



## FROM JESUS TO CHRIST

## THE STORY OF THE STORYTELLERS

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## The Gnostic Gospels

The 52 texts discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt include "secret" gospels poems and myths attributing to Jesus sayings and beliefs which are very different from the New Testament. Scholar Elaine Pagels explores these documents and their implications.

From *The Gnostic Gospels*  
by Elaine Pagels

In December 1945 an Arab peasant made an astonishing archeological discovery in Upper Egypt. Rumors obscured the circumstances of this find--perhaps because the discovery was accidental, and its sale on the black market illegal. For years even the identity of the discoverer remained unknown. One rumor held that he was a blood avenger; another, that he had made the find near the town of Naj 'Hammādi at the Jabal al-Tárif, a mountain honeycombed with more than 150 caves. Originally natural, some of these caves were cut and painted and used as grave sites as early as the sixth dynasty, some 4,300 years ago.

Thirty years later the discoverer himself, Muhammad 'Alí al-Sammán; told what happened. Shortly before he and his brothers avenged their father's murder in a blood feud, they had saddled their camels and gone out to the Jabal to dig for **sabakh**, a soft soil they used to fertilize their crops. Digging around a massive boulder, they hit a red earthenware jar, almost a meter high. Muhammad 'Alí hesitated to break the jar, considering that a **jinn**, or spirit, might live inside. But realizing that it might also contain gold, he raised his mattock, smashed the jar, and discovered inside thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather. Returning to his home in al-Qasr, Muhammad 'Alí dumped the books and loose papyrus leaves on the straw piled on the ground next to the oven. Muhammad's mother, 'Umm-Ahmad, admits that she burned much of the papyrus in the oven along with the straw she used to kindle the fire.

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

Fearing that the police investigating the murder would search his house and discover the books, Muhammad 'Alí asked the priest, al-Qummus Basiliyus Abd al-Masih, to keep one or more for him. During the time that Muhammad 'Alí and his brothers were being interrogated for murder, Raghíb, a local history teacher, had seen one of the books, and suspected that it had value. Having received one

from al-Qummas Basiliyus, Raghib sent it to a friend in Cairo to find out its worth.

Sold on the black market through antiquities dealers in Cairo, the manuscripts soon attracted the attention of officials of the Egyptian government. Through circumstances of high drama, as we shall see, they bought one and confiscated ten and a half of the thirteen leather-bound books, called codices, and deposited them in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. But a large part of the thirteenth codex, containing five extraordinary texts, was smuggled out of Egypt and offered for sale in America. Word of this codex soon reached Professor Gilles Quispel, distinguished historian of religion at Utrecht, in the Netherlands. Excited by the discovery, Quispel urged the Jung Foundation in Zurich to buy the codex. But discovering, when he succeeded, that some pages were missing, he flew to Egypt in the spring of 1955 to try to find them in the Coptic Museum. Arriving in Cairo, he went at once to the Coptic Museum, borrowed photographs of some of the texts, and hurried back to his hotel to decipher them. Tracing out the first line, Quispel was startled, then incredulous, to read: "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down." Quispel knew that his colleague H.C. Puech, using notes from another French scholar, Jean Doresse, had identified the opening lines with fragments of a Greek **Gospel of Thomas** discovered in the 1890's. But the discovery of the whole text raised new questions: Did Jesus have a twin brother, as this text implies? Could the text be an authentic record of Jesus' sayings? According to its title, it contained the **Gospel According to Thomas**; yet, unlike the gospels of the New Testament, this text identified itself as a **secret** gospel. Quispel also discovered that it contained many sayings known from the New Testament; but these sayings, placed in unfamiliar contexts, suggested other dimensions of meaning. Other passages, Quispel found, differed entirely from any known Christian tradition: the "living Jesus," for example, speaks in sayings as cryptic and compelling as Zen koans:

Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

What Quispel held in his hand, the **Gospel of Thomas**, was only one of the fifty-two texts discovered at Nag Hammadi (the usual English transliteration of the town's name). Bound into the same volume with it is the **Gospel of Philip**, which attributes to Jesus acts and sayings quite different from those in the New Testament:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scholars investigating the Nag Hammadi find discovered that some of the texts tell the origin of the human race in terms very different from the usual reading of Genesis: the **Testimony of Truth**, for example, tells the story of the Garden of Eden from the viewpoint of the serpent! Here the serpent, long known to appear in Gnostic literature as the principle of divine wisdom, convinces Adam and Eve

to partake of knowledge while "the Lord" threatens them with death, trying jealously to prevent them from attaining knowledge, and expelling them from Paradise when they achieve it. Another text, mysteriously entitled **The Thunder, Perfect Mind**, offers an extraordinary poem spoken in the voice of a feminine divine power:

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

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin....

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

I am the silence that is incomprehensible....

I am the utterance of my name.

These diverse texts range, then, from secret gospels, poems, and quasi-philosophic descriptions of the origin of the universe, to myths, magic, and instructions for mystical practice.

Why were these texts buried-and why have they remained virtually unknown for nearly 2,000 years? Their suppression as banned documents, and their burial on the cliff at Nag Hammadi, it turns out, were both part of a struggle critical for the formation of early Christianity. The Nag Hammadi texts, and others like them, which circulated at the beginning of the Christian era, were denounced as heresy by orthodox Christians in the middle of the second century. We have long known that many early followers of Christ were condemned by other Christians as heretics, but nearly all we knew about them came from what their opponents wrote attacking them. Bishop Irenaeus, who supervised the church in Lyons, c. 180, wrote five volumes, entitled **The Destruction and Overthrow of Falsely So-called Knowledge**, which begin with his promise to set forth the views of those who are now teaching heresy . . . to show how absurd and inconsistent with the truth are their statements . . . I do this so that . . . you may urge all those with whom you are connected to avoid such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ.

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

This campaign against heresy involved an involuntary admission of its persuasive power; yet the bishops prevailed. By the time of the Emperor Constantine's conversion, when Christianity became an officially approved religion in the fourth century, Christian bishops, previously victimized by the police, now

commanded them. Possession of books denounced as heretical was made a criminal offense. Copies of such books were burned and destroyed. But in Upper Egypt, someone; possibly a monk from a nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, took the banned books and hid them from destruction--in the jar where they remained buried for almost 1,600 years.

But those who wrote and circulated these texts did not regard **themselves** as "heretics. Most of the writings use Christian terminology, unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage. Many claim to offer traditions about Jesus that are secret, hidden from "the many" who constitute what, in the second century, came to be called the "catholic church." These Christians are now called gnostics, from the Greek word **gnosis**, usually translated as "knowledge." For as those who claim to know nothing about ultimate reality are called agnostic (literally, "not knowing"), the person who does claim to know such things is called gnostic ("knowing"). But **gnosis** is not primarily rational knowledge. The Greek language distinguishes between scientific or reflective knowledge ("He knows mathematics") and knowing through observation or experience ("He knows me"), which is **gnosis**. As the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as "insight," for **gnosis** involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny. According to the gnostic teacher Theodotus, writing in Asia Minor (c. 140-160), the gnostic is one who has come to understand who we were, and what we have become; where we were... whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.

Yet to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of **gnosis**. Another gnostic teacher, Monoimus, says:

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, "My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body." Learn the sources of sorrow:, joy, love, hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him **in yourself**.

What Muhammad 'All discovered at Nag Hammadi is, apparently, a library of writings, almost all of them gnostic. Although they claim to offer secret teaching, many of these texts refer to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and others to the letters of Paul and the New Testament gospels. Many of them include the same **dramatic personae** as the New Testament--Jesus and his disciples. Yet the differences are striking.

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

Second, the "living Jesus" of these texts speaks of illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance, like the Jesus of the New Testament. Instead of coming to

save us from sin, he comes as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. But when the disciple attains enlightenment, Jesus no longer serves as his spiritual master: the two have become equal--even identical.

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

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

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

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

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

Could the title of the **Gospel of Thomas**--named for the disciple who, tradition tells us, went to India--suggest the influence of Indian tradition?

These hints indicate the possibility, yet our evidence is not conclusive. Since parallel traditions may emerge in different cultures at different times, such ideas could have developed in both places independently. What we call Eastern and Western religions, and tend to regard as separate streams, were not clearly differentiated 2,000 years ago. Research on the Nag Hammadi texts is only beginning: we look forward to the work of scholars who can study these

traditions comparatively to discover whether they can, in fact, be traced to Indian sources.

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

We find this problem familiar in our own experience. The term "Christianity," especially since the Reformation, has covered an astonishing range of groups. Those claiming to represent "true Christianity" in the twentieth century can range from a Catholic cardinal in the Vatican to an African Methodist Episcopal preacher initiating revival in Detroit, a Mormon missionary in Thailand, or the member of a village church on the coast of Greece. Yet Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox agree that such diversity is a recent--and deplorable--development. According to Christian legend, the early church was different. Christians of every persuasion look back to the primitive church to find a simpler, purer form of Christian faith. In the apostles' time, all members of the Christian community shared their money and property; all believed the same teaching, and worshipped together; all revered the authority of the apostles. It was only after that golden age that conflict, then heresy emerged: so says the author of the Acts of the Apostles, who identifies himself as the first historian of Christianity.

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

Contemporary Christianity, diverse and complex as we find it, actually may show more unanimity than the Christian churches of the first and second centuries. For nearly all Christians since that time, Catholics, Protestants, or Orthodox, have shared three basic premises. First, they accept the canon of the New Testament; second, they confess the apostolic creed; and third, they affirm specific forms of church institution. But every one of these--the canon of Scripture, the creed, and the institutional structure--emerged in its present form only toward the end of the second century. Before that time, as Irenaeus and others attest, numerous gospels circulated among various Christian groups, ranging from those of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to such writings as the **Gospel of Thomas**, the **Gospel of Philip**, and the **Gospel of Truth**, as well as many other secret teachings, myths, and poems attributed to Jesus or his disciples. Some of these, apparently, were discovered at Nag Hammadi; many others are lost to us. Those who identified themselves as Christians entertained many--and radically differing--religious beliefs and practices. And the communities scattered

throughout the known world organized themselves in ways that differed widely from one group to another.

Yet by A. D. 200, the situation had changed. Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the only "true faith." The majority of churches, among which the church of Rome took a leading role, rejected all other viewpoints as heresy. Deploring the diversity of the earlier movement, Bishop Irenaeus and his followers insisted that there could be only one church, and outside of that church, he declared, "there is no salvation." Members of this church alone are orthodox (literally, "straight-thinking") Christians. And, he claimed, this church must be **catholic**-- that is, universal. Whoever challenged that consensus, arguing instead for other forms of Christian teaching, was declared to be a heretic, and expelled. When the orthodox gained military support, sometime after the Emperor Constantine became Christian in the fourth century, the penalty for heresy escalated.

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