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The Nag Hammadi Library

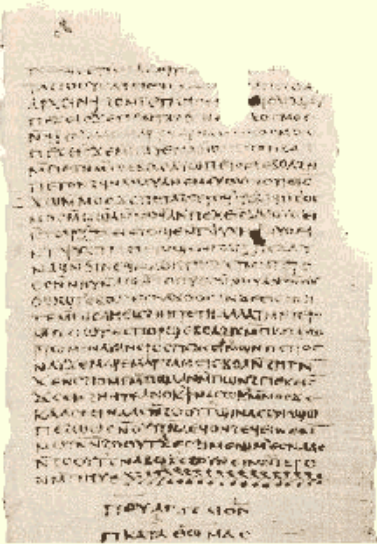
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An Introduction to Gnosticism and The Nag Hammadi Library

What is Gnosticism?

“Gnosis” and “Gnosticism” are still rather arcane terms, though in the last two decades they have been increasingly encountered in the vocabulary of contemporary society. The word *Gnosis* derives from Greek and connotes "knowledge" or the "act of knowing". On first hearing, it is sometimes confused with another more common term of the same root but opposite sense: *agnostic*, literally "not knowing". The Greek language differentiates between rational, propositional knowledge, and a distinct form of knowing obtained by experience or perception. It is this latter knowledge gained from interior comprehension and personal experience that constitutes gnosis.¹

In the first century of the Christian era the term “Gnostic” came to denote a heterodox segment of the diverse new Christian community. Among early followers of Christ it appears there were groups who delineated themselves from the greater household of the Church by claiming not simply a belief in Christ and his message, but a "special witness" or



Nag Hammadi

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Thomas Gospel

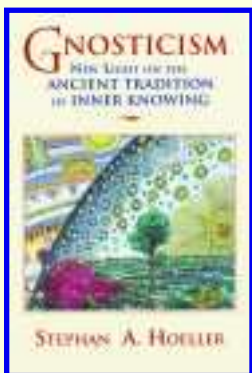
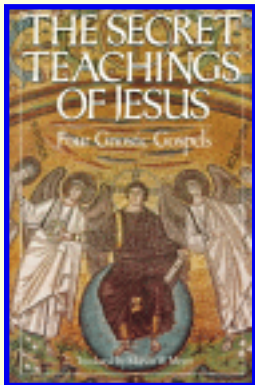
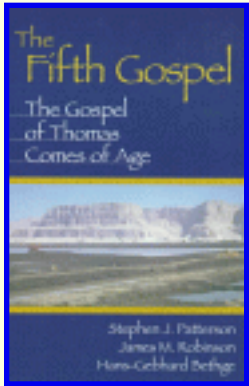
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(Above image of the Gospel of Thomas courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont Graduate University)

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revelatory experience of the divine. It was this experience or *gnosis* that set the true follower of Christ apart, so they asserted. Stephan Hoeller explains that these Christians held a "conviction that direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings, and, moreover, that the attainment of such knowledge must always constitute the supreme achievement of human life."²

What the "authentic truths of existence" affirmed by the Gnostics were will be briefly reviewed below, but first a historical overview of the early Church might be useful. In the initial century and a half of Christianity -- the period when we find first mention of "Gnostic" Christians -- no single acceptable format of Christian thought had yet been defined. During this formative period Gnosticism was one of many currents moving within the deep waters of the new religion. The ultimate course Christianity, and Western culture with it, would take was undecided at this early moment. Gnosticism was one of the seminal influences shaping that destiny.

That Gnosticism was, at least briefly, in the mainstream of Christianity is witnessed by the fact that one of its most influential teachers, Valentinus, may have been in consideration during the mid-second century for election as the Bishop of Rome.³ Born in Alexandria around 100 C.E., Valentinus distinguished himself at an early age as an extraordinary teacher and leader in the highly educated and diverse Alexandrian Christian community. In mid-life he migrated from Alexandria to the



Church's evolving capital, Rome, where he played an active role in the public affairs of the Church. A prime characteristic of Gnostics was their claim to be keepers of sacred traditions, gospels, rituals, and successions – esoteric matters for which many Christians were either not properly prepared or simply not inclined. Valentinus, true to this Gnostic predilection, apparently professed to have received a special apostolic sanction through Theudas, a disciple and initiate of the Apostle Paul, and to be a custodian of doctrines and rituals neglected by what would become Christian orthodoxy.⁴ Though an influential member of the Roman church in the mid-second century, by the end of his life Valentinus had been forced from the public eye and branded a heretic by the developing orthodoxy Church.

While the historical and theological details are far too complex for proper explication here, the tide of history can be said to have turned against Gnosticism in the middle of the second century. No Gnostic after Valentinus would ever come so near prominence in the greater Church. Gnosticism's emphasis on personal experience, its continuing revelations and production of new scripture, its asceticism and paradoxically contrasting libertine postures, were all met with increasing suspicion. By 180 C.E. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, was publishing his first attacks on Gnosticism as heresy, a labor that would be continued with increasing vehemence by the church Fathers throughout the next century.

Orthodoxy Christianity was deeply and profoundly influenced by its struggles with Gnosticism in the second and third centuries. Formulations of many central traditions in Christian theology came as reflections and shadows of this confrontation with the Gnosis.⁵ But by the end of the fourth century the struggle was essentially over: the evolving ecclesia had added the force of political correctness to dogmatic denunciation, and with this sword so-called "heresy" was painfully cut from the Christian body. Gnosticism as a Christian tradition was largely eradicated, its remaining teachers ostracized, and its sacred books destroyed. All that remained for students seeking to understand Gnosticism in later centuries were the denunciations and fragments preserved in the patristic heresiologies. Or at least so it seemed until the mid-twentieth century.

Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library

It was on a December day in the year of 1945, near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, that the course of Gnostic studies was radically renewed and forever changed. An Arab peasant, digging around a boulder in search of fertilizer for his fields, happened upon an old, rather large red earthenware jar. Hoping to have found a buried treasure, and with due hesitation and apprehension about the *jinn* who might attend such a hoard, he smashed the jar open. Inside he discovered no treasure and no genie, but instead books: more than a dozen old codices bound in golden brown leather.⁶ Little did he realize that he had found an extraordinary collection of ancient texts,

manuscripts hidden a millennium and a half before -- probably by monks from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius seeking to preserve them from a destruction ordered by the church as part of its violent expunging of heterodoxy and heresy.

How the Nag Hammadi manuscripts eventually passed into scholarly hands is a fascinating story too lengthy to relate here. But today, now over fifty years since being unearthed and more than two decades after final translation and publication in English as *The Nag Hammadi Library*,⁷ their importance has become astoundingly clear: These thirteen papyrus codices containing fifty-two sacred texts are representatives of the long lost "Gnostic Gospels", a last extant testament of what orthodox Christianity perceived to be its most dangerous and insidious challenge, the feared opponent that the Church Fathers had reviled under many different names, but most commonly as Gnosticism. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts has fundamentally revised our understanding of both Gnosticism and the early Christian church.

Overview of Gnostic Teachings

What was it that these "knowers" knew? What made them such dangerous heretics? The complexities of Gnosticism are legion, making any generalizations wisely suspect. While several systems for defining and categorizing Gnosticism have been proposed over the years, none has gained any general acceptance.⁸ So

with advance warning that this is most certainly not a definitive summary of Gnosticism and its many permutations, we will outline just four elements generally agreed to be characteristic of Gnostic thought.

The first essential characteristic of Gnosticism was introduced above: Gnosticism asserts that "direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings," and that the attainment of such knowledge is the supreme achievement of human life. Gnosis is not a rational, propositional, logical understanding, but a knowing acquired by experience. The Gnostics were not much interested in dogma or coherent, rational theology -- a fact that makes the study of Gnosticism particularly difficult for individuals with "bookkeeper mentalities. One simply cannot cipher up Gnosticism into syllogistic dogmatic affirmations. The Gnostics cherished the ongoing force of divine revelation--Gnosis was the creative experience of revelation, a rushing progression of understanding, and not a static creed. Carl Gustav Jung, the great Swiss psychologist and a life-long student of Gnosticism in its various historical permutations, affirms,

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

In his study, *The American Religion*, noted literary critic Harold Bloom suggests a second characteristic of Gnosticism that might help us conceptually circumscribe its mysterious heart. Gnosticism, says Bloom, "is a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the self, and [this] knowledge leads to freedom..."⁹ Primary among all the revelatory perceptions a Gnostic might reach was the profound awakening that came with knowledge that something within him was uncreated. The Gnostics called this "uncreated self" the divine seed, the pearl, the spark of knowing: consciousness, intelligence, light. And this seed of intellect was the self-same substance of God. It was man's authentic reality, the glory of humankind and divinity alike. If woman or man truly came to gnosis of this spark, she understood that she was truly free: Not contingent, not a conception of sin, not a flawed crust of flesh, but the stuff of God, and the conduit of God's immanent realization. There was always a paradoxical cognizance of duality in experiencing this "self-within-a-self". How could it not be paradoxical: By all rational perception, man clearly was not God, and yet in essential truth, was Godly. This conundrum was a Gnostic mystery, and its knowing was their treasure.

The creator god, the one who claimed in evolving orthodox dogma to have made man, and to own him, the god who would have man contingent upon him, born *ex nihilo* by his will, was a lying demon and not God at all. Gnostics called him by many deprecatory names: "Saklas", the fool; "Ialdebaoth", the blind god; and

"Demiurge", the architect or lesser creative force.

Theodotus, a Gnostic teacher writing in Asia Minor between 140 and 160 C.E., explained that the sacred strength of gnosis reveals "who we were, what we have become, where we have been cast out of, where we are bound for, what we have been purified of, what generation and regeneration are."¹⁰ "Yet", the eminent scholar of Gnosticism, Elaine Pagels, comments in exegesis, "to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God: this is the secret of gnosis.... Self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical." ¹¹

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

Jesus said, `I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out.... ¹²

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.' ¹³

He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: What a remarkably heretical image! The Gospel of Thomas in its entirety is an extraordinary

scripture. Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard University notes that though ultimately this Gospel was condemned and destroyed by the evolving orthodox church, it may be as old or older than the four canonical gospels preserved, and even have served as a source document to them.¹⁴

This brings us to the third prominent element in our brief summary of Gnosticism: its reverence for texts and scriptures unaccepted by the orthodox fold. Gnostic experience was mythopoetic: in story and metaphor, and perhaps also in ritual enactments, Gnosticism sought expression of subtle, visionary insights inexpressible by rational proposition or dogmatic affirmation. For the Gnostics, revelation was the nature of Gnosis. Irritated by their profusion of "inspired texts" and myths, Irenaeus complains in his classic second century refutation of Gnosticism, that "...every one of them generates something new, day by day, according to his ability; for no one is deemed perfect, who does not develop...some mighty fiction."¹⁶

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

In many of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts God is imaged as a dyad of masculine and feminine elements. Though their language is specifically Christian, Gnostic sources often use sexual symbolism to describe God. Prof. Pagels explains,

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

`From Thee, Father, and through Thee, Mother, the two immortal names, Parents of the divine being, and thou, dweller in heaven, humanity, of the mighty name...'17

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

"...the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended... They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us? the Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as I love her?"¹⁸

The most mysterious and sacred of all Gnostic rituals may have played upon this perception of God as "duality seeking unity." The Gospel of Philip (which in its entirety might be read as a commentary on Gnostic ritual) relates that the Lord established five great sacraments or mysteries: "a baptism and a chrism, and a eucharist, and a redemption, and a bridal chamber."¹⁹ Whether this ultimate sacrament of the bridal chamber was a ritual enacted by a man and women, an allegorical term for a mystical experience, or a union of both, we do not know. Only hints are given in Gnostic texts about what this sacrament might be:

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

reseparate.20

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

Classical Christian Gnosticism was lost to the Western world during the fourth and fifth centuries. But the Gnostic world view -- with its comprehension of humankind's true uncreated nature and inherent affinity with God; its affirmation of interior individual experience granting certain knowledge; and its awareness of demiurgic forces binding human consciousness -- was not so easily extinguished. These Gnostic perceptions continued in various forms to course through Western culture though perforce often by occult paths. Gnosticism was and is today a tradition perpetually reborn in the *gnosis kardia* of humankind, a tradition eternally alive within those "who have ears to hear" its call.

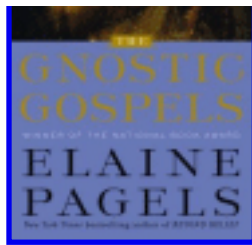
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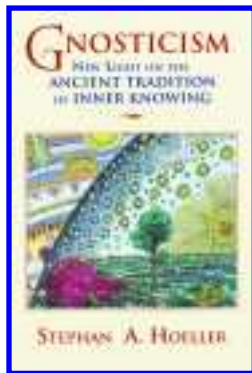


The Gnostic Gospels by Elaine Pagels

For any reading program, this is

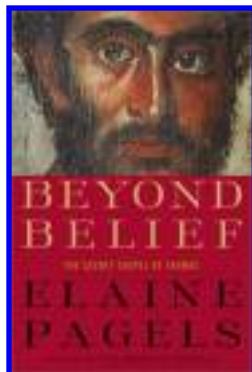


the place to start. Pagels has produced a popular classic, a book acclaimed for two decades by laymen and scholars alike. You will find no better introduction to classical Gnosticism and the Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi. The combined reading of this book and Stephan Hoeller's text (listed above) will give an excellent introduction to Gnosticism. Of course, after finishing *The Gnostic Gospels*, you will also want to read Pagels recent book, *Beyond Belief* (see below). [Buy the Book](#)



Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing by Stephan A. Hoeller **NEW**

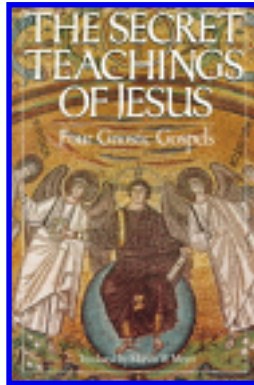
There has long been need for a comprehensive introductory guide to the Gnostic tradition. Hoeller supplies just such a book with this new offering. This delightful study gives clear voice to the essential message of Gnosticism; it is an invaluable introduction to the history and import of Gnosticism in the Western tradition. The Nag Hammadi library is discuss in context and the import of the Gnostic texts is put in perspective by this work. [Buy the Book](#)



Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas by Elaine Pagels **NEW**

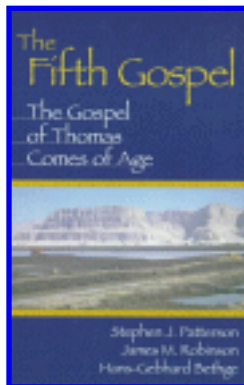
In a book certain to become a another classic, Pagels returns to the themes she first introduced two decades ago in her landmark study, *The Gnostic Gospels*. **Beyond**

Belief interweaves ancient history with the quietly compelling tale of Pagels' own quest to understand her heritage. It leads by careful and well-reasoned steps back through history, to an interior spiritual tradition within Christianity forgotten by the world – a tradition reviled as heresy, and excised from what became orthodox creedal faith. As most readers will perceive, Pagels' heart is keenly attuned to that forgotten Christianity. Pagels here discusses at length the conflict of Ireneus with the Valentinians and its import for the formation of orthodoxy (issues mentioned briefly in the essay above). [Buy the Book](#)



The Secret Teachings of Jesus: Four Gnostic Gospels edited by Marvin Meyer

A presentation of four principal texts from the Gnostic writings found at Nag Hammadi. Included here is the *Gospel of Thomas*, a remarkable record of the sayings of the "living Jesus", along with the *Book of Thomas*, *The Gospel of James*, and *Secret Book of John*. A concise introduction rounds out this nice selection of Gnostic texts. It serves as good collection to use for beginning study of classical Gnostic writings. [Buy the Book](#)



The Fifth Gospel: The Gospel of Thomas Comes of Age by Stephen J. Patterson and James M. Robinson

Very readable edition of the important *Gospel of Thomas*, perhaps the single most important

document found at Nag Hammadi. This translation is accompanied by two excellent introductory essays placing *Thomas* within the historical Gospel context. (Robinson's essay discusses in detail the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library and the subsequent long and difficult process of bringing the works to publication.) The book is written by recognized scholars but addressed to a general audience. A highly recommended introduction to this important Gnostic Gospel. [Buy the Book](#)



The Nag Hammadi Library in English edited by James M. Robinson

The epochal translation of the entire Nag Hammadi Library. First published in 1977, this newest edition has improved the translations presented. Every student of Gnosticism will want to own this book, but before attempting to understand the texts presented here, we highly recommend a study of the introductory readings listed above. [Buy the Book](#)

Notes:

1. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York, 1987), p.9. Hereafter cited as GS.
2. Stephan A. Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung* (Wheaton, Ill., 1982), p.11.
3. Layton, p. 220.

4. Layton, pp. 217-221.
5. Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford, 1990), p. 5.
6. We should here note, given recent extensive discussions about the Dead Sea Scrolls, that the Nag Hammadi find is entirely separate from that much publicized discovery of ancient Jewish texts. Discovered beginning in 1947, two years after the Nag Hammadi texts were found, these records now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls were apparently the possessions of Essene communities residing near Qumran in Palestine at a time around the beginning of the Christian era.
7. J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York, 1st ed., 1977; 3rd ed., 1988). Hereafter cited as NHL.
8. An excellent summary of these appears in: Stephan Hoeller, "What is a Gnostic?" *Gnosis: A Journal of Western Inner Traditions* 23 (Spring, 1992), pp. 24-27.
9. Bloom, p. 49.
10. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Exerpta ex theodoto* 78.2.
11. Pagels, pp. xix-xx.
12. Gospel of Thomas, 35.4-7, NHL.
13. Gospel of Thomas, 50.28-30, NHL.
14. Helmut Koester, "Introduction to The Gospel of Thomas", in NHL, p. 124 f. See also Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York, 2003), pp. 50-73.
15. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1.17.1
16. *ibid.*, 1.18.1
17. Pagels, p. 49.

18. Gospel of Philip, 63.32-64.5, in NHL.

19. Gospel of Philip, 67.27, in GS.

20. Gospel of Philip, 70.12-20, in GS.

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