

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## Gnostics: Did You Know?

Interesting and Little Known Facts about the Gnostics

Compiled by Jennifer Trafton and Rebecca Colossanov

**LOST AND FOUND.** In 2006, a published English translation and a documentary by the National Geographic Society sparked a storm of public interest in the "lost *Gospel of Judas*." The third- or fourth-century Coptic manuscript (probably translated from a second-century Greek text) was discovered in the 1970s, but it suffered three decades of mishandling, robbery, deterioration, and neglect before scholars could finally study, authenticate, and translate it. This may be the same *Gospel of Judas* mentioned by the Christian writer Irenaeus in his book *Against Heresies* in AD. 180. The *Gospel of Judas* is the latest in a number of Gnostic manuscript discoveries in the last century, the most important of which was a collection of over 40 Gnostic writings in caves near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. (See *The Secret Is Out*)

**PRO-JUDAS. NOT PRO-JEWISH.** Because the *Gospel of Judas* portrays Judas as a hero rather than a villain, some people have given the impression that it is somehow an antidote to historic Christian anti-Semitism. This response is ironic, since much of early Gnosticism was deeply critical of traditional Judaism. Gnostics believed that there were actually two Gods, and that the God of the Jews was an evil or ignorant creator who deceived people. One Gnostic text calls the Hebrew patriarchs a "joke"! Because of this, Gnostics interpreted the Jewish Scriptures in ways that seem very strange to us. For example, many believed that Eve was right to take the serpent's advice and eat from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. (See *In the Know*)

**GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME GOSPEL.** Although the Gnostics had their own "gospels," such as the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Truth*, they were all written later than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and none of them were ever considered Scripture *by* the majority of Christians. (See *No Other Gospel*) They are not gospels in the same sense as the canonical gospels: They do not chronicle the life of Jesus and are not primarily concerned with historical events but with spiritual advice, revelations, and explanations of the Gnostic view of the cosmos.

**THE DIVINE SPARK.** Gnostics believed they were the elect, spiritual ones who alone had the "seed" of the divine trapped inside their earthly bodies. Salvation for them meant escape from the material world. Some Gnostics believed in reincarnation for imperfect souls who might have another opportunity in this world for salvation through knowledge.

**NO SECRETS.** The Gnostics sometimes claimed that secret truth had been handed down by one apostle to a select group of insiders. But Christian opponents like Irenaeus argued that the true church represented the teaching of all of the apostles passed on in many locations. This was the original meaning of the word "catholic" as we say it in the Apostles' Creed: according to the whole church. (See *Taught by the Apostles*)

**MARY, MARY.** Since the 19th century, Gnostic writings have been popular among some feminists because they seem to give greater prominence to women than the traditional Christian church has done. The *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* depict Mary Magdalene as uniquely loved by Jesus and the recipient of special revelation.

**LIVING REMNANTS.** Did any of the early Gnostic sects survive? Perhaps—in the tradition of the

Mandaeans, a small religious group in southern Iraq and Iran. There is some reason to believe that they originated in first-century Palestine as a Jewish Gnostic sect. They speak a dialect of Aramaic, and the ritual of baptism plays a central role in their religion. In their view, John the Baptist was the true prophet, but Jesus was a liar and a sorcerer. The Mandaeans have been the focus of international news recently ("Save the Gnostics" said the **New York Times**) because their community has been an unintended casualty of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Most of Iraq's Mandaeans have had to flee to other parts of the world.

**STILL POPULAR.** There are people who call themselves "Gnostics" today, such as the **Ecclesia Gnostica** (Gnostic Church) in Los Angeles, but their religion is an amalgam of beliefs rather than a true reflection of ancient Gnosticism. More common in today's culture are the movements and books that show the continuing influence of Gnostic ideas—such as Scientology, the New Age, novels like **The Da Vinci Code**, and even some aspects of psychotherapy.

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## It Only Takes a Spark (to keep a heresy going)

Jennifer Trafton

**When I was in college**, members of a certain scholarship program were required to attend a one-day "leadership development" seminar, in which we took a personality test and discussed—well, ourselves, mostly. Then the seminar leader made us all lie on the floor for 20 minutes in silence so that we could get in touch with the "divine spark" within us. I used the time to pray. The girl next to me fell asleep (apparently she was sparkless).

This was not a religion class. The leader had conducted these seminars for people in companies all over the country. We were impressionable (okay, a bit skeptical) 19-year-olds at a secular university. And we were being fed Gnosticism. Lesson of the day: ancient heresies are alive and well in modern culture.

Gone are the days when the average Christian could get away with not knowing what the Rule of Faith was or how the biblical canon developed. In recent years, the early church has become the subject of public debate and an enormous amount of confusion. The tempest over *The Da Vinci Code* has finally begun to subside, but the speculations and questions it raised among readers still reverberate.

In 2006, a National Geographic Society documentary introduced Americans to the newly translated *Gospel of Judas*, painting it as a juicy subversive text and even bringing up Hitler's praise of the Oberammergau Passion Play to show where the Christian vilification of Judas led. (If only the church had listened to those tolerant, enlightened Gnostics!) Bookstores teem with authors claiming to overturn the traditional understanding of Jesus or the accepted history of the earliest church. Many current books portray Gnosticism as a vital, exciting, alternative Christianity suppressed by a power-hungry Catholic hierarchy.

And it's not just a matter of bestselling novels or passing academic trends. As Philip Jenkins describes in this issue, Gnostic ideas have never really died—they have cropped up in medieval heretical movements, 19th-century poetry, modern psychology, and esoteric groups like Scientology. In today's atmosphere of pick-and-choose personal religion, Gnostic-like beliefs meld easily with popular "spirituality." After all, it's nice to hear that I'm *special*, that God is *inside me*, that the key to ultimate life is to *know who I really am*. Sin? Beside the point.

When the *Gospel of Judas* controversy broke, New Testament scholar Darrell Bock wrote in an article for *Christianity Today*, "It is important to appreciate that many people asking questions or embracing the recent materials have no background in church history, so they have no way of assessing what is being said. Their questions are quite sincere in light of the repeated message they are hearing that the new materials should change our view of history."

I knew there was a good reason why *Christian History & Biography* exists.

In this issue, we want to lay out the basic facts that will help you evaluate and respond to the dizzying array of wild theories and "evidence" in bookstores and on TV, and also to recognize Gnostic ideas when you encounter them in alternative spiritualities and popular culture. Hint: "divine spark" spells trouble.

***Next issue: How the Holy Land Became Holy***

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## Defining the Faith

Gnosticism emerged during a time when Christians faced an identity crisis.

Everett Ferguson

**A Christian walking the streets of Ephesus** in the mid-second century would have seen signs of material splendor and prosperity—the recently built Library of Celsus at the entrance to the commercial agora, the temples and other building projects initiated under the emperor Hadrian, the Roman remodeling of the great theater, the new Vedius Gymnasium and baths, and other amenities of a flourishing urban life. He could have conversed about current philosophical interests—Middle Platonic metaphysics, Stoic ethics, Aristotelian science. He may have been aware of flourishing literary activity from authors such as the clever satirist Lucian of Samosata.

The religious, political, economic, and cultural life of Ephesus was dominated by the cult of Artemis, whose magnificent temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World, though other cults flourished as well. The association of the imperial cult with Artemis testified to the pervasive presence of the Roman Empire.

During the second century, the empire reached its height geographically (under Emperor Trajan) and economically (under Hadrian and the Antonines). Underneath this success, however, were reasons for uneasiness. Emperor Marcus Aurelius struggled mightily against barbarians on the frontiers. Books about history by Pausanias, Plutarch, Athenaeus, and others reflected a general feeling that the older customs were better and that something had been lost in the new Roman age. Movements such as the Neopythagoreans and Christian Encratites took a negative view of the material world. The question of the origin of evil troubled many, especially Jews and Christians who believed in a good Creator. Undercurrents pulled toward another, spiritual world.

Christians shared in this vibrant, troubled culture. They wrestled with how to relate to the overarching Roman political, economic, and religious authority. They moved up the economic ladder. They engaged the philosophical issues of the time, produced their own abundant literature, and clarified doctrines. Above all, now that the last of the apostles had died, Christians wrestled with their own identity: Who are we? What does it really mean to be a "Christian"?

### A persecuted race

Christians faced this question within the context of uneasy relations with the Roman state. Religious acts permeated all aspects of society—athletics, dramatic entertainments, commercial activities, civil oaths, and political functions. The Roman government co-opted local cults as part of the state religion. The ultimate test of political loyalty was sacrifice to the "divine spirit" of the emperor, represented by his statues and pictures.

Some Christians reasoned that bodily actions are irrelevant to spirituality and therefore going through the motions of sacrifice does not matter morally. Most Christians, however, rejected pagan religions as idolatrous and refused to participate in acts of sacrifice, even in civil and social contexts. This refusal led to sporadic outbursts of persecution. Those who steadfastly resisted any temptation to compromise were considered the heroes of the church. Some who volunteered for martyrdom yielded under pressure, so the church discouraged voluntary martyrdom and held up the example of Polycarp of Smyrna as martyrdom "according to the Gospel." Polycarp withdrew to a country house until the authorities arrested

him. His confession is classic: "For 86 years I have served Christ; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Persecutions underlined the communal aspect of Christian faith. Narratives of the martyrs' trials recorded that, when commanded to sacrifice to the gods in obedience to the emperor, the martyrs repeatedly confessed, "I am a Christian." Christians were condemned "for the name," that is, for being members of the group that was considered subversive. The apologist Justin Martyr argued that this legal practice was unfair: People should be punished for their own crimes, not for those suspected of an entire group.

But such experiences strengthened the consciousness of a special identity. In their written defenses of their faith, Christians spoke of themselves as a "third [or fourth] race." The *Epistle to Diognetus* says of Christians, "They neither esteem those to be gods that are reckoned such by the Greeks [Romans included] nor hold to the superstition of the Jews." And Aristides' Apology states, "There are four classes of people in this world: Barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and Christians."

## Jesus and Moses

Rome recognized Jews as an ancient people, and as long as Christians were considered a branch of Judaism they enjoyed a certain protection. But this situation was ambiguous, for there was popular animosity against Jews, especially after the Jewish revolts against Rome (the latest in the 130s during the reign of Hadrian). Also, Jews removed the legal cover provided by Judaism by excluding Christians from their communities.

Relations between Jews and Christians were ambivalent. Jesus and his earliest disciples were Jews, but by the second century the churches were composed mostly of Gentiles. The question of Christianity's relation to Judaism and the Old Testament was a very important part of Christians' efforts to define their identity.

The longest surviving second-century work illustrating this Christian-Jewish discussion is Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Trypho, a Jew, was puzzled that Christians "professing to be pious" did not "alter [their] mode of living from that of the Gentiles" or observe "festivals or sabbaths and do not have the rite of circumcision" required in the Law of Moses. Justin distinguished between the Old and the New Covenants. The Old Covenant given to Moses was valid for Jews, but the prophets predicted a "new law" and "eternal covenant" in Christ that is for all peoples.

Others expressed different answers to the question of Christianity's relation to Judaism. Some (for example the *Epistle of Barnabas*) allegorized the Law, so that its "spiritual" meaning belonged to Christians. Some, like the heretic Marcion, wanted to sever Christians' association with Judaism and rejected the Old Testament altogether (an approach his opponent Tertullian said "gnawed the Gospels to pieces"). The Gnostic teacher Ptolemy made distinctions in the Law between what was fulfilled by Christ, what was abrogated by him, and what was transformed by him.

But most Christians held fast to their Jewish heritage. It showed that Christianity was not something novel (a major pagan criticism against Christians) but had ancient historic roots—an important fact in a culture that valued the oldest as the best and the truest. Jewish Christians maintained various aspects of Judaism along with their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Gentile Christians, although they did not observe the ceremonial aspects of the Law, continued to consider the Jewish Bible in its Greek translation as their Scripture.

Christians' use of some Jewish books not found in the Hebrew Bible (still included in Roman Catholic editions today) made the limits of the Old Testament canon a concern already in the second century. Melito, the bishop of Sardis, journeyed to Palestine to learn the exact contents of the "Old Covenant" from Jews there, and he recorded a list agreeing with the Jewish and Protestant Bibles except for the

absence of Esther.

## **Doctrinal dilemmas**

An essential aspect of the question "Who are we?" was the related question "What do we believe?" As Christians prayed, sang, taught the gospel message to converts, and confessed their faith in baptism, they were forced to think deeply about how Jesus related to God and what the limits of true doctrine were.

For one thing, there was considerable pressure within the culture to modify or compromise monotheism. Christians shared with Judaism the belief in the one Creator God, and the philosophers of that age were moving towards an affirmation of one Supreme Principle. But the currents of thought also found a place for multiple subordinate divine beings, much like multiple governors under one supreme emperor. Even some forms of Judaism reflected this trend.

Also, those who affirmed Jesus as Savior interpreted the nature of salvation differently. Was he a teacher who brought enlightenment or a healer who brought wholeness? A spirit who brought eternal life or a real human being who brought a resurrection of the body? A conqueror who brought deliverance from fate or demons, or a redeemer who brought forgiveness of sins?

Those we now call "Gnostics," who combined elements of Greek philosophy, Jewish speculation, and Christian belief, had various perspectives on these and other options—as did the Gnostics' orthodox opponents. Moreover, the church's proclamations about Jesus—his virgin birth, ministry of teaching and healing, crucifixion, bodily resurrection, and future coming as a judge—were questioned by those who discounted the historicity of these events.

A diversity of viewpoints emerged, expressed in various forms of Christianity. Common to nearly all Christian groups, as far as we can tell, was baptism in the name of Jesus Christ as the central act of initiation and a weekly communion on the first day of the week.

## **Holding on to the apostles**

In the midst of all of these challenges from within and without, Christians tried to maintain a sense of unity and theological clarity by strengthening the organization of local communities and keeping up constant communication between these communities. As the second century went on, there were fewer and fewer "apostles, prophets, and teachers"—as well as fewer evangelists who circulated among the churches and carried the gospel to new areas—and more bishops (or pastors) who emerged out of the council of elders as the main leaders of the Christians in each city. "Let the congregation be wherever the bishop is," wrote Ignatius of Antioch, concerned that doctrinal divisions would tear apart local churches.

Not all Christians liked the growing organizational structures. The Montanist movement revived the practice of prophecy in reaction against what they perceived to be the church's weakening separation from the surrounding world and against the greater authority exercised by bishops. Teachers continued to function, sometimes only loosely connected with the local leadership. Some, like Justin Martyr, were orthodox, while others, like the Gnostics, promoted their own esoteric speculations and formed independent schools of thought.

At the core of all these developments was one central concern: Where can we find the apostolic message? Christians clung to the apostles' teaching about Jesus as the standard for determining what was true and what was not. Those who taught a different message from what the local bishop and elders taught appealed to a secret tradition going back to one of the apostles. Over against this claim to "secret teaching," their opponents pointed to the public succession of leaders and teaching in the established churches. The theologian Tertullian summarized this argument: Truth is what "the churches received

from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God," and all other doctrine is false. Such concerns led to a "canon" of accepted apostolic writings (the New Testament), a summary of the message these writings contained (the Rule of Faith), a confession of faith (the Apostles' Creed), and an apostolic succession of bishops and elders.

At the intersection of Greek philosophy, Jewish interpretation of Scripture, and Christian affirmations of a divine Redeemer who appeared on earth, various teachers formulated their views of material and spiritual reality and sought a firm place to stand. Except for physical persecution, the situation of Christianity in the West today has a lot in common with the second century. And on the worldwide scene, the question "What is a Christian?" remains a central issue.

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## In the Know

The Gnostics believed that knowledge is the key to salvation--for a select few.

David M. Scholer

**Amazing but true: Second-century Gnosticism** is a "big ticket" item today. TV feature programs, popular books and novels, and a flood of scholarly literature are discussing it. The recent unveiling of the thoroughly Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* caused quite a sensation, primarily because Judas is the "hero" of the story. Various groups and scholars have touted the spiritual wisdom of Gnostic movements and a few have even suggested that some Gnostic documents were unfairly prevented from entering the New Testament canon. The latest, complete, and authoritative translation of the major ancient Gnostic texts discovered in 1945 is entitled *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. Even though the authors nuance the term "Scriptures," the book title makes an appeal to lay Christians that raises many questions and concerns.

The current hoopla over ancient Christian Gnosticism has led to many misleading claims. It is vitally important for Christians to understand the Gnostic movements as accurately as possible, both for the sake of grasping the realities of the second-century church and for our own theological reflection. Gnosticism appealed to people then because it presented new, often creative, responses to the major questions of existence, buttressed by claims of secret, special revelation. In today's religious climate, suppressed literature offering an alternative to established orthodox tradition has an irresistible appeal. These old texts also seem to resonate with some people's spiritual quests.

### The knowing ones

"Gnosticism" is a modern term (first used in 1669) to describe a complex of movements in the ancient church. People who belonged to these sects believed they possessed secret knowledge; therefore, the second-century church father Irenaeus and the third-century Neoplatonist philosophers called them "Gnostics" (gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge). The church fathers also referred to Gnostics by the names of their leaders. When describing themselves, the Gnostics used phrases like "offspring of Seth," "the elect," "enlightened ones," "immovable race," and "the perfect."

Because of the problem of how to label the Gnostics, some modern scholars argue that the term Gnosticism should no longer be used. They point out, correctly, that the movement was diverse, with many different sub-groups emphasizing different ideas. But other historians argue that, as long as this diversity is recognized, Gnosticism is still a legitimate generic term to talk about the family resemblances between these different groups (just as we use the terms "Christianity" or "evangelical").

The origins of Gnosticism are, like so much else we want to know about antiquity, shrouded in mystery and a subject of debate. Most Christians throughout history—and many today—have argued that the Gnostics were a heretical offshoot of the church in the second century. All the Gnostic writings we know of are from the second and third centuries A.D. However, there is substantial indirect evidence that the movement pre-dated Christianity (for example, an early tradition says that Simon Magus, mentioned in Acts 8, was the "father" of Gnosticism). It may have originated in Alexandria, Egypt, in the first century B. C. as an aberrant form of Judaism, combined with certain ideas about divine reality drawn from the Platonism of the time (which had developed beyond the philosophical ideas of Plato). This movement then found its "home" in early Christianity, understanding Jesus Christ as the true Revealer of the true God within the emerging Gnostic worldview.

The evidence we have suggests that the Gnostic movements formed various, but related, schools of thought sometime slightly before A.D. 150. Earlier in the 20th century, some scholars (notably Walter Bauer) argued that in some places Gnostic Christians were the majority. It now seems clear, however, that Gnostics constituted a minority of Christians in the second century yet were strong enough to cause concern and alarm to various church fathers.

Two very important second-century Gnostic leaders were Basilides and Valentinus. Basilides was a teacher in Alexandria, Egypt, before 150. According to the church fathers, he had been taught by Menander, who in turn had been taught by Simon Magus. Valentinus, who emerged in Alexandria and went to Rome around 140, was a brilliant Gnostic thinker. He wrote extensively and, according to Tertullian, was for a brief time a candidate for bishop of Rome. Some fragments of his writings have survived in short quotations in the church fathers. In addition to the schools of thought that formed around these two major teachers, other Gnostics focused special attention on the apostle Thomas (the famous *Gospel of Thomas* reflects this stream of thought) and others (called Sethians) focused on Seth as the "perfect" son of Adam and Eve and a Gnostic redeemer figure (sometimes subsumed under Christ).

### Good God, bad god

Prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection in the 1940s (see "The Secret is Out"), virtually all we knew about ancient Gnosticism came from the anti-Gnostic writings of the church fathers (which occasionally quoted a few Gnostic texts), a pagan Neoplatonic work against the Gnostics, and a couple of later Gnostic works, *The Two Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia*. Today, we possess many more Gnostic books that give us a fairly reliable picture of how the Gnostics understood the world and salvation. Though there was great variety among the different streams of thought, there were a number of characteristic beliefs.

All ancient Western cultures during the time of the early church were dualistic to some degree, due in part to the influence of Plato and his followers. Such dualism was so prevalent that the famous German scholar Hans Jonas once quipped that gnosis was the common bond of all religious cultures at that time. Gnostic dualism was distinguished by its absolute, radical character: All matter (the world and the body) is evil and has its source in an evil creator who fell from and betrayed the true God. This lesser, inferior divine being arose through some mysterious tragic split with the ultimate realm (the Pleroma or "fullness") of the ultimate God, who is often called the Father of All.

Some forms of Gnosticism believed that this split in the deity produced an extensive array of intermediary beings (archons, principalities, and powers, many of whom are given names like Yaldabaoth, Sakla[s], and Barbelo) who inhabit the cosmos between the Pleroma and the earthly realm.

Gnostics believed that humanity is trapped in the material world/human body. The creator seeks to mislead humans by keeping them blind to the spiritual reality of the ultimate Father of All. In order to provide salvation, the ultimate God sent a redeemer, who navigated the journey from the Pleroma through the intermediary beings to earth. In some Gnostic texts this redeemer is Seth (drawing on the positive presentation in Genesis 4:25, 5:3, and 6:2-3), but the majority of Gnostic texts have Christ as the redeemer. Because the material world is evil, Christ only appeared to be human (this belief is called docetism and is condemned in 1 John 4:2). Gnostic books like *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* therefore deny that Christ died on the cross.

Christ provides salvation by delivering secret revelations/discourses to his true followers; it is this knowledge that is crucial. The saved are a special spiritual group of humanity (the Pneumatics) who "know" the folly of the material world/body and understand that in a "spiritual resurrection" they will be united with the Father of All. These "elect" have a divine spark (or spirit) of the ultimate God inside them, which is rescued through the secret revelations given by the redeemer. In many Gnostic texts, the salvation of the true spark is an ascent through the intermediary beings back to the Pleroma.

## Turning the Bible upside-down

Gnostics identified the evil god/creator with the God of the Old Testament; this had profound implications for their understanding of Scripture and the history of Israel. All Christians in the second century were struggling with their identity in relation to Judaism. For example, Justin Martyr, writing around 150, declared that the Jewish Scripture was actually a Christian book, since the Jews did not know how to understand it. And in 165, Melito, the bishop of Sardis, preached a Good Friday sermon on the death of Christ that accused the Jews of killing God.

But the Gnostic approach was far more denigrating of the Jewish heritage. In fact, one classic passage in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* uses Isaiah 45:5-6 to show that the God of Israel is inferior; a true God would never need to declare that he was the only God. This text also includes a fascinating litany that states, in parallel fashion, that "Adam was a joke," followed by naming Abraham, David, Solomon, the 12 prophets, and Moses also as jokes! The capstone is the declaration that the God of the Jewish Scripture is also a joke. Each litany ends with the words "we have not sinned," referring to the Gnostics' claim to proper spiritual understanding. (This is an interesting declaration in light of 1 John 1:8-2:2, which clearly states that those who claim not to have sinned are in error.)

Gnostic interpretation of Scripture, therefore, often made the villains into heroes and the heroes into villains. For example, Eve and the serpent in the garden were the ones really in touch with the knowledge of the ultimate God; the inferior creator misled humanity. (In fact, some Gnostic groups were known as the Naassenes or Ophites, from the Hebrew and Greek words for "serpent.") The 20th-century classics scholar Arthur Darby Nock once quipped that all one needed to do to create Gnosticism was to turn Genesis upside down and do inverse interpretation!

In Gnostic texts, the recipients of "revelation" are usually various followers of Jesus (e.g., Thomas, Peter, Philip, John, Mary of Magdala). In the *Gospel of Judas*, the recipient is Judas, which comes as quite a surprise to readers of the canonical Gospels. Here it is Judas who delivers Jesus from his evil human body, thus achieving a major Gnostic goal. Just as with Eve and the serpent, a person who seems "evil" in the traditional texts is, in fact, the one in touch with the true Gnostic revelation. In the *Gospel of Judas*, the other disciples of Jesus are said to serve the lesser god, while Judas is open to the true God.

## Physical matters

Apart from the radical dualism noted earlier, the most common theme in Gnostic texts is asceticism, or a denial of the importance of the body. This may be one reason why some later Christian monastics found these documents attractive. However, various church fathers (for example, Irenaeus in the second century and Epiphanius in the fourth century) described the Gnostics as immoral libertines who grossly indulged the body and its passions. The church fathers appear to be indulging in polemical exaggeration, yet it is possible for ascetics to become libertines. (Various movements in church history certainly demonstrate this—the Oneida Community in 19th-century America, for example.)

This Gnostic rejection of the body had many implications. One was their attitude towards martyrdom. Second-century Christians debated whether or not people ought to seek martyrdom, but most held up their martyrs as heroes of the faith who had shared in Christ's suffering and death. The Gnostics, on the other hand, seem to have completely rejected the idea that dying for one's faith had value. The Nag Hammadi text *Testimony of Truth* states, "Foolish people have it in their minds that if they simply make the confession, 'We are Christians,' in words but not with power, and ignorantly give themselves up to a human death, they will live. But they are in error and do not know where they are going or who Christ really is. Instead, they are hastening toward the principalities and the authorities."

## The status of women

Another implication of the Gnostics' asceticism and rejection of the body—and a subject of much modern debate—is their view of women. Gnostic texts are replete with sexual imagery, including feminine terms and images, yet they state over and over again the goal of sexual renunciation. The well-known ***Gospel of Thomas*** says, "For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom." This most likely means, in context, that renouncing worldly, physical existence is what prepares one for true salvation. Thus, male and female Gnostics are spiritual equals.

Women seem to have had a prominent place in some Gnostic streams of thought. Mary of Magdala, for example, is a person of great significance in various Gnostic texts, such as the ***Gospel of Thomas*** and the ***Gospel of Philip***. The ***Gospel of Philip*** states that the Savior loved Mary more than all of the other disciples and often kissed her. The ***Gospel of Mary*** presents Mary as the recipient of the Savior's true revelation, much to the disgust of Peter.

These texts probably indicate some degree of Gnostic protest against the limitation of women's roles in the majority church, and they may suggest female leadership in at least some Gnostic circles. Yet many scholars are cautious; the texts we have do not clearly show that Gnostic movements were egalitarian or significantly dominated by female leaders.

### **Gnostic "churches"?**

Because of their view of the physical world, it is unclear what role ritual practices played for Gnostics. Did they form churches? Did they celebrate the sacraments? We have very little evidence. But it does seem quite clear that many Gnostics embraced a set of sacramental rituals. For example, the Valentinian ***Gospel of Philip*** names five "mysteries": baptism, chrism, eucharist, redemption, and bridal chamber. (There is a major debate among scholars about whether the bridal chamber refers to literal sexual activity; more likely it is symbolic, given the Gnostic rejection of the body.) The ***Testimony of Truth*** contrasts false baptism (that of the majority church leaders, perhaps?) with true baptism, which is the renunciation of the world.

The church fathers imply that the Gnostics had their own secret meetings. One theory is that Gnostic Christians may have attended both the majority church and the secret gatherings of true (spiritual) persons (i.e., the Gnostics). The ***Revelation of Peter*** appears to attack the church leaders, saying that they lead people astray: "And there are others among those outside our number who call themselves bishops and deacons, as if they had received authority from God, but they bow before the judgment of the leaders. These people are dry canals."

Although no text speaks of Gnostics "evangelizing," their writings may have been used to attract followers, and Gnostic teachers certainly took the opportunity to speak with other Christians about their "misunderstandings." Through whatever means, the movement grew.

### **What's the attraction?**

Many aspects of Gnosticism seem rather strange to us today. For example, in one Gnostic text, Jesus laughs during the crucifixion, because the person on the cross is only a material being created by the lesser god. Yet despite its "weirdness," the early church fathers considered it a major threat to the church. How could such a movement have attracted any followers of Christ? What made Gnostic beliefs so appealing?

Gnostics, like all other Christians in the second century, were attempting to answer the basic theological questions that confront human existence: What is the relationship between God and the created world? Why is there evil and how does that affect one's understanding of God? How should the Old Testament be interpreted in light of Christ? Who is Christ, and what is the salvation he offers? Given the spiritual

realities of salvation, how should one regard the physical body? Is there a resurrection from the dead, and what does that mean?

Gnostics were offering creative answers to these questions that many people found compelling and attractive. To many in the Greco-Roman world, Gnostic dualism may have seemed to provide very tidy solutions to thorny issues like the Incarnation. A person in that culture knew one thing for sure: The ultimate God would never be revealed in actual human form. Gnosticism was ultimately a "spiritual" movement.

But to the majority of Christians, Gnostic answers about God, creation, and Christ were theologically inadequate. Gnostic groups remained strong through the second and third centuries, but then they began to lose ground significantly and by the fifth century were virtually extinct. Other issues such as Manichaeism (a derivative movement from Gnosticism) became the focus of debate, prompting the criticisms of Augustine of Hippo, for example. By this time, the church had gained the position and power to set and enforce the standards of orthodoxy.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

## The Secret is Out

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection brought ancient Gnostic writings to light.

David M. Scholer

In 1945 an Arab peasant named Muhammed Ali and his brothers discovered a jar at the base of a cliff near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. Inside the jar were 13 leather-bound papyrus books (codices). The manuscripts were immediately caught in a web of family rivalries, black market trading, and international intrigue, but finally they resurfaced and began to be studied by scholars. The Nag Hammadi "library," as it is often called, turned out to be a treasure trove of ancient Gnostic texts.

The 13 codices contained 52 tractates (individual writings—Coptic translations of Greek texts from the second and third centuries A.D. Out of those 52 tractates (which included a partial translation of a very short passage from Plato's *Republic*), 40 were Gnostic writings that scholars had never seen before. Most are secret apocalypses and/or "revelation" discourses. The collection also includes gospels (the most famous of which is the *Gospel of Thomas*), acts, and epistles. They combine pagan, Jewish, and Christian ideas and reflect the two major Gnostic schools of thought, the Sethian school and the Valentinian school. Many of the texts emphasize the Apostle Thomas. (This is now often called Thomasine Christianity.)

The origin of the collection remains somewhat mysterious, but most likely the texts were buried by priests and monks from a nearby monastery that had been founded in the early fourth century by Pachomius, the "father" of communal monasticism. The priests may have collected them in order to refute them or, just as likely, to seek some spiritual benefit or wisdom from them. The burial was probably prompted by Bishop Athanasius' Easter letter in 367, in which he condemned heretical and non-canonical books.

The Nag Hammadi collection is not the only discovery that has revolutionized our knowledge of Gnosticism. The Berlin Gnostic Codex, discovered in 1896, was not published until 1955 (after the Nag Hammadi discovery) due to the world wars. Its most famous unique text is the *Gospel of Mary*. In 2006 the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* was published; it is one of four documents in the Codex Tchacos (found in the 1970s). Another previously unknown document from this codex, *The Book of Allogenes*, was published in 2007.

Before these discoveries, most of what we knew of Gnostic groups came from critiques of them in anti-heretical writings by the church fathers. Now anyone wishing to know what the Gnostics really believed has a wealth of material to read.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

## The Gnostic Christ

This, therefore, is the true testimony: When man comes to know himself and God who is over the truth, he will be saved, and he will crown himself with the crown unfading.

*—The Testimony of Truth*

The Savior said to them: "I want you to know that all men born on earth from the foundations of the world until now, being dust, while they have inquired about God, who he is and what he is like, have not found him. ... But to you it is given to know; and whoever is worthy of knowledge will receive (it) ... "

*—The Sophia of Jesus Christ*

But I [Christ] was not afflicted at all. Those who were there punished me. But I did not die in reality but in appearance ... it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height over all the wealth of the archons and the offspring of their error, of their empty glory. And I was laughing at their ignorance."

*—The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*

[Jesus said to Judas:] "But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me. ... Look, you have been told everything. Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it. The star that leads the way is your star."

*—The Gospel of Judas*

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## One God, One Christ, One Salvation

Irenaeus the "peacemaker" was the early church's best warrior against Gnostic heresy.

D. Jeffrey Bingham

*[The Gnostics] wander from the truth, because their doctrine departs from Him who is truly God, being ignorant that His only-begotten Word, who is always present with the human race, united to and mingled with His own creation, according to the Father's pleasure, and who became flesh, is Himself Jesus Christ our Lord, who did also suffer for us, and rose again on our behalf, and who will come again in the glory of His Father, to raise up all flesh, and for the manifestation of salvation, and to apply the rule of just judgment to all who were made by Him. —Irenaeus, Against Heresies*

In the year 177, Pothinus, the 90-year-old bishop of Lyons (in modern France), died after Romans beat him for two days. Pothinus' crime: insisting that Christ was the Christian God. Terrible persecution had come upon the Christians of Lyons and the neighboring city of Vienne, some 16 miles south on the east bank of the Rhone River. Christians were burned alive in the amphitheater. The young servant girl Blandina, after many tortures, was finally gored to death by a bull. Each martyr sacrificed himself or herself in imitation of the passion of Christ, their Incarnate God, in the hope of resurrection. So fundamental and pervasive was their resurrection-faith that the Romans cremated the martyrs' corpses and dispersed the ashes in the river to defeat any notion that the Christians would be raised bodily from their graves.

Pothinus's successor was named Irenaeus, meaning "man of peace," and the early Christian historian Eusebius honored Irenaeus as a peacemaker in keeping with his name. But this irenic pastor and diplomat was also the second-century church's most informed, prolific, and theologically profound opponent of Gnosticism.

Earlier Christian leaders such as Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr had argued against false teachings that resembled Gnosticism, but Irenaeus was unique in his careful study of Gnostic myths (especially those taught by Valentinus) and in his immense, tireless reply.

### Apostolic pedigree

Irenaeus was born sometime between 130 and 140 in Smyrna—today the city of Izmir in Turkey. As one strolls through the ruins of the ancient marketplace with its impressive colonnades, it is not hard to imagine the boy Irenaeus skipping by the altar of Zeus or observing Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, in theological discussion with the future Roman presbyter, Florinus, who later embraced the Gnostic ideas of Valentinus. In his youth, Irenaeus learned the key components of the Christian faith under Polycarp, who had been taught by the apostle John and others who had seen Christ.

Martyrdom was never far from Irenaeus. Polycarp was killed in February of 155/56. An account left by the church of Smyrna, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, provides a window into the faithfulness of an old man who saw himself as sharing in the sufferings of Christ and hoped for the resurrection of the body.

Irenaeus moved from Smyrna to Lyons (then called Lugdunum) and became a presbyter there. He was a trusted emissary of peace and on at least two occasions represented the church in doctrinal and



liturgical controversies. The great persecution of Christians in Lyons occurred during one of his diplomatic missions to Rome, and so, when he returned, he became bishop in Pothinus' place.

Irenaeus wrote a number of books in his pastoral role, including *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a short presentation of Christian faith. But his greatest literary work was the five-volume *Against Heresies*, written around 180 in response to the Gnostics and also the heretic Marcion. It is still valued today, not only because it is an early example of Christian biblical interpretation and theology, but also because it gives a careful account of a variety of Gnostic beliefs. Irenaeus broke new ground by consulting the Gnostic teachers and reading their literature in order to understand their teachings. He occasionally exaggerated his descriptions for the sake of argument, but now that we have access to many Gnostic writings from the Nag Hammadi collection, we know that his representations of Gnosticism were generally quite accurate.

### **Wolves in sheep's clothing**

With his heart for peace, Irenaeus opposed the Gnostics not out of desire for power but out of concern for their salvation. He wanted, he said, to "turn them back to the truth" and "to bring them to a saving knowledge of the one true God."

Furthermore, he was a pastor with a responsibility to care for his flock. His opponents were enticing members of his community away from apostolic faith with a message that sounded true but wasn't. He therefore saw the Gnostics as false teachers who had cleverly and artfully clothed an unorthodox theological system in a deceitful, seductive costume. "Error," he noted, "indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced ... more true than the truth itself."

As he wrote these words, Irenaeus had in mind Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:15 about false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves. The Gnostics sounded, and frequently acted, just like orthodox Christians. They read the Bible, used the Bible, and cited the Bible. But the way they understood the Bible, the way they put its pieces together, differed dramatically from the perspectives of Irenaeus, Pothinus, Polycarp, and John.

Irenaeus believed there was an unbroken line of tradition from the apostles, to those they mentored, and eventually down to himself and other Christian leaders. The Gnostics interpreted the Scriptures according to their own tradition. "In doing so, however," Irenaeus warned, "they disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures and ... dismember and destroy the truth." So while their biblical theology may at first appear to be the precious jewel of orthodoxy, it was actually an imitation in glass. Put together properly, Irenaeus said, the parts of Scripture were like a mosaic in which the gems or tiles form the portrait of a king. But the Gnostics rearranged the tiles into the form of a dog or fox.

As a pastor, then, Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* in order to describe the heresies that were threatening his congregation and to present the apostolic interpretation of the Scriptures. He revealed the cloaked deception for what it was and displayed the apostolic tradition as a saving reminder to the faithful.

### **God became flesh**

The Gnostics who threatened Irenaeus's community tended to divide things into two realities—one good, the other bad. In response to such dualism, Irenaeus presented the unity of apostolic faith.

For example, Irenaeus' opponents divided "Christ" from "Jesus." Christ, they said, was a divine spirit-being from the heavenly realm (the Pleroma, or "fullness") who did not become really incarnate, so

he could not really suffer. He was not truly human, but either only seemed to be human or temporarily inhabited a human named "Jesus."

But Irenaeus was too familiar with the constant threat of martyrdom to let such dualism deceive his flock. The real, bloody passion and death of Christ was a fundamental element of Christian faith. Martyrdom imitated it, and Christians confessed it in baptism and worship. Irenaeus responded with a strong biblical statement that Jesus Christ was one person, both divine and human, and that he really was crucified.

This is what gave comfort to those who were martyred: "[Christ] knew, therefore, both those who should suffer persecution, and he knew those who should have to be scourged and slain because of Him; and He did not speak of any other cross, but of the suffering which He should Himself undergo first, and His disciples afterward."

At the root of the Valentinian Gnostic myth known by Irenaeus was a division between two Gods: the supreme, transcendent Father revealed by Christ, and the arrogant Demiurge, the creator of the physical world, who was identified with the Old Testament God of the Jews. Therefore, the Gnostics divided reality into two opposing realms—the heavenly world of spiritual beings (named "Aeons") and the material world of trees, rocks, earth, flesh, and blood.

In contrast to this, Irenaeus declared: "But there is one only God ... He is Father, He is God, He the founder, He the Maker, He the Creator, ... He it is whom the law proclaims, whom the prophets preach, whom Christ reveals, whom the Apostles make known to us, and in whom the church believes." These words reveal another important theme for Irenaeus: the harmony between the Old Testament and the emerging New Testament, between the prophets and apostles. The Creator spoken of by Moses is the Father revealed in Christ. His redemptive plan has been the same throughout history.

The Valentinian Gnostics also taught that, since the material world was created by an imposter, an ignorant deity, it had no value and must perish. The human body, as part of the material world, could never be immortal. This is why Christ could not have been truly human and why, the Gnostics believed, there would be no bodily resurrection or redemption of the created order. Salvation was purely spiritual.

But according to Irenaeus, the "spiritual" person is made up of the "the union of [material] flesh and [the human] spirit, receiving the Spirit of God." God created the physical world, and so that world has value and will be redeemed and renewed someday. God created the human body, and the body will be raised again incorruptible and immortal.

Against the Valentinians, Irenaeus emphasized the supernatural, redemptive ministry of the Holy Spirit who renews both the body and the spirit. This ministry of the Holy Spirit strengthened the martyrs to bear witness unto death in hope of bodily resurrection. This promise was based on the reality of Christ's incarnation: "For if the flesh were not in a position to be saved, the Word of God would in no wise have become flesh."

### **The faith that saves**

The Gnostics had an elitist understanding of salvation; they divided humanity into two categories, the "spiritual ones" who belong to the Father and the "material ones" who belong to the Demiurge. As the "spiritual ones," the Gnostic believed, they were destined for salvation because of the divine spark within them (unlike the rest of humanity, who are asleep and have no hope).

Not so for Irenaeus. All humans are fallen—dead in their sins—and in need of redemption. Salvation is

not a matter of destiny but of faith. The eternal Son of God, who became human, reunited God with humanity. Those who believe in him have the life of the Holy Spirit in them—and only they can be called "spiritual": "as many as fear God and trust in His Son's advent, and who through faith do establish the Spirit of God in their hearts—such men as these shall be properly called both 'pure,' and 'spiritual,' and 'those living to God,' because they possess the Spirit of the Father, who purifies man, and raises him up to the life of God."

So we see in Irenaeus the great orthodox doctrines of unity: One God, who is the Father and Creator of all things, immaterial and material, and who orchestrates one harmonious history of revelation and redemption; one Savior, who is both divine spirit and human flesh, both Christ and Jesus; one human nature, which is both spiritual and fleshly; one salvation of both the spiritual and material realms, which is by faith.

These were the doctrines Irenaeus received from those who had passed the apostolic teaching down to him. This was the orthodoxy that protected his flock against the wolves of heresy and that gave Polycarp and the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne the faith to endure even to the end.

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## Gnosticism Unmasked

by D. Jeffrey Bingham

*The label "Gnosticism" is a fuzzy one, describing diverse sects and ideas in the ancient world. This chart summarizes those elements within various Gnostic groups that the majority of Christians found especially troublesome. A particular Gnostic sect would not necessarily have held all of the following beliefs.*

### GNOSTIC VIEW

**GOD** - There are two opposing Gods: the supreme, spiritual, unknown Father who is distant from the world and revealed only by Christ; and the subordinate, ignorant, and evil creator of the world (Demiurge).

**WORLD** - The material world crafted by the Demiurge is evil and keeps the spiritual ones from perfection. It must perish and be escaped.

**HUMANITY** - The Gnostics are by nature the elite, spiritual ones, for they have the "seed" of the spiritual realm inside them. This divine spark (the spirit) is trapped within the material, fleshly body and yearns for release from this evil dungeon.

**SALVATION** Only the immortal spirit of the Gnostic is saved as it gains release from material captivity and returns to the Father's spiritual realm. Salvation is by knowledge (*gnosis*)—by knowing that the true God is the Father, not the Demiurge, and that the true home of the spirit is its place of origin, the Father's realm, not the material world with its bodies of flesh.

**CHRIST** Christ is a spiritual, divine being from the Father's realm who comes to the world to reveal the Father and the true identity of the spiritual ones, the Gnostics. Christ did not become incarnate or suffer on the cross. Instead, he either merely seemed to be human or temporarily inhabited a human being named "Jesus."

**CANON and HISTORY** There are gospels and testimonies of the apostles that convey the perfect revelation of Christ in addition to (and in some ways superior to) the church's four gospels. This revelation brought by Christ manifests the true knowledge of the Father and the Gnostics, while the Law and the Prophets manifest the Demiurge.

### ORTHODOX VIEW (as expressed by Irenaeus of Lyons)

**GOD** - There is only one true God who is the Creator of the world and the Father of Jesus Christ.

**WORLD** - The material world was created good by God. It will someday be renewed and made into a fit home for the redeemed.

**HUMANITY** - God created all human beings as a union of body and spirit. We are not spiritual by nature—this is a gift available to all by faith through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

**SALVATION** Both the immaterial and material aspects of God's creation are saved. By faith in Jesus Christ, a person receives the Holy Spirit who provides spiritual life, resurrects their flesh to eternal life, and redeems the created world.

**CHRIST** Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior, the eternal Son of God made flesh, who truly suffered for the sins of humanity and was truly raised in immortal, incorruptible flesh for their resurrection to eternal life.

**CANON and HISTORY** The church recognizes only four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and believes that these four, along with the rest of the New Testament, are in harmony with the Law and the Prophets. All witness to the one true Creator and Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

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## The Earliest Mere Christianity

Before creeds, even before an official New Testament, there was the Rule of Faith.

D. H. Williams

**Popular scholarship over the last 20 years** or so has captured public attention by focusing on marginal or doctrinally suspect groups within early Christianity. Such scholars claim that these alternative forms of faith were just as authentic as early "orthodoxy"—and in some cases, perhaps even more so. These "lost Christianities" reveal that the earliest Christian church was not uniform but was rather like a religious kaleidoscope. Some recent books leave the impression that there were no shared definitions upon which most churches agreed. But do esoteric Gnostic texts or lost gospels mean that early Christians shared no common "core" of belief?

Such popular scholarship too often overlooks the fact that a common denominator of belief did exist in what ancient Christians called the "Rule of Faith" (in Latin) or the "Canon of Truth" (in Greek). This was a brief description of what Christians believed about God and his story of salvation. The Rule of Faith was what the church was preaching and teaching even before the various gospels and epistles then circulating became canonized into one "New Testament." Indeed, the way the New Testament was formed is part of the legacy that emerged from this early tradition.

### The word delivered to us

The apostles themselves began to develop a norm or model for proclaiming the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Best known is Paul's brief citation of what he calls "tradition" in 1 Corinthians 15:2-8—that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, etc. In Acts 2:33, Peter provides essentially the same points about the Messiah's crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of God, "having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit."

Within a few decades, these proclamations took the form of confessions, short formulas that were easy to remember and offered a basic structure for thinking about God. One such confession found in a Greek liturgical manuscript, called the Dêr Balyzeh Papyrus, was discovered in Egypt and probably written in the early second century:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
And in his only-begotten Son  
Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
And in the Holy Spirit  
And in the resurrection of the flesh,  
And in the holy catholic church.

Around A.D. 125 or shortly after, Aristides of Athens wrote his *Apology* to the emperor in order to defend Christians against false accusations by giving a true account of what they believed. Aristides claimed that there was a "doctrine of the truth" preached by the apostles and still observed in his day:

Now the Christians trace their origin from the Lord Jesus Christ. And he is acknowledged by the Holy Spirit to be the Son of the Most High God, who came down from heaven for the salvation of men. And being born of a pure virgin, unbegotten and immaculate, He assumed flesh ... and tasted death on a cross ... and after three days, He came to life again and ascended into heaven.

The early church was committed to establishing standards for distinguishing true teaching and practice from false. As Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna admonished the Philippians, "Let us, therefore, forsake the vanity of the crowd and their false teachings, and turn back to the word delivered to us from the beginning."

## A "canon" before the Canon

The first use of the term "canon" did not refer to Scripture, but to a condensed form of the church's oral tradition. In the opening of his *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a handbook for teaching converts, Irenaeus of Lyons said Christians must adhere strictly to the "canon of faith" because it linked the churches of his day back to the apostles. He also called this simply "the preaching," "the faith," or "the tradition." Irenaeus articulated it this way:

God the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all ... the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the Father established; and through him [the Son] were made all things entirely ... he became a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life and bring about communion of God and man. And the third is the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied ... and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God.

Similar citations of the "Rule of Faith" are found in the second- and third-century writings of Hippolytus and Novatian in Rome, Tertullian and Cyprian in Carthage, and Origen and Dionysius in Alexandria. There was no one Rule of Faith, but many "rules" that differed in wording, style, and purpose, yet all shared basic characteristics. They were usually Trinitarian in format and included the birth, passion, and ascension of Christ. Some, but not all, referred to the second coming of Christ in glory, the final judgment, the resurrection of the body, and everlasting life for the saints.

More flexible than a creed or fixed formula, the Rule was easily adapted to many different contexts and circumstances. It presented those central elements that most churches professed—a summary narrative of God's self-revelation and his restoration of creation—a kind of "mere Christianity." Tertullian observed that the Rule was much like the four Gospels, which possess a basic unity of truth amidst their differences.

The exact origin of the Rule remains a mystery. Because of its flexible use and teaching-like format, it could have developed from summaries of the faith used to prepare candidates for baptism. Those who appealed to the Rule believed its affirmations were derived from the original message of the apostles. Irenaeus asserted, "The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith."

## Whose Bible?

Most commonly, Christian writers cited the Rule to defend the apostolic faith, often against different groups of Gnostic Christians. Irenaeus referred to the "canon of truth" several times throughout his anti-Gnostic work, *Against Heresies*. Gnostics argued that the Father of Jesus Christ was a different God from the Creator; this made Christ's salvation a denial or escape from creation. To this Irenaeus replied, "The disciple of the Lord, therefore, wanting to put an end to all such teaching" should adhere to the "canon of truth in the church." He then cited the first line of the "canon": "that there is one Almighty God, who made all things by His Word (Christ), both visible and invisible." This shows "that by the Word, through whom God made the creation, He also bestowed salvation on mankind included in the creation."

Many Gnostics were quite ready to use the Old Testament or Christian writings (as well as their own "scriptures") to defend their positions by reinterpreting the text to suit their cosmology. One Gnostic

named Theodotus, for example, referred to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as "the names by whose power the Gnostic is released from the power of corruption"—meaning the divine spirit's escape from the material world. It became clear that it was not enough simply to appeal to Scripture to refute the Gnostics. Who could interpret the Bible rightly? Tertullian argued, "For only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident, there will be the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found."

For the early church fathers, the Rule of Faith was a distillation of the fundamental doctrines in what would later become the New Testament. As such, it served as a measure of orthodoxy or a tool for interpreting Scripture correctly. The Rule was not something separate from or above Scripture, but a summary of the essential meaning of Scripture as it had been preached in the churches since the time of the apostles. This was a public or open tradition, as opposed to the secret tradition appealed to by the Gnostics. It shaped the way believers approached the texts, so that they read the Bible (especially the Old Testament) with Christ at the center.

### **Shared essentials**

Throughout the first four centuries, the Rule was a unifying force in churches across the Mediterranean world. A letter from the council of Arles in Gaul (A.D. 314) to Sylvester, bishop of Rome, warned about the unstable minds of certain persons who "spit out the present authority, the tradition and the rule of truth of our God." Christians in southern France rightfully assumed that Christians in Italy knew and embraced the authority of the same Rule of Faith. A presbyter in Rome named Novatian (c. 245) preserved a shorter version of the Rule.

In sum, the Rule served as a plumb line of truth in a religiously pluralistic world. It possessed fixed and fluid elements that both represented and also helped shape Christian identity. Its widespread use demonstrates that the earliest Christians were very much interested in correct doctrine. The many citations of the Rule prove that the shared essentials of the church's tradition created a fairly cohesive platform of doctrinal norms to which Christians could appeal.

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**The rule of faith**, indeed, is altogether one, alone immovable and unchangeable; the rule is as follows: believing in one only God omnipotent, the Creator of the universe, and His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right (hand) of the Father, destined to come to judge living and dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well (as of the spirit).—**Tertullian (c. 212)**

**The rule of truth** requires that we believe, first in God and Father and Almighty Lord, the most perfect Creator of all things. He suspended the heavens above in their lofty height, made firm the earth with the heavy mass under it, poured forth the freely flowing water of the seas; and he arranged all these, in full abundance and order, with appropriate and suitable essentials.

The same rule of truth teaches us, after we believe in the Father, to believe also in the Son of God, Christ Jesus, the Lord our God, nevertheless the Son of God. We are to believe in the Son of this God who is the one and only God; namely, the Creator of all things, as has already been set forth above.

Next, well-ordered reason and the authority of the faith bid us (in the words and writings of our Lord set down in orderly fashion) to believe, after these things, also in the Holy Spirit, who was in times past promised to the church and duly bestowed at the appointed, favorable moment.—**Novatian of Rome (c. 245)**

**Now to him who is able** to open the ears of your hearts to receive the incisive words of the Lord



through the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus Christ the Nazarene who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate, and slept, that he might announce to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob and to all his saints the end of the world and the resurrection that is to come for the dead, and rose from the dead, that he might show and give to us, that we might know him, a pledge of his resurrection, and was taken up into heaven by the power of God his Father and of the Holy Spirit, and at the right hand of the throne of God Almighty upon the cherubim, to him who cometh with power and glory to judge both the dead and the living, to him be dominion and glory, etc.—***Teaching of the Apostles (third century)***

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## No Other Gospel

Despite the appearance of Gnostic "gospels," the early church decided that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were without rival.

Nicholas Perrin

**I believe I am one of the few literate adults** living who has not read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. But I did listen to it as an audiobook. The problem with audiobooks, in my experience, is that at points my mind wanders and the words momentarily stop registering. This happened as I listened to *The Da Vinci Code*. Sometimes when I caught my mind drifting, I would rewind; at other times I would just let it go and try to piece it all together. I confess: This is no way to do justice to a book. I felt that I owed Dan Brown better. After all, we graduated from high school together.

There was, however, a place in the book when I did stop the tape and hit rewind—several times. It was a turning point in the plot that involved the protagonists in a conversation with a character named Leigh Teabing. Brown had styled Teabing as a kind of expert on things early Christian. The point that really caught my attention (and not just me but, I'm sure, millions of readers) was Teabing's very matter-of-fact statement: "More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament and yet only a relatively few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John among them."

"Wow!" I thought to myself, "talk about provocative." The statement had the sound of being altogether authoritative. And for that reason, it is all the more unsettling for the Christian who is accustomed to thinking that there are only four gospels, the canonical gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Brown is right about the fact that there were other gospels. What needs a closer look is how the "other gospels" were related to the four in the early church. In order to do this, one has to understand how and when these four came to be regarded as a finalized list of authoritative gospels.

## Old and reliable

One of the most important factors in the early church's canonization of the four gospels is their shared antiquity. Though occasionally some scholars argue that the fourth gospel was written c. 110, it is usually dated shortly before the year 100. Matthew and Luke seem to have been written 10 to 30 years earlier than that. Mark is usually supposed to have been earlier still. This puts all four gospels between the years 50 and 100. This also makes the four gospels the earliest extant records of Jesus' life, a fact not unimportant for the early Christians.

A second crucial element in the early church's decision to ascribe the four gospels special status is their apostolicity. This means that each of the four gospels was perceived as either having been written by an apostle or under the supervision of an apostle. The Gospels of Matthew and John were identified with the apostles by the same names. There was a strong tradition that Peter stood behind the writing of Mark, who, according to the early church father Papias (c. 60-130), "interpreted" him. Finally, Luke was recognized as the traveling companion of Paul. The apostolicity and antiquity of the four-fold gospel, more than any other factors, ensured the collection a secure and central place in early church life.

## Early consensus

There is evidence that Christians held a high view of the four gospels very early on. Around A.D. 95,

we find Clement, a bishop in Rome, authoritatively citing words reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount (1 Clement 13:1-2). The only question is whether he is drawing on Scripture or on oral tradition that preserved Jesus' teaching independently of the gospels. In my view, because Clement's citations come from the same passage in the Gospel of Matthew, it makes most sense to surmise that he is using the written gospel itself, with some admixture of Luke.

Around the same time, if not slightly later, there are intimations that Papias knew the gospels, perhaps even all four. The so-called "longer ending of Mark" (Mark 16:9-20), which most text critics regard as a spurious addition tacked on around A.D. 125, seems to reflect bits of Matthew, Luke, and John—and of course Mark itself. At the very least, this demonstrates that the four gospels were in broad circulation. It may even be the case, although it is impossible to prove, that the four gospels by this time constituted a collection in its own right, a sub-canon within the slowly emerging New Testament canon.

Firmer evidence for the four-fold gospel's authoritative status comes from the apologist Justin Martyr around the year 150. Following the philosophical terminology of his day, Justin preferred to call the gospels "memoirs." Justin records that the church used these "memoirs" regularly in their weekly services. This would seem to indicate that the four gospels had achieved a de facto canonical status.

Around this time the famed heretic Marcion of Sinope, convinced that it was necessary to eradicate any Jewish elements from the Christian Scriptures, took it upon himself to pare down the received collection of Christian books. The only gospel that "made the cut" was Luke, but only in an edited-down version. It has been widely argued (notably by Adolf von Harnack) that the Christians first began to think about the concept of a biblical canon only in response to Marcion. But given the evidence of Justin, this seems very unlikely. We are better off maintaining that it was actually Marcion who was reacting to an established de facto canon.

A fragmentary list of New Testament books known to us as the Muratorian Canon can, despite some scholarly opinion, be reasonably dated to around 170. This provides an important piece of second-century evidence for the gospels' canonicity. Unfortunately, the beginning of the Muratorian list is broken off. The fragment begins, "The third book of the gospel, according to Luke." It later continues, "The fourth gospel is by John." Interestingly, Luke is presented as the third gospel and John, the fourth—exactly the canonical order as we have it today. It is hardly a stretch to suppose that the missing first and second gospels were Matthew and Mark, respectively. Matthew, being the favorite gospel of the early church, was almost always positioned first in similar such lists and whenever the four-fold gospel was brought together in one volume.

### **The power of four**

The first church father to mention all four gospels by name was Irenaeus some time around 170. He strenuously objected to the various heretical sects (including that of Marcion) who had latched on to only one of the four gospels in order to substantiate their teachings. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus wrote:

The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are. Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has four pillars, everywhere breathing out incorruption and revivifying men.

While this may not seem the most convincing line of argument today, Irenaeus's statement needs to be understood against the backdrop of a larger argument, which presupposed a theological correlation between creation (made up of four zones) and the new creation, Jesus Christ (revealed by four gospels). While certain scholars have accused Irenaeus of originating this policy of "these four and

no more" in order to squelch competing sects with their gospels, the evidence for a much earlier four-fold gospel canon is more compelling.

## **Apocryphal tales**

This is not to deny that there were other gospels in existence at the end of the second century. There were. **The Gospel of Truth**, the **Gospel of Judas**, and the **Gospel of Thomas** were among them. Many similar gospels continued to be written during the next two centuries. Most of these were composed and used by Gnostic believers who were deeply critical of the beliefs and practices of the Great Church. Like their orthodox opponents, these sects also typically attributed their gospels to apostles or other well-known Christian figures. This was no doubt a bid for authority, as if to say, "Okay, if you say your gospels go back to the apostles, we can say the same thing about our gospels."

Historically speaking, those touting the apostolic origins of the apocryphal gospels had little to stand on. These texts came much later than the four-fold gospel collection. The canonical gospels were all first-century documents; all four offer credible eyewitness accounts of Jesus of Nazareth. The apocryphal gospels, written generations later, can barely compete with this claim.

In addition to these factors, the apocryphal gospels' often surreal narrative and/or patently suspect Christology marked them off decisively as unacceptable for church use. Contrary to some scholarly opinion, the boundaries of the canon were largely determined by the criterion of right belief. Even though a few non-canonical gospels proved to be of passing interest to an equally few church fathers in the East, these texts were never seen as being on par with the four evangelists. The canonical gospels had established themselves in church tradition so firmly and at such an early point that it comes as no surprise that they have remained utterly uncontested as the church's only gospels. That is, until very recently.

Therefore, when Brown's Leigh Teabing says, "More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament and yet only a relatively few were chosen for inclusion," this may make for good fiction, but this is no way to do justice to history. Yes, there were other gospels written over the course of early church history (although nowhere near "eighty"), yet Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John remained in a league by themselves. When the church began to draw lines in a more self-conscious way after the second century, it didn't have to think hard about adding to or subtracting from the gospels. The era before the four-fold canon was a time out of mind. They knew no different.

Had all this come up with Dan Brown at our 25th high school reunion this past spring, I just might have mentioned it. But if I had done so, I would have also had to thank him. Now that the hype and the furor surrounding **The Da Vinci Code** have subsided, Christians can be thankful that Brown has prompted us to listen carefully to early Christian history, to rewind, and to be reminded that there is no other gospel.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## Taught by the Apostles

What is the truth about Jesus? Ask those who knew his earliest followers, said Irenaeus.

Fr. John Behr

"**The Church,**" wrote Irenaeus, "having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believed these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed one mouth."

From the beginning, Christians have been urged to hold on to "the faith delivered once for all to the saints" (Jude 3). Yet also from the beginning, some people had begun to misunderstand or misinterpret that faith. After the eyewitnesses and apostles passed away, believers could no longer go for answers to those who had laid the foundations of the church. In every great city, different teachers and leaders claimed to represent true Christianity, each asserting that they maintained the true faith, each appealing to a body of apostolic writings.

To support their doctrines, some Gnostics were claiming a succession of teachers going back to an apostle. In the face of such authoritative-sounding claims, how could Christians know that what the Gnostics taught was wrong and what their own pastor taught was right? Whom could they trust?

Despite these contending claims, even the pagan doctor Galen (129-216?) recognized that there was such a thing as "the Great Church," which was clearly distinct from the multitude of sects. Irenaeus of Lyons was the first Christian leader to write a confident statement of the faith of "the Great Church" and explain why it could be trusted. He considered three things to be inextricably linked: Scripture (both the Old Testament and the apostolic writings), the tradition of the apostles' teaching (the Rule of Faith), and the leadership of the church.

### Passing on the true faith

Today we tend to think of apostolic succession in terms of the laying on of hands: The church confers an office on a consecrated bishop, who can thereby trace his authority back to the apostles. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches each claim their own unbroken line of ordained leaders. Most Protestants deny the importance of a continuous succession of bishops altogether.

But in the second century, apostolic succession meant something more simple. Two main concerns were at stake: What is the true faith? And how has it been passed on from the apostles to us?

This faith, according to Irenaeus, is found in the Scriptures and summarized in the Rule of Faith. The proof that this is the true faith is that the "Great Church" could point to a visible succession of teachers, presbyters, and bishops who taught the same things throughout the world: This is the teaching common to all the apostles and the churches founded by them. The leaders of many of these churches had been taught by the apostles themselves, or disciples of the apostles, and they "neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about."

This was an important defense of orthodox Christianity against the Gnostic teachers. If the apostles were going to entrust the truth about Jesus to anyone, Irenaeus argued, they would have entrusted it to the

same people to whom they entrusted the churches. They would not have charged some with caring for their flock and then secretly told hidden mysteries to others. In contrast to the Gnostics' secret succession, the Great Church had a succession of teaching that was universal and public—and therefore more trustworthy.

As an example, Irenaeus pointed to the Christian communities in Rome (at that time there were many house churches, each with its own leaders, not one church with a single bishop), and in particular the community led by Eleutherius. He listed 12 successive leaders, from the apostles down to Eleutherius, to show that the apostolic teaching had been passed on continuously. He especially noted Clement, one of the first leaders, who had known the apostles and recorded their teaching in a letter that was earlier than any of the Gnostics' texts. "By this succession," Irenaeus wrote, "the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles, and the preaching of the truth, have come down to us. And this is the most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth."

In later centuries, some churches began trying to construct similar lists of succession to defend their own authenticity or authority, but this was not Irenaeus's main concern. He was not defending the authority of particular people; he was trying to defend the true faith against heresy by showing that the apostles' message about Jesus had been faithfully preserved in the churches, and therefore could be trusted. Succession for him did not primarily mean handing down an office; it was the public expression of the continuity of the true faith.

### **The whole church**

The Roman church had developed a unique importance in the ancient world; it had been founded by both Peter and Paul, had given generously to Christians in other places, and had preserved the true faith. But Irenaeus pointed out that apostolic succession could also be seen in other cities like Ephesus where the apostles had founded a church. His own teacher Polycarp in Smyrna had known the apostles and died "having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the church has handed down, and which alone are true."

Those churches or leaders who could show apostolic succession were not above criticism. Irenaeus had no qualms about writing to bishop Victor, Eleutherius' successor in Rome, and telling him that he was wrong not to respect the Easter practices of Asia Minor Christians. Succession of leadership was not a guarantee of truth, but a powerful witness to the truth that is the common inheritance of all who belong to the Great Church, all who carry on the teachings of the apostles—wherever they may be.

The success of the Great Church—and the weakening of the Gnostics and other sects—did not depend, as some recent popular books have claimed, upon the patriarchal power of authoritarian bishops. At this point in time, bishops and other Christian teachers had no worldly power, no property, and no ability to call upon the political authorities for help. Their power lay in being able to offer Christians a coherent, persuasive picture of the truth handed down from the beginning.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## The Heresy that Wouldn't Die

Though Gnostic sects faded in the early church, Gnostic ideas have had a long shelf life.

Philip Jenkins

**This world is not my home. As it stands, that** statement reflects the views of a great many orthodox Christians, but a Gnostic would take it much further. From a Gnostic perspective, the material world is not just fallen but an utterly flawed creation, beyond redemption. God—or at least, the good, true God—certainly does not work in history. Escape is only available to the small minority who know, who recognize the need for liberation, which lies within. Wisdom, *Sophia*, is for the spiritual, the elite, and distinguishes them from the gullible herd of humans mired in the material, the victims of cosmic deception. They will remain asleep, while the true Gnostic is awakened.

Gnosticism has never gone away, however much some modern scholars lament the suppression of its hidden gospels in the late Roman Empire. The main themes survived, for instance, in the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, which explains how the world was created through the fracturing of the vessels into which the divine goodness was poured. In addition to seeking their own mystic ascent to God, believers also pledge themselves to achieving *tikkun olam*, the restoration of the broken world.

Within Christendom too, the fact that Christian states officially suppressed heresy just drove these ideas beyond the frontiers, into regions like Mesopotamia and Armenia. Gnostic and dualist ideas thrived across large parts of Asia in movements like the Paulicians and the Manichaeans, who taught the children of light how to liberate themselves from the evil god of this world.

Occasionally, these ideas were reimported into Europe, most famously in the Cathar or Albigensian movement, which was suppressed by a near-genocidal crusade in 13th-century France. The Cathars followed the old Gnostic ideas faithfully, offering full salvation to the "perfect" who absolutely renounced the world. These old-new movements relied chiefly on the Christian gospels, interpreting the parables in their own distinctive way. Like the early Gnostics, though, they also wrote their own scriptures, such as the *Book of John the Evangelist*. ("Then did the Contriver of Evil devise in his mind to make Paradise, and he brought the man and woman into it.")

Living in a Christian-ruled society, later Gnostics defined themselves against the church and its doctrines, which provided a foil for the truly spiritual. The Cathars rejected the Roman Catholic Church as, literally, the synagogue of Satan. Catholics followed the deluded God who had created the abomination of the world in which we live and whose bloody misdeeds are chronicled in the Old Testament. Ordinary Catholic believers were the sheep, in the sense of being docile, ignorant, and uncomprehending.

### Old Nobodaddy and Women's Lib

As Europe moved forward into the intimidating world of urbanization and industrialization, the identification between the church, the old God, and the evil society became ever more obvious to the spiritual children of Light. The Romantic English poet William Blake saw a world enslaved by a false God, Old Nobodaddy, the father of jealousy, who was a deceptive projection of society's own lusts and ignorance. Blake presented a full-blown Gnostic mythology, in which the spirit of the giant Albion has become lost and divided. The world is dominated by the rational intellectual force of Urizen, who is challenged by the revolutionary imagination in the form of Los. Only Los remembers the divinity that

Albion has forfeited, and only he can awaken him. In the 19th century, the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire took the logic of revolt to its natural conclusion. If a church allied to a frightful and unjust society preached about God, then the only decent course was to praise the maligned rebel liberator, Satan.

From the end of the 19th century, original Gnostic texts became available once more. From 1896, any literate person could read the translation of the third-century *Pistis Sophia*, which offered a complete overview of Gnostic mythology. All the more striking in an age of women's empowerment, this scripture represents an extended exchange between Jesus and a number of female disciples, including Mary. The work had an impact in its day quite as powerful as the Nag Hammadi texts and the *Gospel of Thomas* would in later decades. Never believe any writer who claims that the world was ignorant of these radical insights until the 1970s!

*Pistis Sophia* and other texts had a huge appeal at a time when progressives and feminists were seeking to construct a new Christianity freed from the shackles of the hierarchical church. The best way to do this was to claim that, far from building something new, they were restoring the lost truths of the earliest followers of Jesus, doctrines suppressed by a sinister ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Writing in 1909, Frances Swiney claimed that the ancient Gnostics had been educated women, "early pioneers of the liberation movement of their sex, dialectical daughters questioning the truth and authority of received opinions, earnest intellectual women. ... The Gnostics kept true to the original pristine faith in the Femininity of the Holy Spirit. A truth universally suppressed in the fourth century A.D. by the male priesthood of the Christian Church."

### **The (sleeping) child within**

Many of the reasons that gave Gnosticism such a cachet in the first quarter of the 20th century still sound familiar today. Gnosticism offered a Christianity freed from elements that many thinkers found troubling, especially the Old Testament, which was being subjected to such devastating historical criticism. Nor were believers expected to accept New Testament gospels that higher critics argued were later, theologically inspired fictions. Through a Gnostic lens, Christianity was transformed from a religion rooted in history to a form of inner psychological enlightenment.

Once Christianity was understood as inner truth, educated observers no longer had to accept the unique claims of that religion, but could see the many commonalities that existed with other world religions. Buddhism in particular also taught enlightenment and waking from the sleep of illusion. Reconstructions of the "real" early Christianity reached a mass public through hugely best-selling novels like George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* (1916), in which a Jesus who survives the crucifixion ends his life by joining a party of missionary Buddhist monks.

Twentieth-century Gnosticism took many forms, both inside and outside the churches. Overtly Gnostic ideas inspired many esoteric groups and new religious movements, especially those derived from the Theosophical movement. To take one example of a modern esoteric religion, Scientology offers an unabashedly Gnostic mythology of sleep, forgetting, and reawakening. Believers are taught to return to the vastly powerful spiritual state they once enjoyed, but lost when that original being was trapped in the deceptions of MEST (Matter, Energy, Space, Time). No less explicitly Gnostic are the later works of that latter-day prophet Philip K. Dick, in books such as *VALIS* (1981).

Psychology was also a major vehicle for Gnostic thought. Carl-Gustav Jung, as much a mystic as a therapist, drew extensively on ancient Gnostic thinkers and mythology in works like *Seven Sermons to the Dead* (1916). Fundamental Gnostic assumptions underlie many forms of contemporary therapy, which lead patients to recognize the Fall through which they became entrapped in the world of illusion and dependency. Patients must above all recover their memories, through which they can overcome the states of sleep, amnesia, and illusion that blight their lives. As for ancient Gnostics, troubled souls are lost in an alien material world, trying to find their way home, to remember their true identity. The



Gnostic idea of salvation became the psychologist's integration or individuation.

These parallels became particularly evident with the child abuse recovery movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Treatment of incest survivors implied such archaic themes as the loss of primal innocence through sexual sins inflicted on the patient, and the recovery of an untarnished child-like state: Memory is the gate through which we return to Eden.

### **A more authentic Christianity?**

But Gnosticism has also returned in an explicitly religious form, with the scholarly rediscovery of the ancient religious movements themselves. The best-known name is Elaine Pagels, whose pivotal 1979 book *The Gnostic Gospels* offered a religious synthesis very similar to that offered in Frances Swiney's day. Pagels likewise presented an ideal Christianity that was dehistoricized, psychological, thoroughly woman-friendly, and had many points of resemblance to Buddhism. For Pagels, moreover, as for later writers like Karen King, these ideas were not just an alternative fringe package labeled "Gnosticism," but the authentic core of the ancient Jesus movement. The ancient Gnostic gospels received a fresh advertisement in 2003 when Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* again argued that such movements were at the center, not the margins, of Christianity. Brown's heroine, who proves to be a descendant of Jesus, even bears the Gnostic-inspired name of Sophie.

Such ideas are intoxicating for the millions of people who have grown up in a Christian culture, who love the figure of Jesus, but who feel that there must be something more to the story than what is offered in the Bible or the churches. Gnosticism, as selectively repackaged by its modern advocates, amply fills this need and is buttressed by "authentic" ancient scriptures. Gnosticism, they feel, represents the pristine faith in a form that could never be appreciated by the vulgar herd of ordinary believers, who remain asleep. Surely God would never deign to make his truth available in a form equally available to everyone, however humble, and from all nations?

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## The Unfolding Faith

A bird's eye view of the early church, the emergence of the Gnostics, and the development of the biblical canon.

Compiled by Michael Holmes, with contributions from Nicholas Perrin

### First Century People & Events

**30 or 33** Death and resurrection of Christ

**32 or 34** Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr

**40-45** Simon Magus, sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24) and, according to tradition, founder of Gnosticism, is active in Samaria

**44** James the son of Zebedee is executed by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2)

**47-64** Paul of Tarsus undertakes his missionary travels

**60-100** Menander, a Gnostic teacher and disciple of Simon Magus, is active

**62** James, the brother of Jesus, is stoned

**64** The Great Fire destroys much of Rome; Nero blames the Christians; Peter and Paul possibly executed

**95** [?] Christians may have been persecuted under Emperor Domitian

**90-100** John, the last of the apostles, dies

### Scriptures & Writings

**43-62** James

**48 or 54-57** Galatians

**50-51** I, II Thessalonians

**50-70** Jude

**55-63** I Timothy

**55-56** I Corinthians

**55-70** Gospel of Mark

**56-57** II Corinthians

**57-58** Romans

**57-63** Titus

**58-62** Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

**60-63** I Peter

**60-69** Hebrews

**60-80** Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Luke

**62-80** Acts

**63-65** II Timothy

**64-65** II Peter

**64-70 or 90-96** Revelation

**80-95** Gospel of John, I, II, III John

**95-97** *I Clement*

## **Second Century People & Events**

**100-120** Saturninus, a Gnostic teacher and disciple of Menander, is active

**108-117** Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, writes seven letters to churches on his way to Rome, where he is martyred

**125** Quadratus (earliest Christian apologist) is active

**130-150** Gnostic teacher Basilides is active in Alexandria

**135** Christian apologist Justin Martyr debates Trypho (a Jewish teacher); refers to the "memoirs" of the apostles (Gospels)

**140-165** Gnostic teacher Valentinus is active in Rome

**143** Marcion of Sinope creates his own "canon" of Scripture

**144** Marcion is expelled from the church in Rome, begins missionary activity in Asia Minor and Syria

**145** Aristides (Christian apologist) is active

156 Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, is martyred

165 Justin Martyr is martyred

170-180 Gnostic teacher Heracleon is active

172 The Montanist movement emerges in Asia Minor

177 Christians are martyred in Lyons and Vienne

178 Irenaeus becomes bishop of Lyons

178 Celsus writes *True Reason*, the first systematic intellectual critique of Christianity

180 Melito, the bishop of Sardis, travels "to the east" (Palestine?) to investigate the number and order of the "books of the Old Testament" (earliest reference to this phrase) and provides the first Christian list of the contents of the Jewish Scriptures

180-200 [?] Muratorian Canon is the earliest surviving attempt to list the New Testament canon

180-200 Christian teacher Clement of Alexandria is active

185 Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, cites a "core collection" of 20 documents acknowledged as Scripture (four Gospels, Acts, 13 letters of Paul, James, 1 Peter)

180-200 Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, writes against the Gnostics

190-220 Christian theologian Tertullian is active

190-200 The phrase "New Testament" begins to be used

## Scriptures & Writings

100 [?] *Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)*

108-117 Letters of Ignatius

109-118 Polycarp's *Letter to the Philipppians*

early 2nd c. [?] *Gospel of Peter* (Gnostic?)

120-140 Papias's *Expositions on the Sayings of the Lord*

120-140 [?] *II Clement*

125 Quadratus's *Apology*

130-132 [?] *Epistle of Barnabas*

143 Marcion's ***Antitheses*** (declared heretical)

145 Aristides' ***Apology***

150 [?] ***Epistle to Diognetus***

150 [?] ***Shepherd of Hermas***

mid 2nd c. [?] ***Gospel of Truth*** (Gnostic)\*

mid 2nd c. [?] ***Gospel of Thomas*** (Gnostic)\*

156 ***Martyrdom of Polycarp***

155 Justin Martyr's ***First Apology***

160 Justin Martyr's ***Second Apology***

160 Justin Martyr's ***Dialogue with Trypho***

165 Ptolemy's ***Letter to Flora*** (Gnostic)

165-175 ***Gospel of Judas*** (Gnostic)

2nd c. ***Gospel of Mary*** (Gnostic)\*

180-185 Irenaeus's ***Against Heresies***

190-95 Irenaeus's ***Proof of the Apostolic Preaching***

170-190 ***Concerning the Passover (Peri Pascha)*** by Melito of Sardis

late 2nd c. ***Treatise on the Resurrection***\* (Gnostic)

late 2nd c. ***First Thought in Three Forms***\* (Gnostic)

late 2nd c. ***Gospel of the Savior*** (Gnostic)

### **Third Century People & Events**

200 Naassenes (a Gnostic sect) flourish

202-206 Christians are persecuted in Rome, Corinth, Antioch, Alexandria, and North Africa (including Perpetua and Felicitas)

203 Christian theologian Origen becomes head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria; he later writes the apologetic work ***Against Celsus***

**216-276** Manes/Mani, founder of Manichaeism (an offshoot of Persian Gnosticism), is active

**249-251** First empire-wide persecution is initiated by Emperor Decius

**257-260** Christians are persecuted under Emperor Valerian

### **Scriptures & Writings**

**207** Tertullian's *Against Marcion*

**3rd c.** *Gospel of Philip* (Gnostic)\*

**3rd c.** *Apocalypse (or Revelation) of Peter\** (Gnostic)

**3rd c.** *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth\** (Gnostic)

### **Fourth Century**

#### **People & Events**

**303-312** Great Persecution begins, instituted by Emperor Diocletian

**313** Constantine's Edict of Milan grants religious toleration, brings persecution to a close

**325** Council of Nicaea produces creed affirming that Christ is "of the same substance" as the Father and condemns the teaching of Arius

**325** Eusebius (in his *Church History*) discusses the "state of the question" regarding the contents and boundaries of the New Testament

**367** Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his *Easter Letter* gives first list of 27 books that matches the New Testament as recognized today

### **Scriptures & Writings**

**375** Epiphanius's *Refutation of All Heresies* against the Gnostics

### **The Dating Game**

When it comes to ancient documents, there is no one-size-fits-all criterion for determining their date. There are, however, general principles, based on two types of evidence: external and internal.

External evidence refers to clues outside the document that can either pinpoint a date or help give us a window. For example, if a given document is clearly cited in another dateable text, then the established text provides a "no later than" cut-off date for our text. Alternatively, an external source may give explicit verification of a document's authorship and/or dating. The only questions are (1) whether there is any reason for the source to have distorted or fabricated this report, and, if not, (2) whether there is good reason to doubt its accuracy.

Internal evidence includes any signs within the text itself that may give a clue to its date. Many of these can provide a "no *earlier* than" cut-off date. Internal evidence includes:

- An explicit statement of audience, authorship (assuming that the named author is not a pseudonym), or time of writing.
- Allusion to any dateable events, figures, movements, ideas, practices, texts, or other material culture.
- The original language of composition.
- The style, word choice, and genre of the document, which may be traceable to a particular author or setting.
- The substantive concerns of the document, which may be traceable to a particular author or setting.

The more external and internal evidence there is, the greater likelihood of a consensus for a proper dating. The less evidence, the more we are left to an educated guess.

—*Nicholas Perrin*

***\*Indicates Gnostic texts included in the Nag Hammadi collection.***

***Most of the dates in this timeline are approximations due to the difficulties of dating events and texts in the first two centuries.***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 96: The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge

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## The Hunger for Secret Knowledge: Recommended Resources

### Early Christianity

- *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, edited by Everett Ferguson, 2 volumes (Garland, 1997)
- Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans, 3rd edition, 2003)
- J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Continuum, 5th edition, 2000)
- Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers* (Brazos, 2007)
- Robert McQueen Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Westminster John Knox, 1988)
- Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (InterVarsity, 2002)
- Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (Yale, 2005)
- Frances M. Young and Lewis Ayers, *Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge, 2004)

### Early Christian Writings

- Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries* (ACU Press, 1999)
- Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Baker Academic, 2006)
- Robert McQueen Grant, *Second Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments* (Westminster John Knox, 2003)
- Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 3rd ed., 1999) and *The Early Christian Fathers* (Oxford, 1969)
- C. C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (Westminster John Knox, 2006)

### Irenaeus

- *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* (Hendrickson, new edition, 1994)
- Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading?* (Michael Glazier Books, 1997)
- Robert Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Routledge, 1996)
- *St. Irenaeus of Lyons, On the Apostolic Preaching*, translated by John Behr (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997)
- Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge, 2005)

### Scripture and Tradition

- F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Chapter House, 1988) and *Tradition: Old and New* (Zondervan, 1970)
- D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Baker Academic, 2005) and *Tradition, Scripture and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Baker Academic, 2006)



## Gnosticism

- Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Anchor Bible, 1995)
- Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (T&T Clark, 2003)
- Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"* (Brill, 2005)
- *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, edited by Marvin Meyer (HarperOne, 2007)
- Birger Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Tradition and Literature* (Fortress, 2007)
- Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas: The Other Gospel* (Westminster John Knox, 2007)
- Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis* (T&T Clark, 1998)
- David Scholer, "Gnosis, Gnosticism," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 400-12
- Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith: The Gnostic Legacy from the Gospels to The Da Vinci Code* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)
- Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (Yale Nota Bene, 2000)
- N. T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (SPCK, 2006)

## Modern Controversies

- Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Thomas Nelson, 2006) and *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking* (Thomas Nelson, 2004)
- Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (InterVarsity, 2006)
- Philip Jenkins, *The Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (Oxford, 2001)
- Nicholas Perrin, *Lost in Transmission? What We Can Know about the Words of Jesus* (Thomas Nelson, 2008)

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## Roots Matter

Defending the faith in today's cultural climate means not only knowing our Bible but also knowing our history.

Darrell L. Bock

**It used to be that when I taught class** and came to Gnosticism, eyes glazed over and clock-watching began. Mentioning Gnostics in church just never happened. The digital age of niche TV and "History Channel" documentaries has changed all that. The Gnostics are making prime time appearances and have agents. I get questions about them constantly.

We are now in a period when it is not enough to know only about the Bible. The apologetics of the past is no longer adequate. Today's questions involve not only how the Bible came to be, but even if there was originally such a thing as orthodoxy. It is a crucial question. Christians need to know a lot more about the second century. Roots matter, especially in the founding of a movement.

One question often raised is how there could be "orthodoxy" when there was no functioning New Testament until sometime between the late second and the fourth century. Doesn't this mean that Christianity could and did go in all directions until the canon nailed down doctrine? The claim is that our history is distorted because winners write the history. My reply is that in this case the winners deserved to win, because their faith had a theological rootedness that the Gnostics' did not.

By tracing second-century theological discussion, we know that a connected use of New Testament books was not yet taking place. Though the individual books were circulating, the only functioning biblical "canon" was the Old Testament. So how was orthodoxy taught? Did it even exist?

The simple answer is that the "Rule of Faith" was present. But how was the Rule of Faith passed on from generation to generation? Was there a mechanism that allowed church members to know what orthodoxy was? The answer is yes. It can be detected within our oldest historical sources for Christianity, showing that the roots of our faith's content go back to the earliest days of the faith.

Three words summarize that mechanism: schooling, singing, and sacraments.

**Schooling** involved doctrinal summaries. Much like memory verses today, they presented the core of the faith, not with the detail of the creeds that emerged after the Council of Nicaea, but with enough content to delineate the most central ideas about God, Jesus, and forgiveness through Jesus' death. 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, Romans 1:2-4, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 reveal this early church schooling. **Singing** involved hymns. Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 show how much theology was contained in what the earliest church sang. **Sacraments** involved the teaching presented at baptism and Communion. Here one can think of the words spoken over the Lord's Table ("On the night he was betrayed Jesus took the bread ... This is for you") or the picture of baptism summarized in Romans 6:2-4, which proclaims that Christ has put the old life to death and given new life.

Here is orthodoxy, rooted in the acts of worship that took place each week before the New Testament canon appeared. The church could know its roots because the apostolic teaching showed up in worship. As a result, orthodoxy was passed on and Gnostic teaching was exposed as lacking the roots that mattered.

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