

# The Gnostic Gospels

By Elaine Pagels

## Plot Summary

### *Introduction*

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

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

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

Testament Jesus speaks of sin and repentance, while the Gnostic Jesus speaks of "illusion and enlightenment," according to Pagels.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Chapter 3: God the Father/God the Mother**

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

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

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

Early Christians interpreted Christ's death on the cross in a number of different ways. Many Gnostic Christians believed that Christ did not die an actual physical death, as he was not truly a physical (human) being but a purely spiritual being who only appeared to have a physical body. This view is found in one of the Gnostic texts, the *Acts of John*, discovered before the find at Nag Hammadi. Other Gnostics, such as the followers of

Valentinus, believed that, because Christ encompassed both humanness and divinity, he suffered and died like a human but "the divine spirit within him could not die." In a sense, Christ transcended death. Orthodox Christianity required that its followers believe that Christ suffered as a human, that his crucifixion was an historical and literal event, and that any other interpretation was heretical.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gnostics also believed that ignorance was the cause of man's suffering—not sin, as the orthodox Christians believed. If man could incorporate self-knowledge, then suffering would be limited or cease. Pagels notes that in this sense, "the gnostic movement shared certain affinities with contemporary methods of exploring the self through psychotherapeutic techniques." Along those same lines, Gnostics often ridiculed the orthodox assumption that the kingdom of God was an actual place and that its arrival would be an actual historical event. Pagels

argues that Gnosticism, though, must be seen as more than a mere rebellion against orthodoxy but instead as "a religious perspective that implicitly opposed the development of the kind of institution that became the early [catholic church](#)." Gnosticism was "no match" for the highly organized institution into which the orthodox church matured, "for ideas alone do not make a religion powerful, ... equally important are social and political structures that identify and unite a people into a common affiliation," Pagels asserts.

### ***Conclusion***

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