

THE Gnostic GOSPELS: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Scholars for years have referred to various specific phenomena as the soil from which gnosticism sprouted, grew and developed. Some have indicated that Christianity was the main soil, others have considered Hellenistic Judaism as a most likely fertile source, others have looked to Palestinian and Syrian sources (beginning with Simon Magus, who is mentioned in Acts), a fourth group sees Hellenistic philosophy (particularly stoicism and neo-Platonism) as the root, and many affirm that oriental pagan religions had some original influence on gnosticism.¹

Elaine Pagels' peculiar contribution to the subject of gnostic studies is her belief that gnostic and "traditional" or "orthodox" Christianity developed side by side until the political and social goals of the stronger "orthodox" led to the suppression and exclusion of gnosticism, to the impoverishment of Christian tradition and the distortion of the institutional Church.² Pagels writes that the Nag Hammadi library opens the eyes of the reader to at least a glimpse of the complexity of the early Christian movement and enables one to see that what has been identified as early Christian tradition actually only represents a small, arbitrary selection of specific sources, chosen from among dozens of others.³ The implication is that there came into being a pool of written religious works during the later first and early second centuries out of which "Christian" leaders arbitrarily chose those that supported their own political and social ideas and that they foresaw would contribute to their goals for the institutional Church.

It is apparent then that "Christian" gnosticism for Pagels does not find its source in pre-Christian phenomena, nor is it to be considered as a heresy arising out of Christianity or as a parasite feeding upon Christianity, but rather as an equal rising out of the same historic milieu only to be set aside, rejected and ultimately destroyed by what came to be orthodox Christianity, in the greater interests of the institutional Church. The implication is that gnosticism might well be the "orthodox" Christianity of today if the Church leaders of the late first and second centuries had not done their work well. By the time of the conversion of Constantine, when Christianity became an officially approved religion, Christian

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¹See G. Van Groningen, *First Century Gnosticism: Its Origins and Motifs* (Leiden, 1967), 9-15. See also R. M. Wilson, "The Gnostic Library of Nag Hammadi," *SJT* 12/2, 161-170; R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (London, 1959); R. Bultmann, *The Theology of the New Testament* (London, 1955) 1; A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York, 1960) 1; W. C. van Unnik, *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings* (London, 1960); G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Welt Religion* (Zurich, 1951); J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York, 1960); E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Michigan, 1973); H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston, 1958).

²E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, 1979) xviii, xxii-xxxvi.

³*Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

bishops saw to it that possession of heretical books was made a criminal offense and that copies of such books were destroyed.⁴

It was the ban on such books, Pagels concludes, that led to the burial of a number of gnostic texts on a cliff at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. The discovery of the cache of documents in 1945 has enlarged our firsthand knowledge of gnostic doctrine, and now, Pagels writes, "the heretics can speak for themselves."⁵ The discovery consists of twelve books plus eight leaves of a thirteenth book written on papyrus in codex rather than scroll form. Each of the books contains a collection of relatively brief works for a total of 52 tractates, twelve of which are duplications. Of the forty separate documents only three are entitled "Gospels," and a fourth has been given that title by scholars because its opening words are "The gospel of truth." The manuscripts, which are Coptic translations of Greek originals, became available in English translation in 1977 as a result of the labor of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity under the direction of James Robinson. Pagels, professor of religion at Barnard College in New York, was a working member of the translation team and thus brings to her book a considerable amount of background knowledge and expertise.

While holding that the Nag Hammadi documents represent a parallel tradition that developed alongside Christianity at the beginning of the Christian era,⁶ Pagels admits that there is a great deal of difference between them and the canonical gospels. For instance, some of the gnostic texts question whether suffering and death find their origin in sin. Others speak of the feminine element in the divine, speaking of God as Father and Mother. Still others suggest that Christ's resurrection is to be understood symbolically, not literally. A few radical texts denounce nongnostic Christians themselves as heretics. On the other hand she states that orthodox Christianity, as defined by the apostolic creed, contains some ideas that people today might find even more strange. These "strange" ideas include the Christian confession that God is perfectly good and yet created a world that includes pain, injustice and death; that Jesus of Nazareth was born of a virgin mother; and that after being executed by order of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate he arose from his grave "on the third day." Pagels asks why the consensus of Christian churches not only accepted these "astonishing" views but established them as the only true form of Christian doctrine. She indicates that in addition to the traditionally accepted religious and philosophic reasons the new gnostic sources suggest that the debate on the nature of God and of Christ also had social and political implications that were crucial to the development of Christianity as an institutional religion. That is, ideas bearing implications contrary to that institutional development came to be labeled heresy, and ideas that implicitly support it became orthodox.

By investigating the texts from Nag Hammadi . . . we can see how politics and religion coincide in the development of Christianity. We can see, for example, the political implications of such orthodox doctrines as the bodily resurrection—and how gnostic views of resurrection bear opposite implications. In the process, we can gain a startlingly new perspective on the origins of Christianity.⁷

It is quite clear that Pagels has come to the question of the origin, development

⁴Ibid., p. xviii.

⁶Ibid., p. xviii.

⁵Ibid., p. xxxv.

⁷Ibid., p. xxxvi.

and demise of "Christian" gnosticism with certain presuppositions regarding the canonical gospels and the development of Christianity.

What proves the validity of the four gospels, Irenaeus says, is that they actually *were* written by Jesus' own disciples and their followers, who personally witnessed the events they described. Some contemporary Biblical scholars have challenged this view: few today believe that contemporaries of Jesus actually wrote the New Testament gospels. Although Irenaeus, defending their exclusive legitimacy, insisted that they were written by Jesus' own followers, we know virtually nothing about the persons who wrote the gospels we call Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We only know that these writings are attributed to apostles (Matthew and John) or followers of the apostles (Mark and Luke).⁸

Pagels' rejection of the view of historic Biblical Christianity that the canonical gospels were written by men who lived in Jesus' time as a faithful presentation of his person, purpose and work has permitted her to consider the canonical gospels as political documents chosen primarily for the purpose of legitimizing the authority of a certain group of leaders of the early Church. Interestingly enough, the authority thus rendered legitimate is always stated in terms anachronistically evoking the Roman Catholic model.

For nearly 2,000 years, orthodox Christians have accepted the view that the apostles alone held definitive religious authority, and that their only legitimate heirs are priests and bishops, who trace their ordination back to that same apostolic succession. Even today the pope traces his—and the primacy he claims over the rest—to Peter himself, "first of the apostles," since he was "first witness of the resurrection."⁹

It is obvious that once one rejects the concept of divine oversight in the discussion of the origin of the canonical gospels he is free to treat them as equal to but not better than any other writings and to treat other writings as of equal value, which Pagels seems to have done in the case of the gnostic gospels.

In the first chapter of her book Pagels sets out to illustrate her thesis by pointing up the political implications of the resurrection of Christ. She suggests that the various Biblical statements concerning the resurrection of Christ allow for a range of interpretation from literal physical resurrection on the one hand to the transformation from physical to spiritual existence on the other. If the NT accounts could support a range of interpretation, why, she asks, did orthodox Christians in the second century insist on a literal view of the resurrection and reject all others as heretical? The answer to the question becomes clear when one examines the practical effect of the doctrine on the Christian movement. The doctrine of the resurrection of Christ, she says, exercises the political function of legitimizing the authority of certain men who claim to have exclusive leadership over the churches as the successors of the apostle Peter, who was the "first witness of the resurrection."

From the second century, the doctrine has served to validate the apostolic succession of bishops, the basis of papal authority to this day. Gnostic Christians who interpret resurrection in other ways have a lesser claim to authority: when they claim priority over the orthodox, they are denounced as heretics.¹⁰

⁸Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁹Ibid., p. 11.

This theory—that all authority derives from certain apostles' experience of the resurrected Christ, an experience now closed forever—bears great implications for the political structure of the community. It restricts the circle of leadership to a small band that stands in a position of unassailable authority, and it suggests that only the apostles had the right to ordain future leaders as their successors.

The gnostic "Christians" rejected this theory, Pagels says, calling the literal view of the resurrection the "faith of fools."¹¹ They insisted that the resurrection was not a unique event of the past but rather symbolized how Christ's presence could be experienced in the present.

How is Christ's presence experienced? The author of the *Gospel of Mary* . . . interprets the resurrection appearances as visions received in dreams or in ecstatic trance. . . . Mary Magdalene, seeing the Lord in a vision, asked Him, "How does he who sees the vision see it? Through the soul, or through the spirit?" He answered that the visionary perceives through the mind.¹²

Thus rather than validating doctrine, authority and relationship to God on the basis of observation of a one-time unique historic event the gnostic pointed to countless appearances of the "spiritual" Christ to his disciples; to the *gnōsis* they received from him, which superseded the Church's teaching; and to the authority he gave, which transcended the authority of its hierarchy.

The controversy over resurrection, then, proved critical in shaping the Christian movement into an institutional religion. All Christians agreed in principle that only Christ himself—or God—can be the ultimate source of spiritual authority. But the immediate question, of course, was the practical one: who, in the present, administers that authority?¹³

The "orthodox" held that they were the ones who, having seen Christ raised from the dead or having committed themselves to that doctrine, administered the authority of the apostles and legitimized a hierarchy of persons through whose authority all others must approach God. Gnostic teaching, as Irenaeus and Tertullian realized, was potentially subversive of this order since it claimed to offer to every initiate direct access to God.¹⁴

Pagels' sense of controversy over Christ's resurrection is based on her perception of the teaching of the NT with regard to the resurrection of Christ. The author's assumption that the NT accounts support a range of interpretation from literal resurrection to spiritual, vision-like appearances after his death does not harmonize with the statements of the Biblical text or the perceptions of the early Church. On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the crucifixion of Christ, the apostle Peter proclaimed the resurrection of Christ—in the city of Jerusalem where his body had been buried—as the fulfillment of the statement of King David in Psalm 16, "Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow thy holy one to undergo decay." Peter pointed out that since David was dead and buried and his tomb was in existence even to that day it was clear that he spoke prophetically of the resurrection of Christ, "that he was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we all are

¹¹Ibid., p. 11.

¹³Ibid., p. 25.

¹²Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 27.

witnesses."¹⁵ The apostle Paul in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch used the same OT passage, asserting that

he raised him up from the dead, no more to return to decay. . . . Therefore he also says in another psalm, Thou wilt not allow thy Holy One to undergo decay. For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers, and underwent decay; but he whom God raised did not undergo decay.¹⁶

Paul, writing to the Roman believers, points up the importance of the bodily resurrection of Christ as a theological rather than a political matter when he writes that "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him up from the dead, you shall be saved."¹⁷

It seems clear that both Peter, the so-called "first witness" of the resurrection, and Paul, the last to see the resurrected Christ, taught that it was a literal resurrection that Christ experienced since his flesh did not see decay and that belief in this great historic reality is essential to genuine NT salvation.

The ante-Nicene fathers also wrote of the literal resurrection of Christ as a doctrine that they believed. The literal resurrection of Christ, however, is seen by the fathers as an incontrovertible evidence of Christ's deity and as an exhilarating demonstration of the future literal resurrection of the believer.¹⁸ Since they interpret belief in the literal resurrection of Christ as essential to salvation it is understandable that the fathers should mount an attack on those who deny its reality, for they seek to protect believers and to persuade unbelievers. The testimony of Scripture and of the fathers uniformly considers the literal resurrection of Christ from a theological vantage point rather than from a political or social point of view, as Pagels has suggested.

In the second chapter of *The Gnostic Gospels* Pagels provides a second illustration of her thesis in a discussion entitled "One God, One Bishop." In passing, it is interesting to note that out of the nine gnostic writings quoted in the chapter only one is a gnostic gospel, and out of 83 footnotes again only one documents the use of a gnostic gospel. It appears that the author was more concerned to "make a point" than to deal with the gnostic gospels, as promised by the book title.

In the discussion of one God, one bishop, Pagels indicates that some scholars today consider gnosticism synonymous with metaphysical dualism—or even with pluralities of gods. Irenaeus denounced as blasphemy such fundamental errors, in view of the statement of the Scriptures that "the LORD your God is one LORD." Some gnostics, especially the Valentinians, recited the creed with the believers, but Irenaeus says that although they did verbally confess one God they did it with mental reservations, saying one thing and thinking another.

The followers of Valentinus, because they do indeed confess with the tongue one God the Father, and that all things derive their existence from Him, but do at the same time maintain that He who formed all things is the fruit of an apostasy or de-

¹⁵Acts 2:29-32, quoting Ps 16:10.

¹⁶Acts 13:34-37.

¹⁷Rom 10:9.

¹⁸See Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection*, 9, 10; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1; Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 48.

fect. . . . It appears, then, that their tongues alone, forsooth, have conceded the unity of God, while their real opinion and their understanding (by their habit of investigating profundities) have fallen away from this doctrine of unity, and taken up the notion of manifold deities.¹⁹

Pagels suggests that it is impossible to discuss why the gnostic position was heretical as long as the discussion is carried on exclusively in terms of religious and philosophical arguments. But when one determines how the doctrine of God actually functions in gnostic and orthodox writings he can see that the religious question also involves social and political issues. By the latter part of the second century, when the orthodox insisted on "one God," they simultaneously validated the system of governance in which the Church is ruled by one bishop. She states that gnostic modification of monotheism was taken—and perhaps intended—as an attack on that system. When gnostic and orthodox discussed the nature of God they were at the same time debating the issue of spiritual authority.²⁰ Pagels believes that the issue of spiritual authority dominates the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians (A.D. 90-100), in which Clement makes it clear that he intended to establish the Corinthian church on the model of divine authority.

As God reigns in heaven as master, lord, commander, judge, and king, so on earth he delegates his rule to the members of the church hierarchy, who serve as generals who command an army of subordinates; kings who rule over the people; judges who preside in God's place.²¹

In contrast the gnostic, having achieved *gnōsis*, is set free from the creator (demiurge) who, rather than God, reigns as king and lord, who acts as military commander, who gives the Law and judges those who violate it—that is, the God of Israel.²²

Achieving *gnōsis* involves coming to recognize the true source of divine power, called "the depth" of all being, and to experience freedom from the power of the demiurge and, by extension, from the bishop who in ignorance worships the demiurge.

In short the author postulates a very early (A.D. 90-100) strong movement toward a hierarchical arrangement in "the church," overlooking the picture presented in the pastoral epistles and in the first three chapters of Revelation, which reflect the condition of the churches in the 60s and late 90s as separate entities, perhaps related in fellowship but without oversight from "one bishop" who is in Rome—or elsewhere, for that matter. In her effort to prove her point the author offers as proof what is at best highly conjectural. In addition the documentation offered is often questionable. On occasion it is difficult to find in the source even an allusion to what is stated as fact. In other instances the context is ignored and statements from the source are used that have little or no reference to the subject under discussion. For instance, she states that Clement argues that

God, the God of Israel, alone rules all things: he is the lord and master whom all must obey; he is the judge who lays down the law, punishing rebels and rewarding the obedient. But how is God's rule actually administered? Here Clement's theology becomes practical: God, he says, delegates his "authority to reign" to "rulers and leaders on earth." Who are these designated rulers? Clement answers that they

¹⁹Irenaeus, *Heresies* 4.33.3.

²¹Ibid., p. 35.

²⁰Pagels, *Gospels*, 34.

²²Ibid., p. 37.

are bishops, priests, and deacons. Whoever refuses to "bow the neck" and obey the church leaders is guilty of insubordination against the divine master himself. Carried away with his argument, Clement warns that whoever disobeys the divinely ordained authorities "receives the death penalty."²³

Careful study of the footnoted locations in 1 Clement reveals that the "rulers and leaders on earth" are in fact the secular leaders rather than bishops, priests and deacons who are not mentioned in the context. The statement concerning the death penalty for disobedience appears to be part of the same context, dealing with rulers in the Church. Actually it appears seven pages earlier in the text of 1 Clement in a context dealing with order in the Church, in which Clement uses the illustration of Israel's high priest and his ministers presenting the various prescribed sacrifices in Jerusalem. He says that "those" (priests and ministers of Israel) who do anything contrary to God's will in carrying out their tasks are punished with death. This reminder of an OT provision was apparently meant as a warning to individuals in Corinth to care for their own responsibilities and not to meddle in the responsibilities of others (as was apparently the case in the church he was addressing). He certainly was not threatening with death those in the Church who were disobedient to divinely ordained authorities.

Philip Schaff indicates that among several important changes in the external organization of the Church that took place in the period of A.D. 100-325 was the rise of the episcopate. "Thus we find, so early as the third century, the foundations of a complete hierarchy; though a hierarchy of only moral power, and holding no sort of outward control over the conscience."²⁴ His view is not that an episcopal hierarchy was in process of establishment at the end of the first century but rather that there was movement toward that model in the third century, although even then there was no external control exercised over the churches. Pagels' projection of the third- and fourth-century ecclesiastical hierarchy back into the late first and early second centuries is anachronistic and cannot be used in the political sense she suggests.

A second example of imprecise documentation appears in Pagels' discussion of the gnostic modification of monotheism, which appears above. In response to the question of why Irenaeus found the modification of monotheism so crucial that the followers of Valentinus were expelled as heretics, she writes that Irenaeus admitted that the gnostics were puzzled about it themselves. She quotes Irenaeus:

They ask, when they confess the same things and participate in the same worship . . . how is it that we, for no reason, remain aloof from them; and how is it that when they confess the same things, and hold the same doctrines, *we call them heretics!*²⁵

Study of the footnoted location again indicates that the context has been overlooked. Irenaeus is instructing his readers about the method of operation em-

²³Ibid., p. 34.

²⁴P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Michigan, 1910), 2, 121, 128. See also K. Bihlmeyer, *Church History* (Westminster, 1968) 105-107; F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Michigan, 1954) 66-67, 72-74; G. P. Fischer, *History of the Christian Church* (New York, 1897) 53-55; K. S. Latourette, *The History of Christianity* (New York, 1953), 1, 132-133.

²⁵Pagels, *Gospels*, 33.

ployed by the gnostics. He writes of the "subterfuge of false persons, evil seducers, and hypocrites." He says they "entrap the simple, and entice them, imitating our phraseology."

Then these are asked regarding us, how it is, that when they hold doctrines similar to ours, we, without cause, keep ourselves aloof from their company; and when they say the same things, and hold the same doctrines, we call them heretics? When they have thus, by means of questions, overthrown the faith of any . . . they describe to them in private the unspeakable mystery of their Pleroma.²⁶

It should be noted that Pagels' desire to discuss the gnostic doctrine of God vis-à-vis the orthodox doctrine of God solely on their political and social merits, without reference to religious and philosophical connotations, is an impossibility. The term "heresy" attaches to the gnostic doctrine immediately, so that discussion of political and social issues is without meaning.

The third chapter of *The Gnostic Gospels* is entitled in startling fashion "God the Father/God the Mother" and explores the masculine and feminine terminology and imagery referred to God in the gnostic writings as opposed to the exclusively masculine terminology used of the God of Israel and of the NT writings. Again Pagels sees social implications in the distinctions between the two systems.

Although Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians indicate that the absence of feminine symbolism for God is not significant since he is not to be considered in sexual terms, Pagels indicates that the actual language in daily use in worship and prayer conveys the distinct impression that God is masculine. She states further that religious rhetoric assumes that men form the legitimate body of the community, while women are allowed to participate only when they assimilate themselves to men. However, the gnostic sources exhibit a very real difference here.

Gnostic sources continually use sexual symbolism to describe God. One might expect that these texts would show the influence of archaic pagan traditions of the Mother Goddess, but for the most part, their language is specifically Christian, unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage, yet instead of describing a monistic and masculine God, many of these texts speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements.²⁷

Pagels sketches three primary characterizations of the feminine element in the gnostic description of God. First, several gnostic groups including the Valentinians describe the divine Mother as part of an original couple. It is suggested that the divine is imagined as a dyad consisting in one part of the Ineffable, the Depth, the Primal Father, and in the other of Grace, Silence, the Womb and Mother of all.²⁸ A second characterization of the divine Mother presents her as the Holy Spirit. *The Apocryphon of John* describes a vision seen by John after the crucifixion as a "likeness with multiple forms . . . and the likeness had three forms. He said to me . . . I am the Father, I am the Mother, I am the Son."²⁹ It is

²⁶Irenaeus, *Heresies* 3.15.2.

²⁷Pagels, *Gospels*, 49.

²⁸Ibid., p. 50.

²⁹J. M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York, 1977) 99.

the contention of the author that this is a vision of the trinity, with the gnostic author's conclusion that the feminine person with the Father and the Son must be the Mother. The *Apocryphon* is quoted again, describing the divine Mother: "She is . . . the image of the invisible virginal, perfect spirit. . . . She became the mother of everything, for she existed before them all, the mother-father."³⁰

It should be stated at this point that the "invisible virginal, perfect spirit" of the quotation is characterized as an aeon by the gnostics³¹ and is not considered to be co-equal with the Father and the Son.

The third characterization of the divine Mother is that of Wisdom. Early interpreters wondered if the saying in the book of Proverbs that "God made the world in wisdom" could mean that Wisdom was the feminine power in which God's creation was conceived.

The (gnostic) poet Valentinus uses this theme to tell a famous myth about Wisdom: Desiring to conceive by herself, apart from her masculine counterpart, she succeeded, and became the "great creative power from which all things originate," often called Eve, "Mother of all living." But since her desire violated the harmonious union of opposites intrinsic in the nature of created being, what she produced was aborted and defective; from this, says Valentinus, originated the terror and grief that mar human existence. To shape and manage her creation, Wisdom brought forth the demiurge, the creator-God of Israel, as her agent.³²

Wisdom was thus seen by gnostics as the first universal creator as well as the one who enlightens human beings by giving them *gnōsis*.

Pagels reminds the reader that none of the texts dealing with "God the Mother" appear in the NT. She sees a correlation between religious theory and social practice, indicating that the reason for their exclusion is to be found in the differences in the position of women in gnostic and orthodox circles. Among the gnostic groups, such as the Valentinians, women were considered equal to men. Some were revered as prophets, others acted as teachers, traveling evangelists, healers, priests, perhaps even bishops.³³ She notes the statements of Irenaeus to the effect that women were especially attracted to the heretical groups, explaining the attraction of Marcus, a gnostic teacher, in terms of clever seduction. Pagels characterizes Irenaeus' seduction statement as metaphoric and as involving Marcus' encouragement to prophesy, which women were forbidden to do in the orthodox Church. Actually, contrary to Pagels' interpretation the context of Irenaeus' discussion indicates that he was writing of actual seduction on the part of Marcus, not metaphorical seduction.

He devotes himself especially to women, and those such as are well-bred, and elegantly attired, and of great wealth. . . . He says to her, "Open thy mouth . . . and thou shalt prophesy." . . . She then idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her. . . . Henceforth she reckons herself a prophetess. . . . She then makes the effort to reward him, not only by the gift of her possessions (in which way he has collected a very large fortune), but also by yielding up to him her person, desiring in every way to be united to him.³⁴

³⁰Ibid., p. 101.

³³Ibid., p. 60.

³¹Ibid., pp. 100-101.

³⁴Irenaeus, *Heresies* 1.13.3.

³²Pagels, *Gospels*, 52.

Irenaeus continues, saying that some of these women have returned to the Church confessing that they had been defiled by Marcus and that they were filled with a burning passion toward him.³⁵

The author feels that the gnostic freedom accorded to women, however, was based on the divine Father-Mother principle, while the orthodox system, which was closed to female participation, was based on the concept of God as masculine.

It is suggested that the gnostics and the orthodox resorted to the polemical technique of writing literature that allegedly derived from apostolic times professing to give the views of the original apostles on this "controversial subject." Among the writings listed are the gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Gospel of Mary* and *Pistis Sophia*, as well as the orthodox "alleged" apostolic letters, of which the "pseudo-Pauline" letters of 1 and 2 Timothy, Colossians and Ephesians are outstanding.³⁶ Pagels acknowledges that Paul sees women as his equals in Christ and allows them a wider range of activity than did the traditional Jewish congregations but could not bring himself to advocate their equality in social and political terms. She sees this as a reflection of social transition as well as of the diversity of cultural influences on the churches scattered throughout the known world.³⁷

It appears to the writer that Pagels has tried to find support for a twentieth-century problem in the gnostic writings of the first century, resorting to argumentation that is not compelling based on sometimes unclear and occasionally impossible-to-find documentation. Her statement that "from the year 200, we have no evidence for women taking prophetic, priestly, and episcopal roles among orthodox churches"³⁸ is misleading. It is intended to imply that prior to the year 200 women are known to have exercised presbyterial or episcopal functions in the orthodox Church and that they had been excluded from these functions by the men by A.D. 200. As a matter of fact, there is no evidence of women holding such positions prior to A.D. 200.

There is one great fact on which nearly all accounts about Jesus of Nazareth agree, whether they were written by his enemies or his friends. That is that he was condemned and crucified by order of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judaea. This fact is amply recorded in the Biblical record and is mentioned by several contemporary non-Christian historians.

In the fourth chapter of her book Pagels discusses the passion of Christ and the persecution of Christians, contending that there is always a correlation between one's interpretation of Christ's suffering and death and his attitude toward martyrdom.³⁹ She states that although sources agree on the basic facts of Christ's death, Christians sharply disagree on their interpretation. Many gnostics believed that Jesus was not a human being at all but rather a spiritual being who adapted himself to human perception.⁴⁰ *The Apocalypse of Peter*, a gnostic text from Nag Hammadi, relates the following version of the crucifixion.

I saw him seemingly being seized by them, and I said, "What do I see, O Lord, that it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one,

³⁵Ibid., 1.13.5.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 60-61.

³⁶Pagels, *Gospels*, 67.

³⁹Ibid., p. 90.

³⁷Ibid., p. 62.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 73.

glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?" The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and at me."⁴¹

In the gnostic *Acts of John*, John indicates that when he meant to touch Jesus, sometimes he encountered a material, solid body and sometimes his substance was immaterial, as if it did not exist at all. Furthermore he says that Jesus never left any footprints, nor did he ever blink his eyes. This all demonstrates to John that his nature was spiritual, not human. In contrast the orthodox Christians insisted that Jesus was a human being and that the crucifixion was an historical and literal event, and as such it was a central element of the Christian faith. To understand why faith in the passion and suffering of Christ was central one must recognize that controversy over the interpretation of Christ's suffering and death involved an urgent practical question: How are believers to respond to persecution, which raises the imminent threat of their own suffering and death?

The author seems to indicate in this chapter that for the orthodox, belief in the historic, literal suffering and death of Jesus set the tone and established the path of Christian response to persecution and the threat of death. She quotes Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Ignatius, Irenaeus and Tertullian in their statements of faith in the crucified Christ and their fierce exultation over the prospect of sealing their witness with their lives.

For most of the gnostics, believing that Christ was a spiritual being who only appeared to suffer and die, there was no point in martyrdom. Tertullian, she says, traces the rise of heresy directly to the outbreak of persecution. This, he says, impelled terrified believers to look for theological means to justify their cowardice.⁴²

This among Christians is a season of persecution. When, therefore, faith is greatly agitated, and the church burning, as represented by the bush, then the gnostics break out, then the Valentinians creep forth, then all the opponents of martyrdom bubble up. . . . For because they know that many are artless and also inexperienced and weak moreover, that a very great number in truth are Christians who veer about with the wind and conform to its moods, they perceive that they are never to be approached more than when fear has opened the entrances to the soul, especially when some display of ferocity has already arrayed with a crown the faith of martyrs.⁴³

The author of the gnostic *Testimony of Truth* attacks the conviction that a martyr's death offers forgiveness of sin; that martyrdom should be considered as an offering to God, who surely does not desire human sacrifice; and that martyrdom ensures resurrection for the martyr.⁴⁴ The gnostic teacher Heracleon shares none of the orthodox believer's enthusiasm for martyrdom and above all never suggests that the believer's suffering imitates Christ's, for if only the human element in Christ experienced suffering it suggests that the believer suffers only on the human level while the divine spirit within transcends suffering and death.⁴⁵

Pagels holds that the orthodox view of martyrdom and of Christ's death as its model prevailed because "persecution gave impetus to the formation of the or-

⁴¹Robinson, *Nag Hammadi*, 345.

⁴⁴Pagels, *Gospels*, 92.

⁴²Pagels, *Gospels*, 88.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴³Tertullian, *Scorp.* 1.

ganized church structure that developed by the end of the second century."⁴⁶ Those who followed the orthodox consensus in doctrine and church politics also belonged to the Church that—confessing the crucified Christ—became conspicuous for its martyrs. Groups of gnostic Christians, on the other hand, were scattered and lost—those who resisted doctrinal conformity, questioned the value of the “blood witness,” and often opposed submission to episcopal authority.⁴⁷

The orthodox tradition, the author indicates, implicitly affirms bodily experience as the central fact of human life, while the gnostics regarded the “inner spirit” as the essential part of every person and thus dismissed physical experience as an illusion. It is no wonder, then, that far more people identified with the orthodox reality than with the “bodiless spirit” of gnostic tradition.⁴⁸

While the author has sought to demonstrate that it was the historic literal death of Christ that motivated “orthodox” believers to imitate his sufferings in martyrdom, the writer submits, following the NT model, that it was not only the literal death of Christ in history but it was the belief that the person who died was the God-man, and that by interpretation his death provided a substitute for the sinner, that provided ample motivation for the believer to cling to his faith in the face of fear, suffering and death.

The fifth chapter of the book is entitled, strikingly, “Whose Church Is the True Church?” The author states that by the year 200 the battle lines had been drawn and that both “orthodox and gnostic Christians” claimed to represent the true Church and accused one another of being outsiders, false brethren and hypocrites.⁴⁹ Both gnostic and orthodox presented different criteria in the attempt to define the Church and to distinguish the true Christian from the false.

Gnostic Christians, writes Pagels, pointed to qualitative criteria. They insisted that neither baptism nor profession of a creed nor martyrdom made one a Christian, and they refused to identify the Church with the actual visible community of believers.⁵⁰ They required evidence of spiritual maturity to demonstrate that a person belonged to the true Church. Orthodox Christians, however, by the late second century had begun to establish objective criteria for church membership. Pagels states that whoever confessed the creed, was baptized, participated in worship, and obeyed the clergy was accepted as a fellow Christian. Stating that the bishops wanted to unify the diverse churches scattered throughout the world into a single network, she indicates that they eliminated qualitative criteria for church membership. In the process of attempting to become truly universal, church leaders are said to have created a clear and simple framework consisting of doctrine, ritual, and political structure.⁵¹ She states that Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, and Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, define the Church in terms of the bishop, who represents the system. “Let no one do anything pertaining to the church without the bishop. . . . It is not legitimate either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop.”⁵² Irenaeus says that the Church stands on the “pillar and ground” of the apostolic writings, to which he attributes absolute authority. All others are false and unreliable, unapostolic, and probably com-

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 98.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 101.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁵²Ign. *Smyrn* 8.1-2.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 104.

posed by heretics. The Church alone offers a complete system of doctrine, proclaiming one God, creator and father of Christ, who became incarnate, suffered, died and rose bodily from the dead. Outside the Church there is no salvation.⁵³

"Gnostic Christians" assert that it is the level of understanding among their adherents and the quality of interrelationships among their members that distinguish the false from the true Church. While the eastern branch of the Valentinians maintained that Christ's body, the Church, was purely spiritual and as such excluded orthodox believers, the western branch disagreed. Ptolemy and Heracleon, the leading teachers of the western school of Valentinians, claimed that "Christ's body," the Church, consisted of two distinct elements—one spiritual, the other unspiritual. This meant that both gnostic (spiritual) and nongnostic (unspiritual) stood within the same Church. The unspiritual were to be brought to *gnōsis* by the spiritual.⁵⁴

The orthodox leaders rejected this out of hand. They sought to build a universal Church that would be open to every social class, every racial or cultural origin, whether educated or illiterate—everyone, that is, who would submit to their organizational system.

The bishops drew the line against those who challenged any of the three elements of this system: doctrine, ritual, and clerical hierarchy—and the gnostics challenged them all. Only by suppressing gnosticism did orthodox leaders establish that system of organization which united all believers into a single institutional structure. . . . They did not tolerate any who claimed exemption from doctrinal conformity, from ritual participation, and from obedience to the discipline that priests and bishops administered. Gnostic churches, which rejected that system for more subjective forms of religious affiliation, survived, as churches, for only a few hundred years.⁵⁵

In reflecting on Pagels' comments in chap. 5 of her book, it seems that there are at least two important realities that need to be stated. The first has to do with anachronism, already mentioned above in another connection. It appears that the author is pushing third- and fourth-century concepts of a universal Church and of hierarchical absolutism back into the late first and early-to-middle second centuries in her effort to explain why gnosticism died out and orthodoxy won the day. The second reality has to do with the constant use of the name "gnostic Christian" by the author. It appears to the writer, based on the connotation of the term "Christian" when it was first used in Antioch (Acts 11:19-26) and on the statements of the fathers such as Ignatius,⁵⁶ Irenaeus⁵⁷ and Tertullian,⁵⁸ that the terms "gnostic" and "Christian" are mutually exclusive and ought not to be used with the one term modifying the other. The gnostics denied the virgin birth, the unity of the divine-human person of Christ and thus the value of his death, and the literal resurrection of Christ from the dead, all of which are essential concepts within the name "Christian" as used in the first and second centuries.

In the final chapter, entitled "Gnosis: Self-knowledge as Knowledge of God," the author points out that while orthodox Christians insisted that humanity needs a divinely-given way of approach to God and that the way has been pro-

⁵³Irenaeus, *Heresies* 4.33.8 and 3.4.

⁵⁶Ign. *Trall.* 6.

⁵⁴Pagels, *Gospels*, 115.

⁵⁷Irenaeus, *Heresies* 1.7.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁵⁸Tertullian, *Val.* 27.

vided in the Scriptures, the gnostic Valentinus taught that humanity itself manifests the divine life and divine revelation and bears within itself the potential for liberation or destruction. The struggle for *gnōsis* (insight) engages one in a solitary, difficult process as he struggles against inner resistance. Jesus is depicted by gnostic sources as teacher, revealer and spiritual master whose goal is to lead the individual into maturity where he no longer needs external guidance or authority. The disciple who comes to know himself, then, can discover what even Jesus cannot teach.⁵⁹

The Testimony of Truth says that the gnostic becomes a "disciple of his own mind," discovering that his own mind "is the father of the truth." He learns what he needs to know by himself in meditative silence. Consequently, he considers himself equal to everyone, maintaining his own independence of everyone else's authority.⁶⁰

It is apparent that the gnostic view of man and sin are very different from that of the Scriptures. The Scriptures of both OT and NT teach that what separates man from God is sin. Man suffers distress, mental and physical, because he fails to achieve the moral goal toward which he aims: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁶¹ The gospel of John expresses the desperate situation of humanity without the Savior:

For God sent the Son into the world . . . that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.⁶²

Many gnostics on the contrary insisted that ignorance, not sin, is what involves a person in suffering. Pagels suggests that

the gnostic movement shared certain affinities with contemporary methods of exploring the self through psychotherapeutic techniques. Both gnosticism and psychotherapy value, above all, knowledge—the self-knowledge which is insight.⁶³

Pagels indicates that the gnostics who thought of gnosis as a subjective, immediate experience were primarily concerned with the internal significance of events rather than with external events such as the events of "salvation history," which occupy the concern of orthodox Christians. Thus gnosticism was more than a protest movement against orthodox Christianity. It included an inner religious outlook that opposed the development of the early institutional Church. "Those who expected to 'become Christ' themselves were not likely to recognize the institutional structures of the church . . . as bearing ultimate authority."⁶⁴

Major themes of gnostic teaching, such as the discovery of the divine within, appealed to many, but the religious perspectives and methods of gnosticism did not lend themselves to mass religion. Thus it was in an unequal contest with the organized orthodox Church, which expressed a unified religious perspective based on the NT canon, offered a creed requiring only the simplest essentials of the faith, and celebrated rituals at one and the same time simple and profound—baptism and the eucharist.

⁵⁹Pagels, *Gospels*, 122-131.

⁶²John 3:17-19.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 132.

⁶³Pagels, *Gospels*, 124.

⁶¹Rom 3:23.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 134.