Christian took suffering to be a consequence of disbelief and sin. *John* says, "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the only Son of God." To the Gnostic, suffering is the result of ignorance of Self, of the God within.

The Valentinians speak of Wisdom giving birth to the world out of her own suffering- the earth from her confusion; water from her terror; the air from her grief. In the *Gospel of Truth*, there is a passage called the "nightmare parable" by scholars of this period. It describes how people act "as if they were sunk in sleep and found themselves in disturbing dreams." Without *gnosis*, men are tossed by their whims and fancies. They are rootless and lost in an absurd existence. In *Dialogue of the Savior*, men are enjoined to true knowledge. "If one does not [understand] how the fire came to be, he will burn with it." The greatest knowledge though is the knowledge of god, from within. Where is that? The *Dialogue* answers, "The lamp of the body is the mind." The *Gospel of Truth* talks about the "sons of interior knowledge."

What is the Kingdom of God, then, so often spoken of by Jesus? To the Gnostics, Pagels says, it is a symbol of "transformed consciousness." In the *Gospel of Thomas*, the Kingdom is not an event to come, it is "spread out on the Earth, but men do not see it." This is in marked contrast to the orthodox texts, which continually speak of the Kingdom in prophetic terms.

It was the universality of the *gnosis* that led the Gnostics away from the rigid authority of the Church. According to Hippolytus, Simon Magus said that each man has within him an "infinite power." And how is this to be reached? Some Gnostics, as in *Zostrianos*, the longest Nag Hammadi text, found it in spiritual discipline. The Gnostic teacher in that text goes through a long ascetic discipline to realize the light within. In the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, chanting, prayer and even a spiritual diary are components of the search for the eighth and ninth levels of understanding. The *Allogenes* also describes a sacred chant and a progression of understanding. It has sections on prayer, on spiritual retreat, on instruction, suggesting some kind of a Gnostic protocol for initiation. Still, Pagel contends, most of these techniques were probably kept secret. And although the Gnostic tools and doctrines may have great value, Pagels comments, it is the rituals and authority of the Church that has kept it alive for so many centuries.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Does the statement made by Jesus to Thomas "...no one comes to the Father, but by me," lead to only one, unilateral interpretation? Over the centuries, some have advanced another concept. In confronting God on the holy mountain, Moses asks God his Name, He is told to say that "I am that I am" sent him. Was that peculiar name of God an indication that the road to God led through the surrender of the Little Self, the egoistic individuality of man, to the great Cosmic Self? Was the name of God in the Old



Testament a kind of Kabalistic formula for *gnosis*? Was Jesus saying the same thing—namely, that the path to the Father lay through the individual's experience of Self, of his own "I am."

In *Mark*, it is Peter's fundamental recognition, above his companions, that Jesus is "the Christ" that makes him the foundation of the Church, the historical head of the Church. Yet, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, it is Thomas' view of the Gnostic Christ that prevails. Because of his silent recognition of Jesus, Jesus tells him directly, "I am not your master." Thomas has drunk from the bubbling stream Jesus has measured out. He has recognized himself, in Pagels' terms, as transformed consciousness. In *Thomas the Contender*, Jesus is the "*knowledge of the truth*." In the Testimony of Truth, the follower of Jesus becomes a "disciple of his own mind." The psychoanalysis Carl Jung seems much of the Gnostic work as an allegory for the workings of the Collective Unconscious. Preceding Jung by hundreds of years, the author of the *Gospel of Philip* affirms how Truth did not come to the world naked, but it is garbed in the vestment of symbols.

This concept of salvation vs. *gnosis* leads to a further cleavage in the Orthodox versus Gnostic debate concerning suffering. For the orthodox Christian, there can be no end to suffering without belief in Jesus; for the Gnostic, suffering is the result of ignorance of Self and ignorance of God.



Conclusion

Conclusion Summary

Pagels again points out, in conclusion, that the orthodox victors may have preserved Christianity precisely because of their emphasis on rigid doctrine, rituals and the authority of the Church. Was it the social function of the Church that kept it alive?

After all, the Gnostic path was relatively solitary and very introspective. The Gnostic focus on suffering was primarily emotional or psychological suffering. Even the Valentinians, who led relatively normal lives, eschewing celibacy and abstinence, still regarded *gnosis* as their primary goal. The orthodox Christian's world was a world of daily services, of special masses, of funerals and baptisms, of marriage and christenings. It was a world of social reality.

The dichotomy between Gnostic and orthodox is echoed in the centuries to come. Blake says of these two opposed viewpoints, "Both read the Bible day and night, But thou read'st black where I see white." Both look at each other's Jesus, in Blake's words, as a "false Christ." Dostoevsky's Ivan in the *Brothers Karamazov*, depicts Jesus as being rejected by his own Church. And Nietzsche talks of Jesus as "the only Christian."

Pagels takes great pains to say that her work is not necessarily advocating a return to Gnosticism or that she "sides" with it, but rather that it brings into sharp focus questions of great value. The Christian may ask himself, in a more profound way, what is the true source for the authority of my church? Does it lie within the canon of the church, the history of succession and the rituals that consolidate the teachings of the Church? Or does the inward journey take primacy? Is the Kingdom of God more truly within than without?

Conclusion Analysis

In the last Chapter and in this "Conclusion," Pagels has taken great care to deny her necessary enthusiasm for Gnosticism. She has opted to praise the orthodox church for its role in preserving the Church from the ravages of history.

Yet, in her articulate rendering of the Gnostic history, theology and psychology, one detects a certain sympathy with the fundamental thrust of their doctrine- that God can be found in a transformed consciousness. She, like the reader, must be awed at the extent that the Nag Hammadi find will revise the early history of the Church and amazed at the capacity of one group of men to actually cover up so completely the theology and history of another's.

The Gnostics, through Nag Hammadi, cry out from the ancient dust of their internment, from the bowels of suppressed history. But is there another page in the history of Christianity that is yet to be uncovered? Groups that claim affiliation with the Knights

Templers, with the Freemasons, with the Johannites and with the scholars that claim the existence of the Merovingian dynasty- all claim that the story is not over and the truth of Christianity is still veiled in historical myth, in conspiracy and in ignorance. And, in future years, who else will make that claim? Only time can tell.



Characters

Adam

Adam appears with Eve in the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis, in the Garden of Eden. He also appears in a number of the Nag Hammadi texts, such as the *Testimony of Truth*, as a character in versions of the creation story that vary from the one in Genesis.

al-Qummus Basiliyusi Abd al-Masih

Al-Qummus Basiliyusi Abd al-Masih was a priest who hid some of the Gnostic books for Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman. He gave one to the history teacher Raghib.

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius was emperor of Rome in the second half of the second century. He has been described as an educated and erudite ruler, but Christians were still persecuted under his regime. According to Pagels, he "despised the Christians as morbid and misguided exhibitionists."

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria, a revered orthodox Christian scholar writing in Egypt around the last part of the second century, expressed many sympathies toward women and their role in religion. Some suspected that he was actually a Gnostic initiate.

Pope Clement , I

Clement I was Bishop of Rome and Pope between A.D. 90 and 100. His letters to the Christian community in Corinth offer an early example of a hierarchy forming within the church. In his letters he states that there is a difference between the clergy and the laity and that God delegates authority to "rulers and leaders on earth." He also notes in his letters to the Corinthians that women should "remain in the rule of subjugation" to their husbands.

Constantine

Constantine was the emperor of Rome in the first half of the fourth century. He was converted to orthodox Christianity. Soon, Christianity became the empire's official state religion, and the penalties for heresy "escalated," according to Pagels.



Eve

Eve appears with Adam in the story of the Garden of Eden in the Old Testament's Book of Genesis. She also appears in the varied creation stories in the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts. In Genesis, she is born from the rib of Adam, but in many of the Gnostic texts she is created by God separately from Adam.

George Fox

George Fox founded the Quaker Church in England during the 1600s. Pagels notes that he, like the ancient Christian Gnostics, rejected the church's authority and sought to find his own "inner light."

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud was a physician in Austria who developed the concept of psychoanalysis in the early part of the twentieth century. Pagels mentions him in the book because she sees many correlations between Gnostic efforts to understand the self and Freud's work on the unconscious.

Heracleon

Heracleon was a student of Valentinus in the middle of the second century and became a Gnostic teacher. He believed that Christians could confess their faith in two ways: before a magistrate and in the daily actions of their lives. He taught that Christians could understand their relationship with Jesus and God through self-reflection and did not necessarily need the guidance of the church.

Hippolytus

Hippolytus was a Greek Christian teacher who lived in Rome at the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century. He wrote the *Refutation of All Heresies* in which he explains, among other things, the origin of the universe. Pagels notes that his "zeal for martyrdom . . . was matched by his hatred of heresy." In A.D. 235, the Roman emperor Maximin had him deported to Sardinia, where he died. Hippolytus objected to Callistus being named Pope and Bishop of Rome so much that he perpetrated numerous slanders about his character and separated himself from the church while Callistus was Pope.

Ignatius

Ignatius was the orthodox Bishop of Antioch in Syria until his death in A.D. 110. He declared that because there was only one God in heaven, there could be only one



bishop for each church, and that the bishop stands in the place of God on Earth. Eventually, Roman officials condemned him to death for undermining Rome's civil authority. According to Pagels, he "accepted the death sentence with joyful exaltation" and saw it as a way to imitate his God and Jesus.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp and became the orthodox Bishop of Lyons in France. He wrote a five-volume treatise against Gnosticism and heresy entitled *The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-Called Knowledge*. He believed that there could be no salvation outside the orthodox church and that the church must be united and universal. Irenaeus especially hated those who "outwardly acted like orthodox Christians, but who were privately members of Gnostic circles." He was also particularly alarmed that women were attracted to Gnostic groups and allowed to participate fully. Pagels uses his words extensively throughout her book to underline accepted Christian orthodox beliefs.

Judas Iscariot

Judas Iscariot was one of Jesus' disciples. Iscariot committed suicide after betraying Jesus.

James

James was Jesus' brother and, eventually, a Christian martyr. Some early Christian traditions believed James to be the first witness of Jesus' resurrection. Gnostics refer to James's teachings as critical, and there are two Gnostic books that explore his ideas.

James

James (not Jesus' brother) was one of Jesus' disciples and was executed for his faith.

Jesus

Jesus was a Jewish teacher in Palestine whose teachings launched Christianity. The early orthodox Christians believed that he was an actual historic figure who suffered and died on the cross as a human being and that he literally rose from the dead; many Gnostics believed that his resurrection was more a spiritual event than a literal one.



John

John was one of Jesus' disciples. The Gnostic *Apocryphon of John* purports to reveal Jesus' secret teachings to John.

Justin

Justin was a Platonic philosopher who converted to Christianity in the middle of the second century after witnessing the faith of persecuted Christians. He encouraged the Roman officials to be on guard against those who would use the charge of Christianity against anyone to settle a personal grudge. Eventually, he became a martyr for his faith.

Marcion

Marcion was a Gnostic teacher who concluded that there must be two separate Gods because, as Pagels notes, two different divinities must have created a world in which both suffering and beauty are found. He appointed women as bishops and priests, upsetting the orthodox clergy, who often referred to Gnostics as Marcionites.

Marcus

Marcus was a student of Valentinus and eventually became a Gnostic teacher. Irenaeus accused Marcus of holding meetings without the authority of a church bishop, violating many orthodox strictures, and seducing women so that they would follow him. Marcus's followers prayed to the divine Mother for insight and believed that God was composed of both masculine and feminine aspects.

Martha

Martha and her sister Mary (not Jesus' mother) were contemporaries of Jesus. The Carpocratians, a Gnostic group, claimed to have received secret teachings from Martha and Mary.

Mary

Mary was Jesus' mother. According to the early Christians, Jesus was born to Mary in a virgin birth, although most of the Gnostics ridiculed this notion.



Mary

Mary (not Jesus' mother) and her sister Martha were contemporaries of Jesus. The Carpocratians, a Gnostic group, claimed to have received secret teachings from Mary and Martha.

Mary Magdalen

Mary Magdalen, a contemporary of Jesus, is depicted in the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary* as someone who received visions and insights from Jesus. These visions and insights are said to surpass those of Peter. Some Gnostic traditions recognized Mary Magdalen as an apostle, and the Gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, indicates that she had an intimate relationship with Jesus.

Matthew

Matthew was a disciple of Jesus and was thought by the Gnostics to have received special secret teachings from him.

Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman

In 1945, Egyptian farmer Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman found the thirteen papyrus books that scholars later realized were a collection of primarily Gnostic Christian writings written between A.D. 120 and 150. He uncovered the clay jar containing the books while digging for a type of soft soil used for fertilizing crops and thought that the jars possibly contained gold. When he saw the books, he brought them home to his mother, who burned some of the pages in their oven. A few weeks later, Muhammad 'Ali and his brothers killed the suspected murderer of their father. Before the police came to investigate the crime, Muhammad 'Ali hid the books with a local priest, thinking that they might be valuable.

Nero

Nero was the Roman emperor in the middle of the first century and was infamous for his cruelty. He supposedly started numerous fires around Rome and blamed them on the Christians. He used these fires as an excuse to torture and kill large numbers of Christians in public arenas.

Paul

Paul was a Jew who lived at the time of Jesus and converted to Christianity after Jesus was crucified because of a dramatic incident in which he saw a blinding white light and a vision of Jesus. He preached and taught Christianity. Scholars disagree as to whether



Paul, through his visions and insights, could claim a "secret wisdom" about Jesus and God.

Peter

The New Testament gospels portray Peter as the leader among all the disciples of Jesus. Roman Empire officials eventually arrested Peter and put him to death.

Pontius Pilate

Pontius Pilate is the Roman official who tried Jesus and condemned him to death by crucifixion.

Plotinus

Plotinus was a Platonic philosopher who criticized Gnosticism for having no program to teach enlightenment and self-knowledge.

Polycarp

Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna and the orthodox Christian teacher of Irenaeus. He was burned alive in a public arena for professing Christianity.

Ptolemy

Ptolemy was one of the leading Gnostic teachers. Roman officials put him to death for teaching Christianity.

Gilles Quispel

Gilles Quispel was a professor of religion in the Netherlands. In 1955, after hearing about the find at Nag Hammadi, Quispel flew to Cairo to investigate photocopies of the ancient documents. He also successfully encouraged the Jung Foundation to secure some of the Nag Hammadi texts in the 1950s.

Raghib

Raghib was the Egyptian history teacher who received one of the Nag Hammadi books from the priest who hid them for Muhammad 'Ali. Realizing that they must have some value, Raghib sent the book to a friend in Cairo, who assisted in selling the text on the black market.



Salome

Salome was a contemporary of Jesus. The Gnostic group the Carpocratians claimed to have received secret teachings from her.

Simon Magus

Simon Magus was a Gnostic teacher who became cursed when he supposedly tried to buy the apostle Peter's spiritual power. Pagels describes him as "Peter's archenemy."

Tacitus

Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived in the last half of the first century and into the second century. Pagels refers to his accounts of Nero and the fires that almost destroyed Rome.

Tertullian

Tertullian, a "brilliantly talented writer" and orthodox Christian thinker living in the second century, ridiculed the Gnostics for their elaborate cosmologies. He considered insubordination of the bishops one of the greatest dangers facing the orthodox church. Tertullian rejected the idea of women as priests or bishops and stressed the differences between the clergy and the laity in the church. Tertullian also felt that martyrdom was a critical part of being a Christian. At the end of his life, he broke with the orthodox church and became a Montanist, part of a "radical prophetic circle" that honored two women as its founders, according to Pagels.

Theodotus

Theodotus was a Gnostic teacher in Asia Minor during the middle of the second century. He was a Valentinian Gnostic and believed that his fellow members were part of a chosen race.

Thomas

Thomas was one of Jesus' disciples. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, Thomas indicates that Jesus was not distinct from the rest of humanity and that both "received their being from the same place," according to Pagels. Other Gnostic sources describe Thomas as one of Jesus' disciples who received a special teaching.



Judas Thomasv

Judas Thomas was Jesus' twin brother according to one of the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi. Some sources claim that he wrote the Gnostic text *Thomas the Contender*.

Valentinus

The Egyptian Valentinus was a poet and one of the most respected Gnostic teachers in the second century. He claimed to have received Paul's secret teachings through one of Paul's disciples. The followers of Valentinus, the Valentinians, were a moderate Gnostic group, and some orthodox leaders complained that many Christians could not see the difference between Valentinianism and orthodoxy.



Themes

The Relationship between Gnosticism and Contemporary Religious Issues

Pagels wrote *The Gnostic Gospels* to offer the lay public a glance at a series of ancient religious documents and to make the argument that Gnosticism's demise was due to orthodox Christianity's success in building a universal, catholic community. She also wants her readers to use the discovery of the Gnostic documents as a launching pad for current conversations about Christianity, religious authority, humanity, and spirituality. Because of the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, "all the old questions—the original questions, sharply debated at the beginning of Christianity—are being reopened," Pagels asserts.

Pagels believes that the discovery and analyses of the Nag Hammadi documents should encourage modern men and women to revisit "the controversies that occupied early Christianity." These debates are as alive today as they were in the second century and focus on one question: From where does the church take its authority? The late discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in the twentieth century is a fortunate accident; if they had been found one thousand years earlier, Pagels muses, they may have been destroyed for their heretical statements. Their discovery today allows a large number of people to read them and reconsider the theological and philosophical underpinnings of Gnosticism in a different light.

The Gnostic texts raise other issues related to contemporary life besides simply religious issues, according to Pagels. She argues that psychotherapy shows a strong similarity to the Gnostic view of human nature. Both psychotherapeutic practice and Gnosticism agree, in opposition to orthodox Christianity, "that the psyche bears *within itself* the potential for liberation or destruction," according to Pagels.

Egalitarianism in Early Christianity

Pagels is careful to note that Gnosticism in the second century A.D. incorporated a wide variety of religious and philosophic thinking. However, she does stress that most Gnostics had difficulty with the standard church hierarchy and considered each member of their flock to be as accomplished in spirituality as the next. Theoretically, when Gnostics met, each person had the same amount of authority. Gnostic members drew lots to decide who would hold a position during a meeting, for they believed that "since God directs everything in the universe, the way the lots fell expressed his choice." On the other hand, by the second century, a three-level hierarchy was fairly prominent in most orthodox Christian communities: at the top were bishops, then priests, and finally deacons. The laity existed at the bottom of the church's institutional structure.



When Gnostics drew the lots to see who would hold leadership positions during meetings, they included both men and women, according to Pagels. Not all Gnostic groups included women on an equal footing with men, but many at least considered God to be "a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements," she asserts. She adds that the Nag Hammadi texts include numerous mentions of a "divine Mother" figure in addition to God, but because Gnostics were never unified into one belief and practice, these descriptions of her are diverse. The divine Mother of the texts can be characterized in three primary ways: as the feminine half of God; as the Holy Spirit, creating an alternate trinity of "Father, Mother, and Son"; and as Wisdom, or the creator of the universe who also shapes and manages her creations.

In fact, women were reported to have been especially attracted to Gnostic groups, Pagels notes, possibly because of the Gnostic willingness to incorporate the feminine into the nature of God. A number of Gnostic groups had women serving alongside men as priests, bishops, prophets, healers, and teachers. In its very early years, the orthodox Christian church displayed a similar openness to women, she claims, but from the year A.D. 200, "we have no evidence for women taking prophetic, priestly, and episcopal roles among orthodox churches."

Style

Pagels's writing style is conversational and is directed toward lay readers as opposed to academics. When discussing the purposes and goals of the book, Pagels uses the first person. For example, in the introduction she notes, "I intend here to show how Gnostic forms of Christianity interact with orthodoxy," giving the reader a clear picture of the book's subject. Pagels makes a personal connection with the subject matter, especially in the book's conclusion. This writing technique is rarely found in books on ancient history and religion. She proclaims, "I find the discoveries at Nag Hammadi enormously exciting."

Pagels also uses the first person to express personal feelings about her subject matter specifically and about Christianity in general. In the conclusion, she writes with a strong voice:

I believe that we owe the survival of Christian tradition to the organizational and theological structure that the emerging church developed. Anyone as powerfully attracted to Christianity as I am will regard that as a major achievement.

Pagels provides an authoritative tone to her book by including hundreds of passages from the New Testament and various Gnostic texts. She uses these passages to support her argument delineating the reasons for the failure of Gnosticism and the enduring success of orthodox Christianity.



Historical Context

Christianity in the Second Century

Jerusalem in Palestine served as the originating center of Christianity (until the Roman army destroyed the city around A.D. 70), and the new religion spread from the city to outposts around the Mediterranean region and the rest of the Roman Empire. Up until the second century, its main practitioners were Jews who saw Christianity as part of what God had promised in the Old Testament. By the middle of the second century, orthodox Christian communities began to function under very specific hierarchies with bishops assuming authority.

Gnostic Christians claimed to have secret knowledge about God and spirituality that separated them from orthodox Christians. The philosophical elements in Gnosticism came from a wide array of sources, including Asian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek religions as well as Judaism and Christianity. Orthodox Christians considered Gnostics heretics for a number of reasons, including the Gnostic interpretation of the Bible, the rejection of church hierarchy, and the insistence that knowledge of God can come from within and does not rely upon intervention from the church. Unlike orthodox Christians, Gnostics were very particular about whom they allowed into their groups, requiring that a member show evidence of religious maturity, holiness, and a deep understanding of the secret teachings. There was no central organization for Gnosticism, but teachers such as Valentinus and Marcion distributed its varied teachings, as mentioned in *The Gnostic Gospels*. By the sixth century, Gnosticism had almost disappeared.

Early Christianity appeared in many diverse forms, especially in the second and third centuries, but practicing Christianity of any form in the Roman Empire was illegal and occasionally punished by death. Christians usually met in homes. In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels notes that the decision facing many Christians—whether to admit to being a follower of Jesus and face martyrdom—was one of the issues that divided orthodox Christians from their Gnostic brethren. Few Gnostics went the route of martyrdom and the orthodox Christians saw this as a failure of faith and one more reason to consider them heretics. By the early part of the fourth century, Roman emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity and, by the time of his death in 337, the orthodox Christian church had become the statesupported religion of the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire

Most agree that the origin of the Roman Empire, a powerful political system that lasted nearly five hundred years, can be traced to 27 B.C., when the Roman Senate gave Gaius Octavius the name Augustus and proclaimed him the first Roman Emperor. Through wars and occupations, the empire grew from lands primarily around Italy and the Mediterranean region to a huge territory stretching to Britain, Spain, North Africa,



Romania, Western Asia, and the Middle East. The empire allowed its conquered people to retain most of their varied languages, societies, and religions. In the first and second centuries under Roman rule, Greek art, literature, and philosophy flourished; Babylonian astronomy and astrology thrived; and eventually Christianity became the standard religion after Constantine converted in the early 300s.

Called the "good emperors," the five emperors who ruled from A.D. 98 to 180 governed during what many historians consider the high point of the Roman Empire. This is approximately when experts believe the Nag Hammadi books were written. Trajan (98-117), for example, displayed concern for the poor, and some historians argue that he did not actively seek to persecute Christians. Hadrian (117-138) reformed the empire's civil service and built an impressive system of roads throughout the empire. During this same period, millions of slaves were captured and imprisoned; women had no political rights; a plague killed one-third of the population in the empire's western regions; and Romans executed Christians and pushed the Jews from their land in the Middle East.



Critical Overview

Critical response to Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels* varied from admiration for her writing abilities to accusations that she was inaccurate in numerous aspects of the book. B. Cobbey Crisler's article in *The Christian Science Monitor* calls Pagels's efforts "refreshing" and "a challenge, especially when 'gnosticism' was regarded by its own adherents to be for the initiated only."

Henry Chadwick, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* a decade after the book's publication, compliments Pagels's writing skills, noting that she is a "gifted, clever communicator" and has "an enviable gift for writing easily." He accuses her, though, of lacking "full rigour," particularly when she attempts to show that the Gnostics were sympathetic to women's religious roles and that their exclusion from the orthodoxy deprived Christianity of a particular richness. "But for most readers that will matter little," he laments.

Kathleen McVey, in *Theology Today*, recognizes that Pagels's book is geared toward an audience with minimal knowledge of Gnosticism and early Christianity, but she also complains that *The Gnostic Gospels* is "calculated to appeal to the liberal intellectual Christian who feels personally religious but dislikes 'institutional religion.'" Similar to Chadwick, McVey is not impressed with Pagels's analysis of the ancient sources and believes that she makes mistakes in her interpretations. "I hope that the intellectually curious will refuse to be swept along" by Pagels's arguments, McVey writes, "but will instead investigate the matter for themselves."

Many critics, including McVey and Chadwick, are doubtful that Pagels's work has succeeded in showing Gnostics in a sympathetic light, as they suspect she wishes them to be. Like Raymond E. Brown, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, some reviewers tend to be of two minds about Pagels's work: that she should be praised for introducing a difficult and important topic to average readers, but that her methods are suspect. For example, Brown writes that he can "only applaud Professor Pagels's intention" to explore the evidence about Gnosticism, but he is doubtful of her sincerity. He argues that "about nine-tenths" of the book consists of Pagels's "sympathetic effort to understand the gnostics's side, which will leave the reader cheering for them and wishing that the narrowminded orthodox had not won." Brown goes on to wonder whether she is actually doing a disservice to the reader not fully apprised of the history of early Christianity.

Hyam Maccoby also sees both promise and failure in Pagels's writing. In his *Commentary* article, Maccoby notes that Pagels's book "is to be commended" for bringing an important subject to light for the general audience in "a readable fashion," but ultimately he evaluates the work as "disappointing." According to Maccoby, Pagels barely scratches the surface of Gnosticism and presents an idealized picture of Gnostics. "The darker side of gnosticism is hardly touched on" in Pagels's book, as she skips over "their obsession with the evil of this world, their hatred of sex, their elitism,



[and] their mystagogic pretension," he claims. Maccoby does praise her descriptions of the Valentinians, one of the more moderate Gnostic groups.

Pagels's handling of the relationship between women and Gnosticism is a popular area of examination for critics. Chadwick mentions in his article that she must "exert gentle pressure on the surviving evidence" that could point to Gnostic acceptance of women in teaching and priestly roles, as he believes that the Nag Hammadi material "offers only a few grains of encouragement to liberated women readers." Maccoby asserts that Pagels has exaggerated "the feminism of the gnostics," for their feminism, he believes, often "amounted to a contempt for sex and a desire to reduce all mankind to neuter beings."

Pagels's critics are varied in their response to her book, but one complaint rises to the surface of almost every review: the inaccurate nature of the book's title. Chadwick notes that modern scholars consider only four of the fifty-two Nag Hammadi documents to be gospels, and Brown asserts that not all of the Nag Hammadi texts are even considered Gnostic in their content. "The title of her book thus might lead us to anticipate new knowledge about the historical Jesus," but that is not the case, according to Brown. Crisler suggests that the title might have been "an editorial choice" designed for "market appeal."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines how Pagels, throughout her book, shifts her descriptions of Gnosticism based on images of elitism.

Numerous critics have noted that throughout Pagels's book *The Gnostic Gospels* her intentions are clear that the reader should come away with a primarily positive impression of how Gnostic Christianity actively involved women in important religious roles and stood as a bulwark against a rising tide of conventional thought as embodied in orthodox Christianity. Hyman Maccoby, writing in *Commentary*, argues that Pagels wishes for her readers to appreciate Gnostics for "the spontaneity and inwardness of their religious approach," as well as for their "profeminist" leanings. Writing for *The New York Times Book Review*, Raymond E. Brown charges Pagels with leading a rooting section for the Gnostics with futile wishes that "the narrow-minded orthodox had not won." Indeed, Pagels focuses on drawing flattering comparisons between the Gnostic philosophy and modern lines of thought found in democracy, liberalism, libertarianism, anti-authoritarianism, and even psychotherapy—schools of thought with which her modern readers can identify.

Pagels seems entranced by a romanticized yet almost modern image of the Gnostics throughout most of the book. For example, an entire chapter is devoted to examining how Gnostics incorporated women in their religious images and activities, and Pagels lauds the Gnostics for their independence in such matters. The chapter on the question of Christ's resurrection presents the Gnostics as flexible in their beliefs versus the rigid literalists on the orthodox side. Her book appears to speed along with hardly a disapproving word about Gnostic theology and practice until the book's conclusion, where she offers a surprise disclaimer of her enthusiasm for Gnosticism: "That I have devoted so much of this discussion to gnosticism . . . does not mean that I advocate going back to gnosticism—much less that I 'side with it' against orthodox Christianity." This idea is repeated and expanded upon when, after nearly two hundred pages of casting Gnosticism in a relatively positive light, Pagels states that modern men and women "owe the survival of the Christian tradition" to the successes of the early orthodox church over the Gnostic church and that "anyone as powerfully attracted to Christianity as I am will regard that as a major achievement." This is a woman who cheers Gnosticism throughout her book but then is obviously happy that Gnosticism did not win its struggle against orthodoxy. Is there something that Pagels does object to in Gnosticism? The answer is yes, and it appears when Pagels wrestles with the Gnostics' choice of elitism over egalitarianism.

While many critics simply assume that Pagels has made some kind of huge mistake in her book, failing to think clearly about the message she is sending until the book's conclusion, there may be a kinder way to interpret her exploration of Gnosticism. A close reading will show that the book's tone abruptly shifts close to the end, beginning with the fifth chapter, entitled *Whose Church Is the "True Church?"* When Pagels sees the Gnostics in the unflattering light of elitism, she begins to see that, as Kathleen



McVey writes in *Theology Today*, "heresy and feminism were not such good bedfellows."

Before that chapter, Pagels is involved in presenting Gnosticism primarily in a positive light as compared with orthodox Christianity, especially on the subject of women. For example, in the chapter about the role of the feminine in the Gnostic church, Pagels observes that, in contrast to many Gnostic groups, the second century orthodox Christians turned their backs on years of "remarkable openness toward women" when they denied women any level of equality with men. Tertullian, a well-regarded orthodox thinker writing in the second century, exclaimed in horror when he discovered that Gnostics were allowing women to participate fully in the church's rituals. Pagels quotes him as condemning "these heretical women . . . [who] are bold enough to teach, to engage in argument, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures, . . . even to baptize!"

On the other hand, many (but not all) Christian Gnostics, according to Pagels, considered women as men's equals and allowed them to function even as bishops. This decision may have come from two sources, one theological and another more practical. On the theological side, a variously described but consistently present "divine Mother" appears throughout the Nag Hammadi texts. Pagels characterizes these feminine depictions of God in three ways. First, the divine Mother is "part of the original couple," making God a being with both a feminine and masculine side. "This may be akin to the Eastern view of *yin* and *yang* but remains alien to orthodox Judaism and Christianity," she suggests. The second Gnostic characterization of the divine Mother as the "Holy Spirit" creates an alternate version of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Mother. Pagels notes that the *Secret Book*, one of the texts found at Nag Hammadi, uses the feminine Hebrew term, *ruah*, to describe the Holy Spirit. The third characterization of the divine Mother is that of Wisdom, considered a feminine power among many Gnostics, according to Pagels. Followers of the two Gnostic teachers Valentinus and Marcus prayed to the divine Mother as "incorruptible Wisdom" and through her received *gnosis*, the essential knowledge required to become a full-fledged Gnostic.

The more practical reason for the Gnostics' acceptance of women may be no more than their keen understanding that, if they conferred responsibilities upon women and included feminine images in their worship, this might attract more women to their form of Christianity. Pagels does not directly claim this, but she is at least aware of this possible marketing strategy when she asks "whether gnostic Christians derive any practical, social consequences from their conception of God—and of humanity—in terms that included the feminine element." Her answer to this question is emphatically affirmative.

By bringing up the possibility that Gnostics who approved of women in the church might have been acting out of less than theologically pure motives, Pagels offers one of the first of a few, but significant, criticisms of Gnosticism in the book before the fifth chapter. The reader knows that Pagels is looking at the Gnostics through a less rosecolored lens immediately in the opening of the fifth chapter, when she notes that not only did the orthodox Christians condemn the Gnostics, but the Gnostics were equally adept at condemning orthodoxy. "Christian tradition has preserved and revered orthodox writings that denounce the gnostics," she writes. "Now, for the first time, certain texts discovered



at Nag Hammadi reveal the other side of the coin: how gnostics denounced the orthodox." In the next sentence, she uses the rather strong verb "polemicize" when noting that the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, one of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts, refers to the orthodox Christians as "pagans" and "dumb animals."

Earlier in the book, Pagels had given an almost modern cast to Gnosticism, asserting in the first chapter, for example, that just as today's humans take for granted that science and technology will advance, "so the gnostics anticipated that the present and the future would yield a continual increase in knowledge." She describes them with a democratic tone, noting how they involved women and questioned authority. For second-century inhabitants, Pagels paints them as holding remarkably modern concepts. It is in the fifth chapter that the issue of elitism among the Gnostics arises—and this is where Pagels finds that she cannot continue to support the Gnostics as completely as before. By the time she finishes with chapter five, Pagels is using the anti-democratic and anti-feminist term "elitism" when describing Gnosticism. For example, she notes that the Gnostics will not accept just anyone into their fold; they evaluated "each candidate on the basis of spiritual maturity, insight, or personal holiness." Not only would this be cumbersome, but it would also make the Gnostics subject to uncomfortable charges of exclusiveness, as Pagels does when she notes that, as opposed to the Gnostic church, the orthodox church rejected "religious elitism . . . [and] welcomed members from every social class, every racial or cultural origin, whether educated or illiterate," as long as they respected the church's hierarchical authority.

Ironically enough, Gnostics, who rejected church hierarchy, were themselves involved in a rating system by which some people might be ranked higher than others based on their "holiness." According to Pagels, Gnostic teachers themselves often worried that having a group in which membership was based on spiritual maturity and the presence of something as ethereal as "spiritual gifts" would promote a sense of elitism. The author of the Nag Hammadi text *Interpretation of the Knowledge* expresses concerns that those who had attained enlightenment would separate themselves from "ignorant," less skilled Christians and might even hesitate to share insights and knowledge.

The charge of elitism sticks especially well to the Gnostics as the book continues into the sixth chapter and conclusion. In the sixth chapter, Pagels stresses Gnosticism's reliance on self-knowledge as the way to know God and on "one's inner capacity to find one's own direction." The more radical Gnostics rejected any effort to institutionalize religious experience, while the moderate Gnostics, such as the followers of Valentinus, regarded the church "more as an instrument of their own self-discovery," according to Pagels.

Many Gnostics relied on courses of spiritual discipline that were not necessarily written down and that set them apart from other Gnostics as well as orthodox Christians. Pagels notes that a course of discipline that disconnected the practitioner from earthly wants, promoting visions, ascetic practices, and meditation "would appeal only to a few."



Ultimately, as Pagels points out, Gnosticism's elitism and focus on an individual's advancement was its undoing, "for ideas alone do not make a religion powerful." Because religions are made up of people, "social and political structures that identify and unite people into a common affiliation" are terribly important, she proclaims at the end of her book. Orthodox Christians created communities that marked major collective events, such as "the sharing of food, in the eucharist; sexuality, in marriage; childbirth, in baptism; sickness, in anointment; and death, in funerals." The Nag Hammadi *Gospel of Thomas* notes that a Gnostic sees himself as "one out of a thousand; two out of ten thousand"—certainly a startling image of isolation. According to Pagels, early orthodox Christians saw themselves as "one member of the common human family, and as one member of a universal church." It is at exactly that point of distinction— isolation versus community—that Pagels loses her enthusiasm for the Gnostics. While she finds much in Gnosticism to admire, this fault of elitism, she seems to say, outweighs all the weaknesses of orthodox Christianity combined and means that the death of Gnosticism need not be mourned.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on *The Gnostic Gospels*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.



Critical Essay #2

Kattelman is a freelance writer and holds a Ph.D. in theatre from Ohio State University. In this essay, Kattelman discusses how the orthodox Christian Church was misguided in its effort to suppress the information contained in the Gnostic gospels.

Throughout the ages, the suppression of information has been directly connected to the exertion of power and control over the masses. Those who wish to remain in power often feel the need to suppress or destroy certain texts, and the ideas contained therein, so that their authority will not be challenged or called into question. In her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels explores how the early Christian Church was guilty of this practice in its effort to establish itself as the single source for the true word of God.

The early Church fathers were particularly threatened by the concepts contained in what we now refer to as the "Gnostic gospels" because they placed the search for enlightenment directly into the hands of each individual, thus eliminating the need for a church hierarchy to deliver and interpret God's word. This was a very dangerous idea to the bishops and priests of the orthodox Church. If Christians could take control of their own search for knowledge, the church fathers would no longer be needed. The "uneducated" masses would be able to find their own answers and the institution of the Church would no longer hold the position of ultimate authority in religious matters. The Gnostic ideas were a particular threat because they opened up the possibility that the Church, as an institution, may become obsolete. As Kurt Rudolph notes in his book *Gnosis*, "A close relationship to God became possible even for the 'man in the street' without priestly mediation, without temple, without cultic practices." That priests and bishops would no longer be needed was a radical and extremely threatening proposition to those who made their livelihood administering God's word; thus, they found it necessary to refute and suppress the gospels that did not support their unique *right* to lead others to religious salvation. This is not to suggest that the early bishops and priests were deliberately evil men who were manipulating information for purely political means. Although this may have been the case with certain individuals, most leaders of the church had a real concern for the religious salvation of the people. As Pagels notes, "Their religious views, certainly, bore political implications; yet, at the same time, the practice they urged was based on their beliefs about God."

Unfortunately, the suppression of alternate ideas by the Church fathers serves to throw suspicion upon the very religious tradition they represent. In retrospect, their actions may be interpreted as misguided, or even foolish, and can serve to call their doctrine into question. The error of their ways can be especially striking when seen from modern times with the additional knowledge and information we have gained through the centuries. Throughout history, one can point to numerous examples of Church repression that we now recognize as wrong. Take the case of Galileo, for example. In the seventeenth century, Galileo was suspected of heresy by the Church because he reported moons orbiting Jupiter, which he had observed through a telescope he made. From this, he concluded that the earth was not the center of the universe. According to church officials, the idea that the earth was not the center of the universe was a



challenge to God's will. They believed that because God had made man in his own image, surely he would have placed his great creation at the center of all things. Here, one can see how religious dogma served to control not only the philosophical issues of the time, but the role and scope of scientific study, as well. In her book *Seeing Through the Visible World*, June Singer discusses this notion, and its relation to Galileo's case:

Institutionalized religion in the Western world had maintained its strong role in determining what was and was not the province of science, and had exercised its authority to decide what would be legitimate subjects for scientific exploration. The basis for this domination of science by the Church was its view of God's design and purpose for the world, for nature, and for human beings. Thus, areas approved for investigation included both the material and the spiritual domains, with the reservation that the Church must approve the findings wherever they occurred. Galileo challenged that authority.

Galileo was forced to renounce his theories, was put under house arrest for life, and was *forbidden to publish*. The challenge his theories presented to Church authority could not be tolerated. Of course, we now know that Galileo's theories were correct. He was able to add to mankind's knowledge because he chose to look beyond the blindly accepted "facts" and to seek out his own answers. This shows how scientific study can also be related to the ideas of the Gnostics, in that it places the responsibility for finding the correct answers upon the individual. In a somewhat ironic twist, Galileo was finally pardoned by the pope in 1992.

There are many who believe that to gain the greatest understanding of a subject, one should consider the greatest amount of information possible. Most scientists have long held this belief, and the idea can be found in many stories and philosophies throughout the world. Take, for example, the famous Indian folk tale of the blind men and the elephant. As the story goes, there are six blind men who are totally unfamiliar with the creature that we know as an elephant. Each man examines a different part of the elephant and then describes the creature from his own experience. The first man touched the elephant's side and declared, "The elephant is smooth and solid like a wall." The second man examines the trunk and comes to the conclusion that the elephant is like a snake. The third feels only the elephant's tusk and decides that the elephant is sharp and pointy, like a spear. The fourth, upon examining the elephant's leg, describes him as "A strong, sturdy tree." The fifth feels the elephant's ear and notes that he is like a fan. The sixth grabs hold of the elephant's tail and proclaims "The elephant is nothing more than a piece of old rope!" Because the men do not explore all of the available information, they come to very different, and incorrect, conclusions. Finally, they are told of their error, and the wisest of them says, "To learn the truth, we must put all the parts together." This is a very Gnostic concept. The Gnostics believed that all subjects, including religion, should be open to unlimited personal investigation. Their religious views held that, to learn the ultimate truth, one should gather as much information as possible, and then *put it all together*.

Those who follow the orthodox view of religion refute the idea that more information is always better. They believe that one should not try to gather additional information in



order to understand the teachings of Jesus, but should accept and follow them as they are currently presented in the Bible. There is no need for additional study, or additional texts, because all needed information has already been made available. As Rudolph notes, the orthodox view runs thus, "Since Jesus Christ we have no need of any further investigation, nor of any research since the Gospel has been proclaimed." What this view fails to acknowledge, however, is that additional information, even contradictory or ambiguous information, does not necessarily preclude individuals from reaching the same conclusions as they might have without this information. It is somewhat curious that the Church fathers did not have enough faith in their own reasoning to assume that, if presented with additional ideas and material, others would still come to the same conclusion. After all, the Church fathers were familiar with the ideas of the Gnostics, and yet, that did not serve to change their own faith in any significant way. They were able to sift through the available information and decide for themselves what to believe. Because they were desperate to remain in power, however, the bishops and priests of the time were unwilling to trust that ambiguous teachings would still lead the populace to accept their authority as the true road to ultimate salvation. It is interesting that the early orthodox Church refused to embrace any kind of ambiguity. Even Jesus himself spoke in parables, although it increased the possibility that some may misunderstand his meaning. He had faith, however, that his followers would be able to properly interpret the stories and figure out the correct message. He was not afraid of contradiction and ambiguity. This task of "figuring out the answers" is something that Gnostics wholeheartedly embrace. In fact, Pagels notes, "The gnostic understands Christ's message not as offering a set of answers, but as encouragement to engage in a process of searching." According to the Gnostics, enlightenment is not reached by learning and accepting preordained facts, it comes from personal study and discovery.

The censorship of information is a "red flag." It signals the fact that something is being hidden and that people are being controlled and manipulated. Censorship is always a political act, no matter whether it is exercised by a religious or a secular institution. The main reason for the censorship of the Gnostic gospels was due to a power struggle in the fledgling Christian Church and the need of the orthodox sect to assert its ultimate authority. In *Hidden Gospels*, Philip Jenkins describes the struggle: "As orthodoxy won, it proceeded to destroy its rivals and their texts, in which the vindictive mainstream church found so many subversive ideas." Fortunately, the Church was not successful in destroying all of the "radical" and "heretical" texts, although it almost succeeded. As Pagels notes, "The efforts of the majority to destroy every trace of heretical 'blasphemy' proved so successful that, until the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, nearly all our information concerning alternative forms of early Christianity came from the massive orthodox attacks upon them." Luckily, however, sometimes the best efforts to censor material are thwarted, and the information eventually comes out. The texts discovered at Nag Hammadi are a priceless find. They have opened up a whole new perspective on the Christian religion and, contrary to what some orthodox Christians may claim, serve to strengthen the religion through their additional information. It is fortunate that the keeper of these documents had the foresight to hide them—otherwise they would have been destroyed and thus never available to us. It makes one wonder what other insightful texts have been lost to us forever due to the threatening ideas they contained.

Source: Beth Kattelman, Critical Essay on *The Gnostic Gospels*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Witcover is an editor and writer whose fiction and critical essays appear regularly in magazines and online. In the following essay, Witcover draws historical parallels between the Nag Hammadi texts and Pagels's book on the subject.

Imagine a number of books written about a recent historical event by a number of different authors who are drawing on the same material . . . but who approach their subject in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons. Imagine also that these books are published at approximately the same time and receive a mixed reception from readers and critics, so that initially no one book or group of books stands above the rest in the public estimation. Now fastforward a hundred years. The majority of the books are out of print, all-but forgotten, while those that remain have attained the stature of classics and are not only widely read but part of the curriculum in every school. How to explain this phenomenon?

One possibility is that the surviving books are simply the best of the lot. But let's assume that when you examine the works in question, you find that many of them are, in their own ways, as well-written and engaging as those now viewed as classics. In that case, it might occur to you that the reasons for the success of some of the books and the failure of others over time must be looked for as much beyond the books as within them. This seems unobjectionable enough, and under normal circumstances it would be, but imagine finally that the works in question are religious in nature and deal with controversial topics that once had—and perhaps continue to have—immense constructive and destructive potential both for society as a whole and for any number of persons within it. Then, suddenly, the seemingly academic question of which books succeed and which fail can become, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Such was the case with the books that are the subject of Pagels's influential—and controversial—1979 popular study, winner of both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

In 1945, a treasure trove of ancient Gnostic manuscripts was discovered near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi by a group of local men on their way to commit a murder. That circumstance, worthy of an Indiana Jones movie, was historically apt, for when the manuscripts were hidden over 1,500 years earlier, murder was also in the air. Historians conjecture that in the fourth century A.D., Christian monks from a nearby monastery hid the manuscripts to escape being branded as heretics, and very possibly put to death, by authorities of the Catholic Church, which had forbidden possession of the books in question. Although the Church had become the official religion of the Roman Empire by that time, thanks to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (c. 312 A.D.), many threats to its power remained. Some lay outside the Church, in competing religions old and new. Others lay closer, even within the bosom of the Church itself, and these threats, from the perspective of the ruling bishops, were the gravest of all because they did not come from men and women who worshipped strange gods but instead from people who claimed to be Christians themselves. These



Christians, called Gnostics, saw the life and message of Jesus Christ in terms radically different from the official, orthodox beliefs reflected in the New Testament and the apostolic creed. The early Church fathers were determined to root out the Gnostics and their doctrines at all costs. They succeeded so well that until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, only a handful of Gnostic manuscripts were known to exist, and much of the information available to scholars about the Gnostics and their beliefs came from their orthodox adversaries. As Pagels notes in *The Gnostic Gospels*, "It is the winners who write history— their way."

Yet Pagels wrote her book during a period when many of history's traditional winners were coming under fresh scrutiny by skeptical scholars like herself. *The Gnostic Gospels* is concerned with history's losers; as such, although it looks back nearly 2,000 years, it is a revisionist project very much of its own time. In an article about Pagels in *Publishers Weekly*, critic Jenny Schuessler alludes to this perspective: "Reading her books, one senses a tremendous respect for the power of personal religious experience and an abiding sympathy for dissident movements in conflict with an uncomprehending or hostile culture."

The 1970s was an era of profound social, religious, and academic change as many of the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s were carried forward within the system instead of outside it. By 1979, the year *The Gnostic Gospels* appeared, feminism was midway through its so-called Second Wave and seemed to be riding high. The Equal Rights Amendment was just three states short of ratification (the ERA never gained those votes, failing in 1982). The Supreme Court had legalized abortion in America by its 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Title IX had gone into effect in 1976, and positive results were already being seen in the number of women enrolling in college and participating in school athletics programs. The main branches of the Lutheran Church in the United States had voted to ordain women in 1970; the first woman rabbi, a follower of Reform Judaism, was ordained in 1972; and in 1976, the Episcopal Church voted to allow the ordination of women as bishops and priests—a step the Catholic Church continues to reject on theological grounds, as it has done for nearly 2,000 years.

The effects of the feminist movement in the academic arena were equally profound. Scholars of both sexes looked at traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences from the perspective of the voiceless, the powerless, the oppressed, and the forgotten. This revisionist approach also led to the creation of new disciplines such as Women's Studies. It is important to keep this historical background in mind as we consider Pagels's thesis in *The Gnostic Gospels* and evaluate the critical reception that thesis received.

Armed with the evidence unearthed at Nag Hammadi, Pagels sets out in *The Gnostic Gospels* to open "a startlingly new perspective on the origins of Christianity." She quotes from the recovered texts to set out the Gnostic positions on some of the central tenets of Christian faith: whether Jesus was human or divine; the meaning of his death and resurrection; the proper roles of the sexes in Christian worship; the composition of the Trinity; even the fundamental nature of God and His creation. By comparing the beliefs of the Gnostics to those of their orthodox opponents, Pagels intends to show that "these



religious debates . . . simultaneously bear social and political implications that are crucial to the development of Christianity as an institutional religion." In her insistence on treating ostensibly abstruse theological arguments as both influences on, and reflections of, the social and political ferment of the first centuries of the Christian era, Pagels extends the classic feminist slogan, "The personal is the political," into the religious sphere. Her aim in doing so is more than simply to deepen our knowledge of the ancient world by adding hitherto suppressed voices to the chorus of history; for Pagels, any re-visioning of the past compels a similar re-visioning of the present, which is its inheritor: "The Nag Hammadi sources . . . challenge us to reinterpret history—and to re-evaluate the present situation."

Who were the Gnostics, what did they believe, and why did Orthodox Christians find those beliefs so repugnant theologically and dangerous politically that they proclaimed them heresy and zealously persecuted all who professed them—even as they themselves were being persecuted and put to death by the pagan Roman Empire? The word "gnostic" comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." As employed here, *gnosis* should not be understood as rational or physical knowledge derived through the mind or the senses. Rather, it is a form of knowledge that transcends such categories, an *inner*, spiritually-based knowing that is subjective yet superior to all other sources of knowledge because it is connected directly to the ordering power of the universe, or God. The goal of Gnosticism is to find God by means of an inward-directed spiritual journey leading through and beyond the self. As Pagels points out, "to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of *gnosis*." Gnosticism predates Christianity and draws from a wide variety of sources and traditions, including non-Western ones, and even Christian Gnostics were far from constituting a single group or movement; on the contrary, Pagels demonstrates that the very inwardness and personal subjectivity of the Gnostic quest for religious truth precluded the kind of organizational and theological homogeneity available to the orthodox.

The Gnostic elevation of personal spiritual experience above the teachings of the Church would have been enough by itself to earn the enmity of the orthodox. But Christian Gnostics went further. They allowed women a role equal to that of men in their churches and ceremonies. They believed that Jesus had imparted secret wisdom to some apostles and disciples and not others, and that Mary Magdalen had been especially favored. Many believed that the God of the Old Testament, whom they called the *Demiurge*, was an inferior, deluded god, a bungler responsible for a flawed creation. The *Demiurge* had forgotten the true God, whose representative was Jesus. Thus, orthodox Christians, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was also the God of the New and that Jesus was His son, were themselves deluded and were worshipping a false god. This secret Gnostic wisdom was recorded in gospels that the orthodox refused to admit as genuine. The Nag Hammadi texts contained a number of these gospels, including the most famous, the *Gospel of Thomas*. They are Pagels's primary sources in *The Gnostic Gospels*, and she draws from them to demonstrate convincingly not just that the triumph of orthodox Christianity was due to the "organizational and theological structure that the emerging church developed" in its struggle to survive the oppressions of the Roman state while simultaneously crushing



the threat of Gnosticism, but that this triumph resulted in "the impoverishment of Christian tradition."

Although Pagels explicitly states that she is not advocating a return to Gnosticism, but merely attempting to clarify "the major issues in the whole debate, then and now," some critics and reviewers found her denial unconvincing. Yet in attacking Pagels's presumed political biases and agendas, critics often betrayed their own. Writing in *The Christian Science Monitor*, B. Cobbey Crisler found Pagels's book one-sided:

Her picture of the Gnostics is considerably idealized in the interests of recommending them to modern libertarians and anti-authoritarians. The darker side of the Gnostics is hardly touched on: their obsession with the evil of this world, their hatred of sex, their elitism, their mystagogic pretension, and at times their 'transcendence' of ordinary morality.

Kathleen McVey, writing in *Theology Today*, sounded a similar note:

Elaine Pagels' *Gnostic Gospels* is a book calculated to appeal to the liberal intellectual Christian who feels personally religious but who dislikes "institutional religion." In the midst of the resurgence of antiscientific and anti-intellectual currents throughout American Christianity, Pagels has presented us with an appealing portrayal of the Gnostic Christians as a beleaguered minority of creative persons kept ignorant of their rightful historical role by a well-organized but ignorant lot of literalists.

Indeed, it is impossible to read some of the criticism directed toward *The Gnostic Gospels* without feeling that there is an animus behind it that is actually directed past the book and its author, toward larger cultural and societal forces, such as feminism, which the critics, for whatever reasons, perceive as threatening. A personal, somewhat supercilious tone frequently creeps in, as in this condescending, patronizingly paternalistic put-down by Hyam Maccoby, writing in the magazine *Commentary*: "Professor Pagels, unfortunately, has a tedious bee in her bonnet. This is her idea that doctrinal differences between orthodox and Gnostic Christians can often be explained in terms of 'politics.'"

In his 1992 book, *The American Religion*, noted literary critic Harold Bloom writes of the emergence of a peculiarly American religion— indeed, an entire culture—that is, as he puts it, "irretrievably Gnostic." Interestingly, in his *Commentary* review written some twelve years earlier, Hyam Maccoby agreed, going so far as to state that Gnosticism "may even be regarded as the form of religion most congenial to the modern world." Nor was Pagels herself blind to the many parallels between the tumultuous early centuries of the Christian era and the final decades of the twentieth century, observing in *The Gnostic Gospels* that "an increasing number of people today" share the impetus that led the Gnostics on their inner search for self-knowledge and knowledge of God. The fact that her book, the source of some controversy and critical animus upon its publication, has gone on to find wide acceptance as a classic of feminist scholarship and revisionist history could be interpreted as evidence that Bloom is right, and that, in writing about

these forgotten religious texts from the distant past, Pagels was also writing not just about the world of 1979 but about the world of the future as well.

Source: Paul Witcover, Critical Essay on *The Gnostic Gospels*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Pagels argues in *The Gnostic Gospels* that one of the primary reasons orthodox Christianity survived and flourished over the past two thousand years is because of its structure and organization. Write a short essay explaining why you agree or disagree with her thesis, using specific examples from her book and other sources. If you disagree with her argument, offer your own reason why you think Gnostic Christianity did not last more than a few hundred years and orthodox Christianity did.

Investigate the rulers of the Roman Empire during the second century. What were their policies about Christians? Did they actively seek out Christians to persecute or did they tolerate Christians? Create a timeline of that century showing all of the emperors and add pertinent information about how they dealt with Christians.

Pagels discusses how women were involved in Christianity during the second century. Research the role of women in all aspects of life during the Roman Empire, focusing on the first through third centuries. What kinds of rights did women have? Were their roles and rights dependent upon other factors, such as social or economic status? Write a short essay on women during this period in the Roman Empire, touching on whether their social and political status was related to their religious activities.

Different groups of people living under the Roman Empire practiced many religions other than Judaism and Christianity. Investigate the religions practiced during this period (aside from Judaism and Christianity) and create a chart that answers a few basic questions about each religion, such as: What were the major defining features of this religion? What were the primary rites or rituals of this religion? Who could and could not participate? How many people were members of this religion; i.e., was it common or uncommon? Was it legal to practice this religion during the Roman Empire? Do people still practice this religion today?

Compare and Contrast

Second Century A.D.: The Roman Empire includes much of Europe and other territories and has successfully assimilated people from numerous cultures, many of which have a their own local language.

Today: There are numerous different languages spoken in Europe, and most students are taught at least one foreign language in addition to their national language. The European Union is in the process of regulating trade by introducing the euro as the standard form of currency for most of Europe.

Second Century A.D.: While aristocratic women in the Roman Empire can influence politics through their husbands or sons, they cannot hold political office.

Today: Women hold many positions in the parliaments of Europe. For example, Italy's ministers for Equal Opportunity and Education are both women, and 18 percent of the members of the British Parliament are women.

Second Century A.D.: Christians in the Roman Empire are a small minority, persecuted and tortured for refusing to participate in the religious practices of Roman pantheistic religions and the emperor cult.

Today: Christianity is the most common religion in Europe, with about 80 percent of the continent's population calling themselves Christians.

Second Century A.D.: Christians bury their dead in underground catacombs decorated with beautiful wall paintings. These are also places of refuge for persecuted Christians, as the Roman Empire considered burial places sacrosanct by law.

Today: Catacombs all over Europe attract hundreds of thousands of tourists every year. Videotape tours of various catacombs are also available.

What Do I Read Next?

Richard Elliott Friedman's 1997 account in *Who Wrote the Bible?* focuses on the first five Old Testament books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Friedman looks to biblical and archaeological evidence to discover who authored these immensely important documents and offers the reader a sense of what life was like thousands of years ago.

The six volumes of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* were originally published between 1776 and 1788. In this historical standard, author Edward Gibbon writes a literary-style narrative that begins with the second century A.D. and ends with the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.

The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins, by Burton L. Mack, is a collection of Jesus' sayings, proverbs, aphorisms, and parables—what many believe to be a "lost gospel" written by one or more of his followers. Mack's 1994 book is his own translation of this material that portrays Jesus to be more of a Jewish Socrates than a Christ.

Elaine Pagels's most recent book *The Origin of Satan: The New Testament Origins of Christianity's Demonization of Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* (1995) offers an interpretation of Satan's historical role in Christianity. The book looks at the dark side of Christianity and how irrational hatreds continue to plague Christians and non-Christians.

Robert A. Segal has pulled together a collection of C. G. Jung's essays on Gnosticism in *The Gnostic Jung* (1992). The book also contains essays by two well-known writers on Jungian psychology and Gnosticism, Victor White and Gilles Quispel. Segal's introduction covers Jung's interest in Gnosticism and why Jung often characterized himself as a modern-day Gnostic.

Further Study

Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Ballantine Books, 1994.

Karen Armstrong, a former nun and British journalist, looks at the history of monotheism over the past 4,000 years. In addition to discussing the intertwined histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Armstrong also touches on mysticism, the philosophy of religion, and the death of God.

Meyer, Melvin, trans., *The Secret Teachings of Jesus: Four Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books, 1986.

Melvin Meyer offers a new English translation of four early Christian Gnostic texts for general readers.

Robinson, James E., ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Harper, 1990.

This is the English translation of the Nag Hammadi texts found in Egypt in 1945, containing numerous Gnostic and other religious documents. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* was first published in 1977, and this publication is the revised 1988 edition with introductions to each document.

Scarre, Christopher, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, Penguin, 1995.

This atlas includes graphics and text supplying an overview of Roman history beginning with the eighth century B.C. through the rise of Christianity.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on



□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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