Beyond the Gnostic Gospels

Edited by
EDUARD IRICINSCHI,
LANCE JENOTT,
NICOLA DENZEY LEWIS
and PHILIPPA TOWNSEND

Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
82

Mohr Siebeck

Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity

82

Beyond the Gnostic Gospels

Studies Building on the Work
of Elaine Pagels

Edited by

Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott,
Nicola Denzey Lewis and Philippa Townsend

Mohr Siebeck

Elaine Pagels, born 1943; 1964 BA, 1965 MA from Stanford University; 1970 PhD; since 1982 professor of early Christian history at Princeton University; in 2012 Princeton University's Howard T. Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities.

Eduard Iricinschi, born 1968; MA in Religious Studies from New York University; PhD in the Religions of Late Antiquity from Princeton University; currently postdoctoral Polonsky fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute.

Lance Jenott, born 1980; studied History, Classics, and Religion at the University of Washington (Seattle) and Princeton University; PhD in the Religions of Late Antiquity from Princeton University; currently postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Oslo.

Nicola Denzey Lewis, born 1966; BA in Religious Studies from the University of Toronto; MA and PhD from Princeton University in Religion and the Program in the Ancient World; currently Visiting Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University.

Philippa Townsend, born 1975; degrees in Classics from Cambridge University and University College London, in Religion from Harvard University and Princeton University; PhD from Princeton in the Religions of Late Antiquity; currently Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Ursinus College, Pennsylvania.

ISBN 978-3-16-152834-7 / eISBN 978-3-16-158681-1 unveränderte eBook-Ausgabe 2019
ISSN 1436-3003 (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at *http://dnb.dnb.de*.

The book was printed by Laupp & Göbel in Nehren on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

Table of Contents

Part I: The Social World of Early Christians

Part II: Creating Orthodoxy and Heresy

Part III: Ritual and Myth

Part IV: Christianity in Egypt

Part V: New Testament Studies

Abbreviations

ABR	*Australian Biblical Review*
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	*Ante-Nicene Fathers*
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung* (ed. Temporini and Haase)
BA	*Biblical Archaeology*
BCNH	Bibliothéque copte de Nag Hammadi
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series latina (Turnhout, 1953–)
CRINT	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CSCO	Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium
DCLS	Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies
DOP	*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*
ECTT	Early Christian Texts in Translation
FC	Fathers of the Church
GCS	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
HFS	Historisk-filosofiske skrifter
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HR	*History of Religions*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
Hyp	Hypomnemata
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JEH	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JJH	*John, Jesus, and History* (2 vols.; ed. Paul N. Anderson et al.)
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JRH	*Journal of Religious History*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	*A Greek-English Lexicon* (ed. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones)
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
Mus	*Muséon: Revue d'études orientales*
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies

NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NPNF^{2}	*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
NTTSD	New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
OTP	*Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.)
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
RBL	*Review of Biblical Literature*
RGRW	Religions in the Greco-Roman World
RHE	*Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*
R&T	*Religion and Theology*
SAPERE	Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque pertinentia
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLECL	Society of Biblical Literature: Early Christianity and Its Literature
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SCHNT	Studia ad corpus hellenisticum Novi Testamenti
SEAug	Studia ephemeridis Augustinianum
SGRR	Studies in Greek and Roman Religion
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions: Supplements to *Numen*
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STAC	Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity
StNAM	Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern
StPatr	Studia Patristica
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich)
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
UNT	Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*
VCSup	Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAC	*Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*
ZWT	*Zeitschrift fur Wissenschaftliche Theologie*

Explorations at the Edges of Orthodoxy: Elaine Pagels' Study of the Early Christian World

PHILIPPA TOWNSEND[1]

Elaine Pagels has long been one of the foremost scholars in the field of early Christian studies, and a pioneer in communicating the work of this field to the public. In the year of her seventieth birthday, this volume looks back on her many scholarly contributions, and shows how they have shaped current debates. It includes the latest research from some of the most distinguished scholars in the field, as well as from more junior scholars at the beginning of their careers. This introduction sketches out the key stages of Pagels' intellectual trajectory over the past forty years (without, of course, attempting to offer a complete catalog of her publications), and then briefly indicates how the essays in this volume build on Pagels' work.

Early Explorations of Valentinianism

Pagels' fascination with Christian texts that have been relegated to the margins of history began during her time as a graduate student at Harvard, when her professors George MacRae and Helmut Koester first introduced their students to the still unpublished Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi. Pagels' doctoral work focused not primarily on these documents however, but on the works of Valentinian authors such as Heracleon, preserved in fragmentary form in heresiological texts. Soon after completing her dissertation research, Pagels published her first book, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*.[2] In this volume and several accompanying articles,

[1] Special thanks to Eduard Iricinschi for all his help in researching this introduction. Thanks too to Peter Hayakawa, Eduard Iricinschi, Lance Jenott, and Kevin Wolfe for reading it and making helpful suggestions, and to my research assistant Amanda Ernst for gathering books and articles. "At the edges of orthodoxy" is a phrase from Elaine Pagels' most famous book, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979; repr. Vintage Books, 1989), 150.

[2] Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (SBL Monograph Series 17; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973; repr. 1989).

Pagels developed a multi-faceted and highly original series of arguments, which prefigured many of the themes of her later work (not to mention many of the directions of future scholarship in general). Her research represented a major advance on scholarship which had frequently, if unconsciously, adopted the heresiologists' hostile characterizations of the Valentinians.[3]

Pagels showed that the seemingly contradictory Valentinian interpretations of the Gospel of John, rather than being the result of an arbitrary and irrational exegetical approach as some previous scholars had claimed, were completely coherent when understood within the threefold Valentinian schema of *pleroma*, *kenoma*, and *cosmos*: the divergences in interpretation depended on which of these three "frames of reference" the exegetes were employing.[4] She went on to draw out the implications of Valentinian exegesis for religious practice, indicating early on a dissatisfaction with the traditional assumption that "Gnostics" were only concerned with abstract theology and not with ritual.[5] Further undercutting stereotypes of "Gnosticism," she rejected the view that the different experience of ritual by "pneumatic" and "psychic" Christians stemmed from a deterministic soteriology, and argued that it actually reflected a complex and dynamic model of spiritual transformation.[6] She then extended her critique in order to challenge the very terms of the previous scholarly debate, which had pivoted on whether the Valentinians believed in "free will" or "determinism"; she argued that those concepts were anachronistic and did not accurately convey the concerns of the Valentinians themselves, which could be better understood in terms of a theology of election.[7] Finally, in a move that presaged her later explorations of the ways in which early Christian debates shaped philosophical ideas that would become fundamental to western thought, she argued that the very concept of soteriological free will as developed by Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen, emerged from their attempts to refute and delegitimize the Valentinians.[8] The originality and percep-

[3] For an early article by Pagels on the ways in which Irenaeus distorted Valentinian eschatological and soteriological beliefs, see "Conflicting Versions of Valentinian Eschatology: Irenaeus' Treatise vs. the Excerpts from Theodotus," *HTR* 67 (1974): 35–53.

[4] Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 26.

[5] Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 57–82. On Valentinian rituals, see also Pagels, "A Valentinian Interpretation of Baptism and Eucharist: And Its Critique of 'Orthodox' Sacramental Theology and Practice," *HTR* 65 (1972): 153–69.

[6] Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 98–109.

[7] Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 104, 109.

[8] Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 110. Pagels elaborates on these points in an early article, arguing that the Valentinians developed a theory of divine election largely through allegorical exegesis of Paul's Epistle to the Romans; Paul's "Jews" who stand "under the law" are interpreted as psychic Christians, and the "Gentiles" who are "outside the law"

tiveness with which, in her earliest work, Pagels was able to dismantle the stereotypes of polemical Christian authors (both ancient and modern) contributed significantly to the development of a more sophisticated scholarly approach to "heretical" Christian groups, and in certain ways anticipated three of the most important and influential recent books deconstructing the concept of "Gnosticism," by Michael Williams, Karen King, and Ismo Dunderberg (all contributors to this volume).[9]

In her second book, *The Gnostic Paul*, published only two years after the first, Pagels extended her examination of Valentinian exegesis of New Testament texts, this time focusing on interpretations of the Pauline epistles.[10] Despite the traditional characterization of Paul as an opponent of "the Gnostics," and of "Gnosticism" as unbiblical and inherently at odds with "true Christianity," Pagels argued that "two antithetical traditions of Pauline exegesis . . . emerged from the late first century through the second. . . . [O]ne reads Paul *antignostically*, the other *gnostically*."[11] While her book was not a study of the historical Paul, she argued that it is important to consider how the anti-gnostic exegesis of the heresiologists may have influenced our understanding of Paul's letters – in other words, how the reception history of texts impacts the way those texts themselves are understood.[12] Here again, Pagels showed how traditional scholarship on the Valentinians had been shaped by the polemics of the second- and third-century heresiologists, and employed close textual analysis to deepen our understanding of both Valentinian and non-Valentinian Christianity.

The Politics of Orthodoxy

It was not until after the publication of her first two books that Pagels began extensive work on the Nag Hammadi Codices. With the support of grants from the American Council of Learned Societies and the American

become the pneumatic Christians; see Pagels, "The Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis of Romans as Basis for Anthropological Theory," *VC* 26 (1972): 241–58; and cf. *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975; repr. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), 13–46.

[9] Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[10] See also Pagels, "Valentinian Claim to Esoteric Exegesis," and "'The Mystery of the Resurrection': A Gnostic Reading of 1 Corinthians 15," *JBL* 93 (1974): 276–88.

[11] Pagels, *Gnostic Paul*, 5.

[12] Pagels, *Gnostic Paul*, 9, 162–64.

Philosophical Society, she travelled to Cairo and joined the team of scholars transcribing, editing, and translating the Nag Hammadi texts.[13] For the next few years, her work focused on interpreting these esoteric documents.[14] Studying them alongside the writings of the heresiologists enabled her to see that disputes between early Christians over seemingly abstruse points of theology actually had concrete political and practical implications. Her interest in the intersection of politics and religion became increasingly evident during this period in a series of articles in which she suggested that the scholarly obsession with dogma as the dividing issue between "orthodox" and "gnostic" Christians simply reproduced the accounts of the heresiologists themselves, while obscuring deeper questions. Examining disputes over monotheism and differing interpretations of Jesus' passion and resurrection, Pagels argued that we couldn't understand the high charge of these debates unless we considered the ways in which different views legitimized diverse models of church hierarchy, spiritual authority, and responses to persecution.[15] At the same time, she was careful to avoid reductionism, insisting that considering these implications "does not reduce theological issues to political ones. Rather it shows how these issues are interconnected in the actual life of second-century communities."[16]

This nuance in Pagels' approach to political matters was also evidenced in her work on gender and religion. In an early article on "Paul and Women," Pagels steered a course between those who saw Paul as "the eternal enemy of woman" in George Bernard Shaw's words, and scholars who were attempting to rehabilitate him as, on the contrary, "the only certain and consistent spokesman for the liberation and equality of women in the NT."[17] Instead Pagels argued that we should attempt to read Paul on his

---

[13] For Pagels' account of this period, see *The Gnostic Gospels*, xxviii–xxvix.

[14] Pagels participated in the First International Congress dealing with the Nag Hammadi texts, at which she presented a paper, later published as Elaine Pagels, with Helmut Koester, "Report on the *Dialogue of the Savior* (CG III, 5)," in *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis: Papers Read at the First International Congress on Coptology, Cairo, December 1976* (ed. Robert McL. Wilson; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 66–74.

[15] See Pagels, "'The Demiurge and His Archons': A Gnostic View of the Bishop and Presbyters?" *HTR* 69 (1976): 301–24; "Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority: Gnostic and Orthodox Traditions," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (ed. Barbara Aland; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 415–30; and "Gnostic and Orthodox Views of Christ's Passion: Paradigms for the Christian's Response to Persecution?" in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28–31, 1978*, vol. 1: *The School of Valentinus* (ed. Bentley Layton; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 262–88.

[16] Pagels, "The Demiurge and His Archons," 322–23.

[17] G. B. Shaw, "The Monstrous Imposition upon Jesus," reprinted in *The Writings of St. Paul* (ed. Wayne A. Meeks; New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 299–303; Robin

own terms, not as if he were addressing our modern situation and concerns.[18] Yet, she did not advocate abandoning Paul's letters as "canonical" altogether, but, in an interesting move, suggested we return to the sense of the word "canon" as a guideline, rather than as a prescriptive set of rules.[19] Early on, then, Pagels was entering into modern theological debates, while managing to avoid the trap of simply reading into ancient texts what she wanted to see there. This approach continued in her work on gender in non-canonical texts: while exploring the expanded possibilities of understanding the divine as feminine that many Nag Hammadi texts offer, she was careful to avoid "a hasty and simplistic reading of the evidence" which might inaccurately suggest that gnostic communities were radically egalitarian, and the orthodox church irredeemably patriarchal.[20]

In her first decade out of graduate school, then, Pagels had already achieved an admirable series of scholarly feats. She had called into question some of the most fundamental assumptions underlying the study of "Gnostic" sources; uncovered a coherent field of Valentinian reading practices; unpacked many of the literary and hermeneutic techniques with which second- and third-century heresiologists had denigrated their opponents; participated in editing and translating the most important textual discoveries for the study of early Christianity in modern history; and begun to explore the contemporary political connotations of ancient religious controversies.

A Public Intellectual

As her work progressed, Pagels increasingly displayed a concern with the implications of her research for broader current debates. In 1979, she made the crucial move to open up her scholarly work to the public – a decision that would have far-reaching consequences not only for her own career, but for the field of early Christian studies in general. Pagels adapted a series of her scholarly articles on the Nag Hammadi texts, by paring down the footnotes and working them into an engaging book-length narrative.[21]

Scroggs, "Paul and The Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 41 (1972): 283–303. Both quoted in Pagels, "Paul and Women: A Response to Recent Discussion," *JAAR* 42 (1974): 538–49.

[18] Pagels, "Paul and Women," 547.

[19] Pagels, "Paul and Women," 547.

[20] Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs* 2 (1976): 301.

[21] The articles included "Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority," "The Demiurge and His Archons," and "God the Mother." Pagels followed this pattern of adapting her scholarly research for a non-academic audience with her subsequent books.

In doing so, she displayed an unusual faith that non-specialists would be interested in (and able to understand) the results of scholarly research, that these ancient texts speak to the concerns of modern people, and that complex ideas can be communicated in accessible clear language without sacrificing rigor or sophistication. The resulting book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, was an instant success, becoming a best-seller and winning the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, as well as contributing to Pagels' selection for a MacArthur Fellowship. From reading her earlier, highly technical works on Valentinianism one would hardly have guessed that Pagels would later make the move into popular writing. Yet her lucid style, narrative instinct, and interest in the social and political implications of seemingly esoteric theological ideas, enabled her to cross the divide between academic and public discourse with ease.

The response to *The Gnostic Gospels* showed not only that there was huge public interest in historical scholarship, but also that Pagels had struck a chord with people's pressing spiritual concerns. In a period when many Americans had become dissatisfied with traditional Christianity, viewing its institutions as patriarchal, its sexual mores as repressive, its reliance on creeds and clergy stifling, and its association with establishment power alienating, the story of these lost gospels offered an alternative vision – not a different set of creeds or authorities to follow, but rather an understanding that Christianity could be *other than it is*. While many children of the 1950s and '60s were turning away from Christianity to explore Buddhism, Hinduism, and "New Age" mysticism, Pagels delved back into the depths of the Christian past to discover alternative spiritual paths, and in doing so, she brought many people along with her. Ironically, despite the vitriol sometimes aimed at her by conservative Christians, Pagels has no doubt "saved" Christianity for many people, giving them a way to reclaim it for themselves.[22] Unsurprisingly, many of those who have been inspired by her work have pursued quite different paths from Pagels' own, whether in setting up Gnostic churches, or in developing fantastical theories about Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene as detailed in Dan Brown's bestseller.[23] However, one thing that anyone who has spent time with Elaine Pagels knows is that instead of dismissing popular concerns, she finds a way to engage them intelligently and considerately – whether by responding graciously to a question from a fan, or entering into the "Da Vinci Code" controversy in the popular media. Rather than simply mock-

[22] This point is illustrated beautifully by an anecdote in one of Pagels' later books about the American Roshi Richard Baker, who told Elaine he wouldn't have had to convert to Buddhism if he'd read the *Gospel of Thomas* first! See Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 74.

[23] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

ing the wild conspiracy theories inspired by Dan Brown's novel, Pagels used the publicity to engage again with popular interest in early Christianity and to analyze *why* people found Brown's story so fascinating, while drawing attention back to what she felt they should be focusing on:

> Those possibilities opened by the "Gnostic" gospels – that God could have a feminine side and that Jesus could be human – are key ideas that Dan Brown explored in "The Da Vinci Code," and are no doubt part of what made the book so alluring. But the truth is that the texts he based his novel upon contain much deeper and more important mysteries than the ones Tom Hanks tries to solve in the movie version that opened this weekend.[24]

It would be hard to exaggerate the impact that *The Gnostic Gospels* and Pagels' later books have had on the public dialogue about early Christianity. She gave her readers a way into texts that otherwise would have been impenetrable – broken, esoteric documents in an obscure ancient language – using her own scholarly expertise and training to translate them for a general audience in the best tradition of engaged scholarship. In doing so, she opened up access to a tradition that many have found spiritually and intellectually intriguing and she exemplified the culturally enriching role that academics can play in society.[25] In an era of increasing specialization and professionalization in academia, in which communicating scholarly ideas to the public is often viewed with suspicion and consequently left to those who are unqualified for the task, Pagels has steered a remarkable course over the past few decades, steadily contributing to cutting-edge academic research while remaining an influential voice in the public sphere.

Pagels' popular writing has not only illuminated the social and political contexts of ancient heresiological debates for a broad audience, but has popularized the detailed scholarly case she has made throughout her career that the texts found at Nag Hammadi were not rejected by the church because of inferior theology, but for specific political reasons; furthermore, that the very fundamentals of what we understand Christianity to be were always contested and never obvious. It is these claims, and her success in communicating them to the public, that have made her seem so threatening

---

[24] Pagels, "The Truth at the Heart of 'The Da Vinci Code,'" *San Jose Mercury News*, May 21, 2006.

[25] Indeed, some would argue that engaging with the public is a responsibility of the intellectual. The words of Edward Said seem apt: "The intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion *to, as well as for, a public*. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publically to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them) . . . and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug." Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), 9 (my italics).

to some conservative Christians, who accuse her of attacking the church and even Christianity itself.

Yet Pagels' attitude to the institutional church, and to those who consolidated it in the early centuries, has in fact always been more complex than her critics have acknowledged. In the Conclusion to *The Gnostic Gospels*, she explicitly recognized the role that the heresiologists played in sustaining Christianity through the centuries when so many other religious movements died out:

> I believe that we owe the survival of Christian tradition to the organizational and theological structure that the emerging church developed. Anyone as powerfully attracted to Christianity as I am will regard that as a major achievement.[26]

Nevertheless, Pagels also clearly recognizes the loss entailed in that process of institutionalization, and sees suppressed currents of Christianity as rich resources for those who, throughout history, "have found themselves at the edges of orthodoxy":[27] dissidents, artists, intellectuals – those who find more spiritual solace in asking questions than accepting answers.

Sex, Society, and Satan

After *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels continued to follow the model of publishing scholarly articles, and then adapting them into more accessible books. In the 1980s, she began research on the ways in which early Christian readings of Genesis informed and legitimated certain views of nature, and consequently of sexuality and politics. The resulting articles would become the basis of another influential and hugely popular work, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*.[28] This line of inquiry developed the interest she had shown in her first book in exploring the religious origins of ideas that later

[26] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 142.

[27] Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 150.

[28] Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988). This book drew on the following articles: "Adam and Eve, Christ and the Church: A Survey of Second-Century Controversies Concerning Marriage," in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honor of R. McL. Wilson* (ed. Alastair H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 146–75; "Christian Apologists and the 'Fall of the Angels': An Attack on Roman Imperial Power?" *HTR* 78 (1985): 301–25; "Exegesis and Exposition of the Genesis Creation Accounts in Selected Texts from Nag Hammadi," in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 257–86; "'Freedom from Necessity': Philosophic and Psychological Dimensions of Christian Conversion," in *Genesis 1–3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden* (ed. Gregory A. Robbins; Lewiston, NY: E. Mellon Press, 1988), 69–97; "The Politics of Paradise: Augustine's Exegesis of Genesis 1–3 versus that of John Chrysostom," *HTR* 78 (1985): 67–95.

became hugely influential in Europe, and even more so in America (for example, the separation of church and state and the value of the individual). Pagels' work demonstrated that from the beginning Christian and Jewish texts have been great resources for ideas about freedom and equality, but also that there is nothing inevitable about this interpretive trajectory, that biblical texts can and have been construed in ways that legitimate the opposite ideas; it is not the text alone that holds the key to meaning, but the act of interpretation, which is always also a political act, rooted in contingent historical circumstance. Importantly, and in part because of Pagels' work, this insight and its implications have become central to the popular discussion of the history of Christianity. And they could not be more relevant to current public debates about religion (for example, with respect to the frequently crude and essentialist caricatures of Islam in the media).

Consideration of the relationship between theology and social context has led Pagels to brilliant insights into the development of concepts that now seem natural or obvious. After her work on the interpretation of Genesis, she began to investigate the development of the figure of Satan in ancient Jewish and Christian texts.[29] Instead of tracing a story of influences, she looked at the *social function* of Satan, and explained why this figure became particularly compelling to Jewish groups in the first centuries BCE/CE. The Satan, as a supernatural adversary, remains in the bible one of God's own messengers; he is not a being fundamentally opposed to God or God's people, like the monstrous Leviathan, for example. It is only in later Second Temple Jewish tradition that he begins to become a much more powerful and malevolent figure. Pagels argued:

> one primary function of the image of Satan is to articulate patterns of group identification distinct from the traditional Israelite pattern – the identification of the people of Israel, God's chosen nation, against 'the nations and their gods.' . . . In particular, my observations suggest that those who developed and elaborated the image of Satan were Jews involved in struggling not only against the nations, but also, and in some cases primarily, against other Jews, often against a dominant majority.[30]

The mythology of Satan and the rebellious angels, then, enabled these groups of "dissident Jews"[31] to articulate their experience of opposition from "intimate enemies."[32]

---

[29] Pagels' wrote three articles on this subject: "The Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy': A Preliminary Sketch," *HTR* 84 (1991): 105–28; "The Social History of Satan, Part II: Satan in the New Testament Gospels," *JAAR* 62 (1994): 17–58; and "The Social History of Satan Part Three: John of Patmos and Ignatius of Antioch: Contrasting Visions of 'God's People,'" *HTR* 99 (2006): 487–505. Her book *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995) drew on the first two of these articles.

[30] Pagels, "Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy,'" 108.

[31] Pagels, "Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy,'" 106.

[32] Pagels, "Social History of Satan, the 'Intimate Enemy,'" 112.

This insight enabled Pagels to undertake a sustained exploration of the changing dynamics of Jews' and Christians' relationships with each other and with outsiders – from the Maccabean period, through the Gospels, and eventually to the Book of Revelation – and to show how these dynamics shaped theological and mythological discourses. Pagels' research on the figure of Satan, conducted over a period of twenty years, ends up not just tracing the history of an idea, but exploring the ways religious imagery and myth are implicated in our social relationships, and particularly in our ability to construct and demonize (literally) others.[33]

Beyond "Gnosticism"

As the scope of her research on Satan shows, Pagels' work over the past thirty years has dealt at least as much with canonical and other "orthodox" texts as with those that have traditionally been categorized as "gnostic." In fact, she has been a leading figure in integrating the study of ancient Christian sources, and thus refusing to abide by the categorizations of the heresiologists. As her work has progressed, she has become increasingly dissatisfied with the label "Gnostic" (as have a number of other scholars) and she has continued to explore connections as well as differences between texts later assigned to opposing sides of the heresiological divide.[34] This approach is particularly apparent in her work on the relationship between hermeneutics and ritual beginning in the 1990s. In a number of scholarly articles, she integrated the imagery of the "bridal chamber" in the *Gospel of Philip* into broader second-century Christian debates; explored connections and controversies between the gospels of Thomas and John with respect to their exegesis of Genesis and its ritual implications; and continued to dismantle the dominant narrow view of heresy as primarily about differences of doctrine, which she had first criticized back in the 1970s.[35]

---

[33] In *The Origin of Satan*, Pagels discusses the troubling afterlife that this association of one's enemies with forces of evil has had in Christian history, particularly in terms of the demonization of Jews and heretics. Yet she ends by meditating on the potential for a very different approach to one's enemies that also has a basis in Christian scripture: "Concluding this book, I hope that this research may illuminate for others, as it has for me, the struggle within Christian tradition between the profoundly human view that "otherness" is evil and the words of Jesus that reconciliation is divine" (184).

[34] See, for example, her comments in "Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*," in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 280.

[35] In addition to "Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*," see Pagels, "The 'Mystery of Marriage' in the *Gospel of Philip* Revisited," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. Birger A. Pearson in collaboration with A. Thomas

Whereas in *The Gnostic Gospels* she had mainly focused on issues of politics and authority as constitutive of heresiological discourses, she now began increasingly to focus on the ways in which ritual practice became a divisive issue for Christians such as Irenaeus, particularly within a context of persecution: "[W]hat Irenaeus identified as 'heresy' among Valentinian Christians was *hermeneutical teaching communicated in ritual* – and specifically any form of initiation ritual that could constitute distinct groups within Christian congregations."[36] These currents in her work – an increasing unease with the clichés associated with "Gnosticism," a concern to explore Nag Hammadi texts as fully part of the early Christian landscape, and an awareness of the centrality of ritual to both the unifying and the divisive power of religion – were further eloquently explored in her most personal book to date, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

Beyond Belief exemplifies Pagels' willingness (rare among academics) to connect scholarly historical debates to her own deeply personal experiences, and to offer her readers empathy, as well as guidance, in their spiritual explorations.[37] Without a doubt, Pagels articulates the conflicted feelings of many when she asks: "[W]hy do so many of us still find [Christianity] compelling, whether or not we belong to a church, and despite difficulties we may have with particular beliefs or practices? What is it about Christian tradition that we love – and what is it that we *cannot* love?"[38] Unlike those who see such questioning of orthodoxy as a threat, Pagels recognizes that we are in a moment that is more open to difference and spiritual individualism than the past, and that formerly suppressed texts and ideas can therefore be productively reclaimed for the enrichment of Christian tradition. Furthermore, in the context of a public debate in which religion is frequently both attacked and defended in terms of beliefs alone, Pagels invites readers into a more profound consideration of what constitutes faith:

> When people would say to me "Your faith must be of great help to you," I would wonder, What do they mean? What is faith? Certainly not simple assent to the set of beliefs that

---

Kraabel, George W. E. Nickelsburg, and Norman R. Petersen; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 442–54; "Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John," *JBL* 118 (1999): 477–96; "Irenaeus, the 'Canon of Truth,' and the Gospel of John: 'Making a Difference' through Hermeneutics and Ritual," *VC* 56 (2002): 339–71.

[36] "Irenaeus, the 'Canon of Truth,' and the Gospel of John," 349.

[37] See ch. 1 of *Beyond Belief*, 3–29, and also the Introduction to *The Origin of Satan*, especially xvi. Edward Said's words again seem appropriate: "There is no such thing as a private intellectual, since the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world. Nor is there only a public intellectual . . . . There is always the personal inflection and the private sensibility, and those give meaning to what is being said or written." (*Representations of the Intellectual*, 9).

[38] Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 6.

worshipers in that church recited every week . . . traditional statements that sounded strange to me, like barely intelligible signals from the surface, heard at the bottom of the sea. Such statements seemed to me then to have little to do with whatever transactions we were making with one another, with ourselves, and – so it was said – with invisible beings. I was acutely aware that we met there driven by need and desire; yet sometimes I dared hope that such communion has the potential to transform us.[39]

Revelations: Judas, Antony, and John of Patmos

When news of the discovery of the *Gospel of Judas* hit the media, Pagels' long and successful history of communicating with the public made her the ideal figure to provide an incisive and non-sensationalized interpretation of the text, along with her friend and colleague Karen King.[40] Explicating the gospel's bewildering visions and revelations in the context of polemics about sacrifice, martyrdom, resurrection, and the failings of church leaders, the authors showed that "The *Gospel of Judas*, far from being bizarre and marginal as we initially suspected, leads us right into the center of the debates about what Christianity would become."[41]

Pagels continued her work of placing literature traditionally classified as "gnostic" back into the center of early Christian debates in an article she wrote with Lance Jenott on "Antony's Letters and Nag Hammadi Codex I."[42] This article contributed to a fairly recent but growing emphasis among scholars on studying the Nag Hammadi Codices within the fourth-century Egyptian context in which they were produced. Jenott and Pagels argued that far from comprising stereotypical "gnostic" ideas such as Docetism and dualism, the contents of Codex I are remarkably consonant with the ideas of the famous ascetic Antony, as evidenced in his letters. They suggested that the texts as arranged within this codex would have offered monastic readers "a curriculum that encourages an open attitude toward ongoing revelation, by contrast with the curriculum that Athanasius would seek to institute within Egyptian monasteries."[43]

Meanwhile, Pagels had been revisiting her research on the history of Satan, extending her analysis to the Book of Revelation. She argued that the

[39] Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 5.

[40] Pagels and King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007).

[41] Pagels and King, *Reading Judas*, 101. Pagels also went on to write "Baptism in the Gospel of Judas: A Preliminary Inquiry," in *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex held at Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 13–16, 2008* (ed. April D. DeConick; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 353–66.

[42] Lance Jenott and Elaine Pagels, "Antony's Letters and Nag Hammadi Codex I: Sources of Religious Conflict in Fourth Century Egypt," *JECS* 18 (2010): 557–89.

[43] Jenott and Pagels, "Antony's Letters," 585.

author's innovations in combining the figure of Satan with that of Leviathan reflect the complexity of his relationships with other followers of Jesus, and in particular his belief that his enemies are both insiders and outsiders – indeed, that the "intimate enemy" and the "alien enemy" have combined forces in both social and supernatural terms.[44] Entering into the scholarly controversy over the identity of the "intimate enemies" John of Patmos demonizes as the "synagogue of Satan," Pagels agreed with those scholars who have suggested they were Pauline Gentiles, not Jews, and that John himself probably did not identify as a Christian at all.[45] She then deepened this analysis by contrasting John's rhetorical self-presentation with that of Ignatius (the first author we know to actually use the term "Christianity") thus constructing a much fuller picture of the "early diversity among followers of Jesus" in Asia at the turn of the first century CE.[46]

As the most contested and cryptic book of the New Testament, and also the one which holds the most popular fascination, Revelation was an ideal subject for Pagels' analysis, and it became the focus of her most recent book.[47] *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* explores the intra-Christian dynamics and anti-Roman polemics that shape Revelation's mythological landscape; but it then goes much further to explicate the text's unique role in later Christian debates about prophecy and authority, and in the consolidation of orthodoxy in the fourth century. The book also reflects Pagels' continuing explorations of the problems of divine revelation: how is it received, how can it be judged, and how has it been used to claim authority or to silence others? In *Revelations*, Pagels brought together many of the themes that have developed throughout her work: a perceptive and learned analysis of the intricacies of ancient Christian debates; a concern to break down traditional scholarly categorizations (in this case by placing Revelation in the context of both Jewish and non-canonical Christian sources); an interest in exploring the spiritual potential of early Christian texts while not ignoring their troubling aspects; and a sensitivity to the modern theological, political, and ethical implications of biblical interpretation. *Revelations* thus epitomizes the approach that has done so much to enrich our understanding of the diversity and complexity of the early Christian world, and the many ways in which that world continues to inform our own.

---

[44] Pagels, "Social History of Satan Part Three," 489.

[45] Pagels, "Social History of Satan Part Three," 498–500.

[46] Pagels, "Social History of Satan Part Three," 501–5.

[47] *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012).

The Studies in this Collection

The contributors to this volume engage with many aspects of Pagels' past research. The essays in the first section build on Pagels' longstanding interest in the social world of early Christian texts. Michael Williams addresses the issue of how cosmological and theological beliefs inform the everyday lives of those who hold them. He disputes the cliché of Gnostic hatred of the world, examining the Nag Hammadi texts instead for evidence of their authors' appreciation of natural beauty and community life. Karen King builds on Pagels' work on the variety of early Christian responses to martyrdom and suffering, demonstrating that a range of Christian texts advocated pacifism and practices of healing as a response to persecution; she then reflects on how reception history and canon formation have shaped the interpretation of texts that deal with suffering in the New Testament itself, and she suggests that re-examining early Christian sources that offer different perspectives may help us as we deal with issues of martyrdom and religious violence today. Einar Thomassen analyzes a passage from the text known as *The First Apocalypse of James* (NHC V,*3*) or *James* (CT,*2*), which has a close parallel in Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*. Irenaeus marks this material as "Valentinian," yet *James*, Thomassen argues, is not a Valentinian text. He suggests that the passage records Valentinian ritual instructions for the dying, which were then used or distributed outside a Valentinian context by individual religious practitioners (similar in function to Orphic ritual specialists) and in this way ultimately came to be incorporated into *James*. Examining the transmission of these texts and ideas, then, gives us new insights into the variety of social contexts in which Valentinian material circulated.

The contributors in the next section build on Pagels' extensive work on the construction of orthodoxy and heresy, and particularly Irenaeus' role in that process. Geoffrey Smith assesses the reliability of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* 1.12.1 as a witness to Valentinian first principles, concluding that Irenaeus accurately reproduced an earlier written heresiological source, but that his description cannot be taken as a reliable representation of what most Valentinians believed. David Jorgensen shows how Irenaeus drew on established Greco-Roman rhetorical techniques in order to construct the appearance of a fundamental difference between his exegetical approach and that of his Valentinian opponents. April DeConick pays tribute to the huge influence Pagels has had in shaping our view of how orthodoxy and heresy came to be constructed, yet she differs from Pagels (and other scholars in this volume) in arguing that Gnostics were indeed a definable group, characterized by a "radically different metaphysical orientation" from that of the "Apostolic-Catholic Christians." Drawing on socio-

logical theory, she delineates the process by which she believes the heresiologists were able to marginalize the Gnostics precisely because the former held values more in line with mainstream Greco-Roman society.

Pagels' contributions to the study of early Christian ritual and myth are fundamental to the next group of essays. Nicola Denzey Lewis questions whether the category of "Valentinian" designates a "distinct Christian social group with its own discrete practices." She builds on Pagels' work on baptism in texts such as the *Gospel of Philip* as she demonstrates the commonalities between so-called "Valentinian" understandings of baptism and those of other Christian groups. John Turner analyzes a series of Sethian treatises, arguing that they indicate a gradual process of ritual "interiorization," in which the baptismal ritual eventually evolved into a "contemplative practice of mystical union with the supreme deity." Marvin Meyer builds on Pagels' discussion of the narrative of Pronoia and Epinoia in the *Secret Book of John* as a parable of spiritual revelation and enlightenment. Analyzing the parallels to Greek myths, especially those of Prometheus and Epimetheus, Meyer interprets the *Secret Book of John* as "a human story of the realization of divine insight and fullness within oneself."

The next essays resonate with Pagels' longstanding interest in the many varieties of Egyptian Christianity. Hugo Lundhaug treats one of the texts Pagels' has written about most frequently – the *Gospel of Philip* – and argues that it should not be read as a Gnostic or Valentinian text, or even in the context of second or third Christianity, but rather as participating in the Christological, soteriological, and ritual debates of fourth and fifth century Egypt. AnneMarie Luijendijk examines an important textual difference between the Coptic and Greek versions of the *Gospel of Thomas*: the Greek version has a line not found in the Coptic, which states "nothing is buried that will not be raised." Rather than attempting to identify which is the earlier, and therefore supposedly more authentic, version, Luijendijk explores what the differences can tell us about debates over the resurrection among early Christian communities. Eduard Iricinschi draws on Pagels' research on the interpretation of Genesis in Nag Hammadi texts and suggests that Nag Hammadi Codex II was assembled to address the tension between the injunction to procreate in Gen 1–3, and the ascetic ideals of the codex's monastic readers. Lance Jenott analyzes the Greek, Coptic, and Arabic Lives of Pachomius, asking why Pachomius' clairvoyance became a troubling issue to local bishops, and suggesting that the reason lay in the fact that Pachomius legitimated the founding of many of his monasteries, which encroached on local bishops' territory, by claiming divine visions. Deirdre Good echoes Pagels' interest in the reception history of the New Testament, and its role in shaping late antique Egyptian Christianity, as she traces the afterlife of Matthew's story of the flight to Egypt.

The final group of essays exemplify some of the different approaches Pagels has brought to bear on the New Testament, including intertextual interpretation, consideration of social context (particularly in terms of intra-Jewish dynamics), and analysis of how reception history has shaped our understanding of early Christian texts. Ismo Dunderberg argues that the very heresiological strategies Pagels has done so much to expose in ancient texts are being redeployed by some conservative Christian scholars today. Focusing on recent research groups on the historical reliability of the Gospel of John, Dunderberg argues that, despite the progress made by Pagels and others in illuminating early Christian diversity, there has recently been a worrying resurgence of theologically inflected "history" that fails to adhere to the normal rules of scholarly discourse, and therefore poses a threat to the way the discipline of New Testament studies is perceived. Harold Attridge's contribution discusses the Gospel of John from a very different perspective. He places the Johannine narrative of the Last Supper in the context of literary descriptions of symposia, showing how an understanding of these intertexts highlights the subtle ironies of the gospel narrative. Holger Zellentin examines the Gospel of Matthew's approach to Torah interpretation, arguing that the controversies between Matthew and the Pharisees can be illuminated by considering them in the context of the modern American legal concepts of "originalism" and "traditionalism." John Gager draws on Pagels' work on Valentinian exegesis of Pauline texts in his analysis of the apostle's turbulent self-presentation, and his image among diverse Christian and Jewish groups of Late Antiquity. John Marshall argues for a reconsideration of the traditional identification of 6 Ezra as a Christian text, noting that its clear dependence on Revelation does not indicate that it is Christian, since Revelation itself was a Jewish text; he then draws out the implications of reclassifying these texts for our understanding of prophetic Judaism in Asia Minor.

Like many of the contributors, the editors of this volume have benefitted as much from personal interactions with Elaine Pagels as from her published work. As her former students, we feel immensely privileged to have experienced firsthand her warmth and intellectual generosity. She has provided us with an example to which we aspire, and a mentor from whom we continue to learn. It is with the deepest gratitude, admiration, and affection that we offer her this volume.

The Social World of Early Christians

A Life Full of Meaning and Purpose: Demiurgical Myths and Social Implications

MICHAEL A. WILLIAMS

Over the last several decades, scholarship on Nag Hammadi and related traditions has included critically important philological and text-critical studies; descriptions and comparisons of mythologies; theories about origins and interconnections; very extensive analyses of theological content and differences; discussions of social tensions and divisions inspired by theological controversies; and a rich variety of other interesting contributions.[1] However, less attention has been paid to everyday life. More specifically, what were the implications for day-to-day "life on the ground" of cosmologies like those found, for example, in several Nag Hammadi texts, where creation is carried out by one or more inferior, or even evil entities (cosmologies that here I will term "demiurgical"). How much difference did myths about the origins and nature of the cosmos actually make in basic patterns of behavior, communal involvement and interaction, attitudes and habits?

Of course, as researchers have often commented, many or most of these texts are long on myth but short on self-referential social description. Authors of Nag Hammadi demiurgical myths do not tend to say much explicitly about how they spent their mornings, afternoons or evenings. And yet, these authors and their readers were flesh-and-blood people who surely did not spend twenty-four hours of every day reading mythological texts. Surely there were many (most?) days when they were not reading these texts at all, even if some would have *thought* about mythemes from these sources and sometimes mentioned them in conversation.

Most devotees, most of the time, would have had other things to do. But *what* things, exactly? Did some own their own fields? Did some harvest

[1] Here is a most appropriate place to offer personal thanks and congratulations to our honoree for her own many contributions over the years to the scholarly literature in this field. Special acknowledgement must be made of the gift manifest throughout her career for arousing interest among a broad audience of readers regarding Nag Hammadi and related traditions. For that, our field in general owes Professor Pagels a very significant debt.