

The Gnostic Gospels: A River of Lies

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Gnosticism: A Definition

The Lord warns us in Holy Scripture that Satan, our enemy, will use lies as a weapon against us believers. We should not be surprised to find lies lurking everywhere Satan can go, "*for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language [like we speak English], for he is a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44).

Just in case we missed the point of such clear passages, the Holy Spirit presents us with a behind-the-scenes view of Satan trying to bury the saving truth under a river of lies. In Revelation 12 the Church is pictured as a pregnant woman about to give birth. Suddenly an enormous, multi-headed, crown-festooned red dragon appears and stands in front of the pregnant woman, waiting for her child to be born so he can devour it. But the male child (Christ), who will rule the nations, is snatched up to God's throne. And the woman flees into the desert. The dragon pursues the woman, but she is given the wings of a giant eagle so that she might fly to safety. And here comes the pertinent part of the picture: "*Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent.*" Can you think of a more powerful way to picture the gush of lies Satan is constantly disgorging in order to overtake the Church? They say a camel can unload its lunch on a human handler with whom it isn't pleased. Satan can unload his lies on us like a river of projectile vomit.

Gnosticism is only one stream of Satan's lie-river. The more one reads about Gnosticism, the harder one is pressed to define it. The NIV Concordia Self-study Bible (p. 1925) gives an excellent definition of the very early Gnosticism encountered by the apostles. Some highlights: "Its central teaching was that spirit is entirely good and matter is entirely evil." So man's body is evil. But God is good because he is spirit. So is our soul. "Salvation is the escape [of the soul] from the body, achieved...by special knowledge" (Greek: *gnosis*). Since matter is evil, the good Christ could not have been truly human. Some Gnostics said Christ only seemed to have a body (docetism). Others like Cerinthus claimed "the divine Christ joined the man Jesus at baptism and left him" just before he died. To counter this heresy the apostle John wrote about the Savior, "*This is the one who came by water [his baptism] and blood [the cross]—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.*" "Cerinthus was a Jewish-Gnostic prominent in Asia Minor about A.D. 100,"¹ or perhaps 90.

When the Rock River flows through Watertown, WI, it looks different from when later it flows through Oregon, IL. But it's the same river. From A.D. 50 through 400, Satan kept taking out a new set of clothing for Gnosticism to wear. At first Gnosticism developed from the starting point of the definition above. But, like a river, Gnosticism never holds its shape long enough to make a specific definition stick for all time. I am left with defining Gnosticism as a clever pack of lies dressed up for different cultures as 'superior knowledge' without which you cannot have spiritual victory. But perhaps you will appreciate a more scholarly definition.

Gnosticism was an ancient Middle-Eastern religious philosophy with many variations, but unified at least in its commitment to a dualism between the material and immaterial worlds. The creation of the universe, in Gnostic mythologies, more often than not was the product of the rebellion of some "emanation" [often referred to as good Aeons or evil Archons] from the godhead. Matter, therefore, was inherently evil; only the world of the spirit was redeemable. Consequently, Gnostics looked forward to immortality of a disembodied soul, not the resurrection of the body. Salvation for them was accomplished by

¹ W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1965 & 1982), p. 51.

understanding secret or esoteric² knowledge, which most of the world did not and could not know. Hence, the Gnostic libraries contained numerous documents that purported to be secret revelations of the risen Lord to this or that disciple, usually after Jesus' resurrection.³

Gnosticism: A Primer

"The Gnostic is a Gnostic because he knows, by revelation, who his true self is... The Gnostic is self centered."⁴ Gnosticism "is a religion of saving knowledge, and the knowledge is essentially self-knowledge, recognition of the divine element which constitutes the true self."⁵

We Christians appreciate knowledge. But, as the apostle Paul dealt with early Gnosticism in his letter to the Colossians, he taught that knowledge about self is helpful only in connection with knowledge about the true God and his love for us and his will for us. Consider 1:9: "...we have not stopped...asking God to fill you with the knowledge [gnosis] of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

The Holy Spirit led Paul to take a swipe at either then-current or future Gnostic doctrine by describing Christ as true God and true man in one person (1:15-19), something that true Gnostics would have had trouble swallowing because of their passion for dualism. Because the thought of God's Son taking on human flesh was abhorrent to them, they would have rejected 2:9, "*in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*"

The Gnostics were big on angels and other spirit beings. Paul just happens to write, "*Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions*" (2:18). Did I mention that the Gnostics were elitists?

The Gnostics were not willing to be deterred by such clear passages of Scripture. Instead they latched onto passages where Paul talks about the evil angels such as 2:15. "*Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*" Never mind that Jesus triumphed over these evil angels. The Gnostics used this and other passages where evil angels are mentioned dwelling in the air as proof of their cosmogony (theory regarding the creation and origination of the world). These evil angels, often called archons by the Gnostics, supposedly intended to keep the souls of the dead from rising up to be with God. Only through knowledge (*gnosis*) could a soul hope to pass by these archons into a happy afterlife.⁶

Gnostics usually allowed their dualism to take them in the direction of an ascetic life. Certainly, a quiet and peaceful life stemming from faith in Jesus and dedicated to whatever is noble, admirable, and praiseworthy is a good thing. But using rules to cut ourselves off from all or most of life's pleasures for fear that the archons will enslave us thereby—no, no, no! "*Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence*" (Colossians 2:20-23).

Some of the Gnostics decided not even to try restraining their sensual indulgence. They reasoned that since matter is evil, breaking God's law is not evil⁷, even though 1 John 3:4 says, "*Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.*" Or perhaps the Gnostics considered unrestrained sensuality as a way of using

² "esoteric: designed for, and understood by, the specially initiated alone; abstruse"—*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1951), p. 281.

³ Craig L. Bloomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" in *Jesus Under Fire*, gen. ed. Michael J. Wilkins & J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 23.

⁴ Robert M Grant, *Gnosticism & Early Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ See for instance "The Gospel of Mary" in *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), p. 472-473. See also Friend, p. 50-51.

⁷ *NIV Concordia Self-Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), p. 1925.

up the body so as to escape from it faster. A person motivated to sin doesn't have to work real hard to come up with rationales for pursuing pleasure. 1 John was written against this libertine form of Gnosticism. In Revelation 2:14 Jesus speaks against this rampant sexuality in his address to the church in Pergamum. "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality." This passage also shows that the early Gnostics were members of the Christian churches.

Gnosticism is like all other false doctrines in that it appeals to the *opinio legis* (opinion about the law) of our sinful nature which likes to say: "If you do something, you get the credit. You can do what is necessary for salvation." Yet Gnosticism appears to have started either within Judaism or as a radical reaction to it. "Nearly all the ingredients later found in Gnosticism were already present in the life and the literature of these Essenes."⁸ It's possible that Gnosticism sprang up simultaneously in several places because by

the second century Gnosticism was a worldwide movement. There were Gnostics in southern Gaul, in Rome, Carthage, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, but the real centers of inspiration were Alexandria and Syria, and the great leaders of the movement, Basilides, Valentinus, Heracleon, Menander and Saturnilus, were Egyptians or Syrians. It had, however, been preached in the first century by the Docetic heretics referred to in the Pastoral and Catholic Epistles and in the *Letters of Ignatius* [A.D. 107]. There were also obscure movements associated with Simon Magus and Cerinthus. Simon was the reputed founder of Gnosticism and had been encountered by St. Paul during his mission through Samaria.⁹

Actually it was Peter who encountered Simon Magus as a sorcerer active in Samaria (Acts 8:9-25). But what an interesting turn of events! After all, we hear that "*Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw*" (v. 13). The last we hear about Simon Magus in Holy Writ is that Peter rebukes him and calls him to repentance for trying to buy the ability of conferring the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. "*Then Simon answered, 'Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me'*" (v 24). I always understood this verse to mean that Simon Magus repented and was allowed to have "*a share in this ministry*" (v 21) after all. But history tells us that Simon Magus remained "*captive to sin*" (v. 23) and as one of its fathers propelled Gnostic thinking into prominence. But then Balaam became unfaithful to the Lord, even after the Lord appeared to him a number of times and let his donkey speak to him (Numbers 22 - 25, 31:8,15-16). "*Of them the proverbs [were] true: A dog returns to its vomit, ' and 'A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud'*" (2 Peter 2:22).

The Gnostics "believed that there is an ultimate source of goodness, which they thought of as the divine mind, outside the physical universe. Humans carry a spark of that divine power, but they are cut off by the material world all around them"—a flawed world, as the Gnostics saw it, the work of an inferior creator rather than the ultimate God. ...the Gnostics proposed that ordinary people could be connected to God.¹⁰ Salvation lay in awakening that divine spark within the human spirit and reconnecting with the divine mind. Doing so required the guidance of a teacher, and that, according to the Gnostics, was Christ's role. Those who grasped his message could become as divine as Christ himself.¹¹

Does anyone else see a similarity to the teachings of Mormonism here?

The Gospels and The gospels

It is possible that the Holy Spirit caused the Gospels, especially Mark, Luke, and John, to be written as tools to help the early church counteract the effects of Gnosticism by setting forth the true story about Jesus. We

⁸ Grant, p. 39.

⁹ Frend, p. 51.

¹⁰ Andrew Cockburn, "The Judas Gospel," *National Geographic*, May 2006, p. 87.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 88.

usually date Matthew as early as A.D. 50.¹² But Mark and Luke were probably written in the late 50s or early 60s, nearly the same time as Paul was dealing with Gnostics in Colosse. And John was probably penned around 85 - 90,¹³ the same time Cerinthus was active in Asia Minor.

The Gnostics weren't about to roll over and die. They started writing down their own versions of Jesus' life and teachings. Today we keep hearing in the news and in movies and in Christmas specials and from modern Bible scholars about these other gospels, other accounts of Jesus' life. The Gospel of Thomas keeps coming up. The Gospel of Mary made a big splash a few years ago. The Gospel of Judas was in the headlines all last year. Just how many of these other gospels were written?

Quite a few actually. I'll report on just 13 of them. The first two aren't actually Gnostic gospels, but it's important to know about them.

Sayings Gospel Q

A popular theory about the origins of the canonical Gospels, called "the two source" theory, which even some conservative Bible scholars seem to have adopted,¹⁴ holds that Mark was the first Gospel, and that Matthew and Luke borrowed material from Mark. But some of Matthew and some of Luke which match with each other do not match with anything in Mark and therefore do not come from Mark. So, the theory goes, there must have been another source from which Matthew and Luke borrowed material. In German 'source' is *quelle*. So this other source is called Q or *Sayings Gospel Q*. Like "the missing link" in evolutionary studies, no copies of Q have ever been found. So the Jesus Seminar "scholars" invented (they would say 'reconstructed') the *Sayings Gospel Q* because it bolsters the two source theory. This work simply amounts to sections of Matthew and especially Luke, which Mark does not report on. The "scholars" believe that Q was written "very early." "Put differently, Q may be a kind of missing link between the Jewish world of Jesus and the early Christian church."¹⁵

Signs Gospel

There actually isn't a "*Signs Gospel*" either. The Jesus Seminar "scholars" invented it too (they would say 'reconstructed' it) in order to support their theory about the development of John's Gospel. They are so convinced that much of John came from a source that is no longer extant, and so convinced that they can derive the words that were in the *Signs Gospel*, that they have actually published a hypothetical text, which they then treat as if it were a real text. It simply amounts to sections of the canonical Gospel of John.¹⁶

Gospel of Peter

"In 1886 French archaeologists discovered a small papyrus codex in a monk's grave in Akhimim in Upper Egypt."¹⁷ It was apparently copied from an already fragmented copy. The work, originally written in perhaps A.D. 110-150,¹⁸ seems like the attempt of someone who had heard the canonical Gospels several times in one place, trying to write down the story from memory after having traveled to a place where no copy of the Gospels was available. Most is a fair retelling of the suffering and death of Jesus. Here are two quotations of the less accurate variety.

¹² G. Jerome Albrecht; *The People's Bible: Matthew* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), p 4.

¹³ Gary P. Baumler, *The People's Bible: John* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), p. 2.

¹⁴ *Jesus Under Fire*, p. 32-33.

¹⁵ *The Complete Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 249-250.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 399.

¹⁸ Cockburn, p. 88.

Joseph {of Arimathea} stood there, the friend of Pilate and the Lord, and when he realized that they were about to crucify him {Jesus}, he went to Pilate and asked for the body of the Lord for burial. And Pilate sent to Herod and asked for his body.¹⁹

Notice that the request for the body comes before the crucifixion of Jesus.

Fast forward to Resurrection Sunday.

...while the soldiers were on guard, two by two during each watch, a loud noise came from the sky, and they saw the skies open up and two men come down from there in a burst of light and approach the tomb. The stone that had been pushed against the entrance began to roll by itself and moved away to one side; then the tomb opened up and both young men went inside. Now when these soldiers saw this, they roused the centurion from his sleep, along with the elders. (Remember, they were also there keeping watch.) While they were explaining what they had seen, again they see three men leaving the tomb, two supporting the third, and a cross was following them. The heads of the two reached up to the sky, while the head of the third, whom they led by the hand, reached beyond the skies. And they heard a voice from the skies that said, "Have you preached to those who sleep?" And answer was heard from the cross: "Yes!"²⁰

Gospel of the Hebrews

The *Gospel of the Hebrews* was written in the Hebrew alphabet.²¹ Early Christian authors (A.D. 150 to 400) quote from a "*Gospel of the Hebrews*." We have only their quotations as sources. The Jesus Seminar "scholars" believe there were actually three such gospels of the Hebrews,²² but I'm not inclined to trust their scholarship.

Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in the 300s: "It is written in the Gospel of the Hebrews that 'when Christ wanted to come to earth, the Good Father summoned a mighty power in the heavens who was called Michael, and entrusted Christ to his care. The power came down into the world, and it was called Mary, and Christ was in her womb for seven months....'"²³

Origen wrote in the 200s: "Those who give credence to the Gospel of the Hebrews, in which the Savior says, 'Just now my mother, the [H]oly [S]pirit, took me by one of my hairs and brought me to Tabor, the great mountain,' have to face the problem of explaining how it is possible for the 'mother' of Christ to be the [H]oly [S]pirit which came into existence through the Logos."²⁴

Gospel of Thomas

National Geographic gives A.D. 110 as the approximate date of the Gospel of Thomas.²⁵ Helmut Koester dates it "possibly as early as the second half of the first century,"²⁶ or between A.D. 50 and 100. The Jesus Seminar group gives a date of A.D. 70-100, which would make it a contemporary of the canonical Gospels, at least according to their timeline.²⁷ Since modern scholars like to date the canonical Gospels after the fall of Jerusalem in 70, they have been crowing about Thomas quite possibly being the first of the records about Jesus. At one point the Jesus Seminar group had even dated Thomas at A.D. 50-60.²⁸ But Thomas doesn't tell us

¹⁹ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 402.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 405.

²¹ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 445.

²² *Ibid*, p. 426.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 430.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 431-432.

²⁵ Cockburn, p. 89.

²⁶ Helmut Koester in *The Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), p. 117.

²⁷ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 303.

²⁸ *Jesus Under Fire*, p. 23.

much about Jesus' life. There is little narrative. "The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of traditional sayings, prophecies, proverbs, and parables of Jesus. ...the collection intends to be esoteric."²⁹

These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. (1) And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death." (2) Jesus said, "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All." (3) Jesus said, "If those who lead you

(a swipe at Christian teachers?)

say to you, 'See, the Kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,'

(probably mocking Christian doctrine)

then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty." (27) <Jesus said>, "If you do not fast as regards the world, you will not find the Kingdom. If you do not observe the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the Father."

This saying appears to promote asceticism and a Judaist outlook *a la* Galatians.

(37) His disciples said, "When will You become revealed to us and when shall we see You?" Jesus said, "When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [will you see] the son of the Living One and you will not be afraid."

This saying may have been used by those who encouraged libertinism, which seems odd, since the rest of Thomas seems to promote asceticism. Or perhaps this saying #37 refers to the practice of encratism, the practice of sexual restraint while indulging in sensual activities. If this is the case, then perhaps *Thomas* is the product of Menander.³⁰

(42) Jesus said, "Become passers-by."

Is this saying, "Don't get involved," or more specifically, "Don't be a good Samaritan"?

(54) Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven." (55) Jesus said, "Whoever does not hate his father and his mother cannot become a disciple to Me. And whoever does not hate his brothers and sisters and take up his cross in My way will not be worthy of Me."

These two show that the Gnostics were quite willing to quote Jesus, either as a way of trying to make themselves look like Christians, or whenever they could take his words in their own way.

(95) [Jesus said], "If you have money, do not lend it at interest, but give it to one from whom you will not get it back." (109) Jesus said, "The Kingdom is like a man who had a [hidden treasure] in his field without knowing it. And [after] he died, he left it to his son. The son did not know (about the treasure). He inherited the field and sold it. And the one who bought it went plowing and found the treasure. He began to lend money at interest to whomever he wished."

Okay. So which is it? Charge interest or not?

(114) Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."³¹

Some Gnostics were misogynous. I remember coming across a section, perhaps in the Gospel of Truth, which spoke of androgyny being a better state than male or female. The Gnostics said many weird things about sexuality.

The Gnostic gospels tend to be rather short when compared to Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. The Gospel of Thomas with its 114 sayings is 45% of the length of canonical Mark.

²⁹ Koester, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 117.

³⁰ Benjamin Walker, *Gnosticism: Its History and Influence* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1983), has a section on Menander on pp. 138-139.

³¹ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 129-130.

Gospel of Truth

The *Gospel of Truth* is dated to about A.D. 150. "In this account *Jesus*³² teachings liberate the soul from a flawed physical world: 'You are the perfect day, and in you dwells the light that does not fail.'"³³

This Gnostic work may have been written by Valentinus himself. Irenaeus wrote against it in A.D. 180. It is not a gospel in the same sense as the New Testament Gospels which focus on the words and deeds of Jesus. This gospel is about the eternal, divine Son of God, "the Word who reveals the Father and passes on knowledge, particularly self-knowledge."³⁴

The gospel of truth is a joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the gift of knowing him, through the power of the Word that came forth from the pleroma³⁵—the one who is in the thought and the mind of the Father, that is, the one who is addressed as the Savior, (that) being the name of the work he is to perform for the redemption of those who were ignorant of the Father, while the name [of] the gospel is the proclamation of hope, being discovery for those who search for him.

Indeed the all went about searching for the one from whom it (pl.) had come forth, and the all was inside of him, the incomprehensible, inconceivable one who is superior to every thought.

Ignorance of the Father brought about anguish and terror. And the anguish grew solid like a fog so that no one was able to see. For this reason error became powerful; it fashioned its own matter foolishly, not having known the truth. It set about making a creature, with (all its) might preparing, in beauty, the substitute for the truth.³⁶

The rest of this work is no easier to understand. In fact it seems to have been purposely written so that a person would have to read it again and again before understanding. Or perhaps it was written this way in order to require the dependence of the students on the teacher who would initiate the students into further levels of *gnosis* (cf. the definition of "esoteric" above).

Gospel of Mary

The *Gospel of Mary*, probably written between A.D. 110-150, "reveals secrets *Jesus* gave to Mary Magdalene alone and not his male disciples."³⁷ The existence of this gospel may help explain the cult of Mary Magdalene that arose in the early church.³⁸

We are missing the first six pages of this work. What remains is certainly creative. The resurrected Jesus is having a dialog with his disciples, who are portrayed as weak and overwhelmed by the task of preaching the gospel. But Mary Magdalene, strong and decisive, encourages them.

Peter said to him, "Since you have explained everything to us, tell us this also: What is the sin of the world?" The Savior said, "There is no sin, but it is you who make sin when you do the things that are like the nature of adultery, which is called 'sin.' That is why the Good came into your midst, to the essence of every nature, in order to restore it to its root." Then he continued and said, "That is why you [become sick] and die, for [...] of the one who [...He who] understands, let him understand. [Matter gave birth to] a passion that has no equal, which proceeded from (something) contrary to nature. Then there arises a disturbance in the whole body. That is why I said to you, 'Be of good courage,' and if you are discouraged (be) encouraged in the presence of the different forms of nature. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

³² Throughout the National Geographic article, the name Jesus is printed *Jesus*.

³³ Cockburn, p. 89.

³⁴ George W. MacRae, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 36.

³⁵ The pleroma = "the fullness," a name for the Gnostic god and all the chief Aeons.

³⁶ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 37-38.

³⁷ Cockburn, p. 89.

³⁸ Jonathan Darman, "An Inconvenient Woman," *Newsweek*, May 29, 2006, pp. 42-51.

When he had said this, he departed. But they were grieved. They wept greatly, saying, "How shall we go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel... Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, "Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into men." Peter said to Mary, "Sister, We know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember—which you know (but) we do not nor have we heard them." Mary answered and said, "What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you." And she began to speak to them these words: ...³⁹

Mary then describes a vision, four pages of which are missing from the manuscript, in which she saw a soul going up through the levels of heaven and overcoming the archons which try to block the path of the soul to God.

But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas." Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: "Did he really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?" Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?" Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect man, and separate as he commanded us and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said." When [...] and they began to go forth [to] proclaim and to preach.⁴⁰

You may have read about some of the ways that radical feminist writers use the *Gospel of Mary* to show that the early church had a place of leadership for women equal to that of men.

Infancy Gospel of Thomas

Over the years a number of Christians have asked me if we know any more about the early life of Jesus than what is reported in Matthew and Luke. Christians must have been asking the same question from the beginning. The Gnostics were all too happy to invent stories about the early life of Jesus. Because Irenaeus speaks against this work in 180 A.D., we can date its origin before that time.

When this boy, Jesus, was five years old, he was playing at the ford of a rushing stream. He was collecting the flowing water into ponds and made the water instantly pure. He did this with a single command. He then made soft clay and shaped it into twelve sparrows. He did this on the sabbath day, and many other boys were playing with him. But when a Jew saw what Jesus was doing while playing on the sabbath day, he immediately went off and told Joseph, Jesus' father; "See here, your boy is at the ford and has taken mud and fashioned twelve birds with it, and so has violated the Sabbath."

Then Joseph confronts Jesus.

But Jesus simply clapped his hands and shouted to the sparrows: "Be off, fly away, and remember me, you who are now alive! And the sparrows took off and flew away noisily. The Jews watched with amazement, then left the scene to report to their leaders what they had seen Jesus doing."⁴¹

And yet it took until Jesus was 31 before he became widely known and popular? And what of John 2:11 which says Jesus' first miracle was changing water into wine?

The son of Annas the scholar,
...whom we would call a scribe or a teacher of the law...

³⁹ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 471-472.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 473-474.

⁴¹ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 371.

standing there with Jesus, took a willow branch and drained the water Jesus had collected. Jesus, however, saw what had happened and became angry, saying to him, "Damn you, you irreverent fool! This is a good example of how hard the translators of the Scholars Version work to make Jesus look bad in their translation of all the gospels, including the canonical Gospels.

What harm did the ponds of water do to you? From this moment you, too, will dry up like a tree, and you'll never produce leaves or root or bear fruit."

In an instant the boy had completely withered away. Then Jesus departed and left for the house of Joseph. The parents of the boy who had withered away picked him up and were carrying him out, sad because he was so young. And they came to Joseph and accused him: "It's your fault your boy did all this."

Later he was going through the village again when a boy ran by and bumped him on the shoulder. Jesus got angry and said to him, "You won't continue your journey." And all of a sudden he fell down and died."⁴²

When Joseph confronts Jesus about all this, Jesus says he'll keep his mouth closed, but that his accusers will have to be punished. So they are struck blind; Jesus also smarts off to a man who agrees to tutor him in a thing or two. Later the gospel reports that "no one dared to anger him for fear of being cursed and maimed for life."⁴³ Of course, with Gnostic narrative like this, the Jesus Seminar "scholars" didn't have to work too hard to make this version of Jesus look bad.

How different the picture we have from the Bible of the real Jesus, the boy who was obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51) and who never sinned once (Hebrews 4:15).

Infancy Gospel of James

I had heard that the mother of Mary was Anna, and I wondered where that information came from. It turns out that the *Infancy Gospel of James*, probably written about 150 A.D., is the source. James is supposedly the much older step brother of Jesus, who would then have had to be a very old man to survive until 62 A.D. when he was actually martyred. This James is the son of the aged widower Joseph from an earlier marriage. This work names John the baptizer's father Zechariah as the high priest, not just one of the priests, sets Mary into the wealthy family of Joachim and Anna, portrays Mary as having been immaculately conceived in Anna, and generally tries to explain why Mary, of all the women in the world, was chosen to be the mother of the Savior Jesus—namely because of her extraordinary purity. The work encourages asceticism. I shared the *Infancy Gospel of James* with my Sunday morning Bible class, and they found it disturbing.

The Secret Gospel of Mark

In 1958, Morton Smith discovered a fragment of a previously unknown letter of Clement of Alexandria who lived from about A.D. 150 to 215. This fragment of the letter refers to *The Secret Gospel of Mark* and quotes two sections. Supposedly, after the death of Peter, Mark migrated from Rome to Alexandria and then revised his gospel to include "whatever would be appropriate for those who are advancing with respect to knowledge (*gnosis*)" and "of which he knew that the interpretation would initiate the hearers into the shrine of the truth which is hidden by seven veils." Although some scholars think Morton Smith forged the whole thing, others believe that in Alexandria the church had two versions of Mark's Gospel, one for the public and one for "a narrow circle of initiates."⁴⁴ Given that Alexandria was the hottest of all the hotbeds of Gnosticism, this is quite possible.⁴⁵

⁴² *The Complete Gospels*, p. 372.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 375.

⁴⁴ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 408-409.

⁴⁵ Alexandria "had also been the city of Philo, and the work of harmonizing Greek philosophy and culture with Hebraic faith was to continue when that faith was represented by Christianity. How Christianity reached there we do not know. But during the first half of the second century it developed from a strongly Judeo-Christian outlook into a strongly Gnostic one. We do not know for certain the names of the early bishops, but Basilides, Valentinus and Heracleon represented between them a succession of Gnostic teachers in

Then Jesus went up and rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. He went right in where the young man was, stuck out his hand, grabbed him by the hand, and raised him up. The young man looked at Jesus, loved him, and began to beg him to be with him. Then they left the tomb and went into the young man's house. (Incidentally, he was rich.) Six days later Jesus gave him an order; and when evening had come, the young man went to him, dressed only in linen cloth. He spent that night with him, because Jesus taught him the mystery of God's domain. { we would translate 'kingdom' }⁴⁶

Perhaps you have heard about some of the plays written and produced off Broadway in the 1980s or 90s which portray Jesus as a homosexual. I wonder if the *Secret Gospel of Mark* was their inspiration. It should come as no surprise that the *Secret Gospel of Mark* is associated with Carpocrates (A.D. 78-138), a disciple of the libertine Cerinthus. "The Carpocratians held all things in common, including their property and their women. Procreation was forbidden, but sex and sin encouraged, and the spermatic fluid divinized. Carpocrates taught that God had implanted in the human breast the biting itch of concupiscence for a special purpose, to make it obligatory to fornicate. By thus sinning, the divine light of God's grace was provided with a chance to operate, a fact eminently pleasing to God. Sin thus became a way of salvation."⁴⁷ The Jesus Seminar "scholars" are surprisingly silent about the connection between the *Secret Gospel of Mark* and Carpocrates.

The Gospel of Judas

The Gnostic Gospel most in the news recently is the *Gospel of Thomas**. "We've always known that there was a Gospel of Judas, which might clear some of this up. In the year 180, Irenaeus, a church father in Lyon who specialized in rooting out heresy, denounced it as 'fictional.' The Gospel was in vogue for a few hundred years, then disappeared from history—until lately.⁴⁸ It is believed to have been written about A.D. 150. We don't know where in Egypt this Coptic copy of *Thomas** was found, but it was bound together with three other Gnostic texts.⁴⁹ The manuscript is in terrible shape. Here's a small sample of the text with lacunas⁵⁰: "[Truly] I say to you, [...] angel [...] power will be able to see that [...] these to whom [...] holy generations [...] After Jesus said this, he departed."⁵¹

"The opening line of the first page reads, 'The secret account of the revelation that *Jesus*⁵² spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot...'"⁵³ The Gnostics often wrote such "secret" lines into their writings. It's one of the marks of a Gnostic writing. "The 'secret account' gives us a very different Judas" from what the Bible

Alexandria extending for half a century between 130 and 180. Then orthodoxy began to come into its own. The year 189 saw the election of Bishop Demetrius who was to govern the See for no less than forty-three years, while a few years earlier, about 180, a converted Stoic, Pantaenus, set up in Alexandria what came to be known as the Catechetical School. ...Clement continued his master's [Pantaenus'] work attempting...to substitute an orthodox, or better, an ecclesiastical Gnosticism in place of the Gnosticism of the Egyptian teachers" (Frend, p. 82). Frend already established that the Rule of Faith in Egypt was different from Irenaeus' (p. 66). Well no wonder! They had Philo trying to harmonize the Greek and Hebraic faiths. They had Gnostic bishops for 50 years, and then a Catechetical School with Gnostic-leaning teachers going strong at a time when orthodox bishops were trying to straighten things out. No wonder the monks near Alexandria (how many of them attended the Catechetical School?) were "known to have revered Gnostic texts and kept them in their libraries" (Cockburn, p. 92). No wonder so many of the Gnostic writings we have are in Coptic, and were found in Egypt, and have such a strong Christian flavor. Although Gnostic writings and teachings were widely spread throughout the Mediterranean, they truly found a home in Alexandria. Here we also have an explanation for why there was a so-called "Christian Gnosticism": the two were blended by the bishops and catechetical teachers of Alexandria. Finally, if asceticism did not come directly from Gnosticism into Christianity, then at the very least it was Gnosticism's longest lasting influence on the church.

⁴⁶ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 411.

⁴⁷ Walker, pp. 139-140.

* [The essayist probably meant *Judas*, here – WLS Library Staff.]

⁴⁸ David Gates, "Sealed With a Kiss," *Newsweek*, April 17, 2006, p. 48-49.

⁴⁹ Cockburn, p. 92.

⁵⁰ Fancy talk for "gaps in the text where the papyrus is falling apart and we can't tell what was written"

⁵¹ Gates, p. 49.

⁵² Throughout the National Geographic article, the name Jesus is always printed *Jesus*.

⁵³ Cockburn, p. 81.

presents. "In this version, he is a hero. Unlike the other disciples, he truly understands Christ's message. In handing *Jesus* over to the authorities, he is doing his leader's bidding, knowing full well the fate he will bring on himself. *Jesus* warns him; 'You will be cursed?'[sic]"⁵⁴ "In other words, Judas is damned for helping bring about the salvation of humankind. This is doctrinally explicable: in the working out of God's plan, some people get damned."⁵⁵ Well, I guess it's explicable if you don't mind mischaracterizing the true doctrine of election as double predestination. But perhaps David Gates doesn't know that even conservative Presbyterians are abandoning double predestination as untenable.

You should know that The National Geographic article, which I'm quoting extensively, is written from the relativistic perspective of those who believe that the canonical Christian bishops in the early church like Irenaeus were being unfair and unscholarly and intolerant and "bad" when they wrote against and excommunicated the Gnostics, and codified the teachings of the church into what is now the orthodox view.⁵⁶

In the very first scene *Jesus* laughs at the disciples for praying to 'your god,' meaning the disastrous god who created the world.

And yet somehow the pro-gnostic / anti-Scriptural camp thinks that Gnostics and canonical Christians were going to get along?! The *Gospel of Judas* was written in opposition to the canonical Gospels. They can't both be accurate history!

He {Jesus} compares the disciples to a priest in the temple (almost certainly a reference to the mainstream church), whom he calls "a minister of error" planting "trees without fruit, in my name, in a shameful manner." He challenges the disciples to look at him and understand what he really is, but they turn away.⁵⁷

This citation argues for a date of writing long after Judas was dead. The only priests functioning before Jesus died were the Jewish priests, not Christian priests.

The key passage comes when Jesus tells Judas: "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." In plain English, or Coptic, Judas is going to kill Jesus—and thus do him a favor. "That really isn't *Jesus* at all," says Meyer. "He will at last get rid of his material, physical flesh, thereby liberating the real Christ [his soul], the divine being inside [from his body]."

That Judas is entrusted with this task is a sign of his special status. "Lift up your eyes and look at the cloud and the light within it and the stars surrounding it" *Jesus* tells him encouragingly. "The star that leads the way is your star." Ultimately, Judas has a revelation in which he enters a "luminous cloud." People on the ground hear a voice from the cloud, though what it says may be forever unknown due to a tear in the papyrus.

The gospel ends abruptly with a brief note reporting that Judas "received some money" and handed *Jesus* over to the arresting party.⁵⁸

About the Gospel of Judas James M. Robinson, the director of the project which translated and published *The Nag Hammadi Library*, told Newsweek: "It tells us nothing about the historical Jesus, nothing about the historical Judas. It only tells what, 100 years later, Gnostics were doing with the story they found in the canonical Gospels. I think purchasers are going to throw the book down in disgust."⁵⁹ I'd go along with that.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 87.

⁵⁵ Gates, p. 48.

⁵⁶ The same is true of "Sealed With a Kiss," by David Gates, p. 49.

⁵⁷ Cockburn, p. 91.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 91. The double underlined words come from the caption on pp. 84-85. [The words in brackets come from the caption on p. 86.]

⁵⁹ Gates, p. 49.

Gospel of the Egyptians

There is also an apocryphal writing by the same title and more well-known, but they are two different works.⁶⁰ Based on its content I'd date this *Gospel of the Egyptians* around A.D. 250-300.

It seems that when the Christians were successful at driving the Gnostics out of the Christian churches, the Gnostics became more creative in describing "Jesus" in their writings. One group, sometimes referred to as Sethians,⁶¹ decided that the real Savior was Seth, Adam's third son.

This work first explains the origins of the heavenly world. From the supreme God,

the transcendent Great Invisible Spirit, there evolves and emanates a series of glorious beings, from the mighty trinity of Father, Mother Barbelo, and Son, through the pleroma of heavenly powers, to Adamas' great son Seth, the father and savior of the incorruptible race. . . .because of the arrogance and hostility of Saklas and the Archons, Seth comes from heaven, puts on Jesus as a garment, and accomplishes a work of salvation on behalf of his children.⁶²

There is another Gnostic work written sometime in the 200s called "The Second Treatise of the Great Seth"⁶³ which presents 'the true story' of the Savior's commission by the heavenly Assembly, his descent to earth, his encounter with the worldly powers and apparent crucifixion, and his return to the Pleroma.⁶⁴ It also "says that the true Christ was never crucified."⁶⁵ Still other Sethian writings include the *Three Steles of Seth*, *Zostrianos*, the *Paraphrase of Shem*, *Allogenes*, the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, and *Melchizedek*.⁶⁶

Gospel of Philip

This "is a collection of theological statements or excerpts concerning sacraments and ethics." It was probably written between 250-300 A.D. "...the line of thought is often rambling and disjointed..."⁶⁷

Christ came to ransom some, to save others, to redeem others. He ransomed those who were strangers and made them his own. And he set his own apart, those whom he gave as a pledge in his will. It was not only when he appeared that he voluntarily laid down his life, but he voluntarily laid down his life from the very day the world came into being. Then he came forth in order to take it, since it had been given as a pledge. It fell into the hands of robbers and was taken captive, but he saved it. He redeemed the good people in the world as well as the evil.⁶⁸

I chose this passage because it sounds close enough to Christian doctrine to deceive those who don't listen closely.

Some said, "Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit." They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman? ... And the Lord [would] not have said "My [Father who is in] heaven" (Matthew 16:17) unless [he] had had another father, but he would have said simply "[My Father]".⁶⁹

So Luke's account of Gabriel's visit to Mary is wrong. And it seems Jesus had a human father besides his heavenly Father?

⁶⁰ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 195.

⁶¹ Walker, pp. 152-154.

⁶² *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 195.

⁶³ Also called "The Second Discourse of Great Seth"

⁶⁴ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 329.

⁶⁵ Cockburn, p. 89.

⁶⁶ Walker, p. 153.

⁶⁷ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 131.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 132.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 134.

The next quotation leads me to think that the author and recipients of Philip were not part of a Christian congregation any longer.

The saints are served by evil powers, for they are blinded by the Holy Spirit into thinking that they are serving an (ordinary) man whenever they do (something) for the saints. Because of this a disciple asked the Lord one day for something of this world. He said to him, "Ask your mother and she will give you of the things which are another's."⁷⁰

Although Jesus was not conceived in the woman Mary by the woman Holy Spirit, it was different for Adam.

Adam came into being from two virgins, from the Spirit and from the virgin earth. Christ, therefore, was born from a virgin to rectify the fall which occurred in the beginning. ... God created man. [But now men] create God. That is the way it is in the world—men make gods and worship their creation. It would be fitting for the gods to worship men!⁷¹

Once more, a statement in favor of asceticism...

When Abraham [rejoiced] that he was to see what he was to see, [he circumcised] the flesh of the foreskin, teaching us that it is proper to destroy the flesh.⁷²

There are many other Gnostic writings which speak about Jesus and therefore could have been included in the list of other gospels, such as the *Secret Book of John*, written about 150, which "Denounces the Old Testament God for trying to hide the truth from humanity."⁷³ But one must draw the line somewhere.

How Did We Find Out About These Gnostic Gospels?

As mentioned above, many of the early church fathers quote or refer to these other gospels. Some were found by archeologists, usually in Egypt and translated into Coptic (the language spoken in Egypt at the dawn of Christianity).⁷⁴ But the biggest find happened in December 1945. Two brothers Muhammad and Khalifah Ali al-Samman came upon a large, heavy, waist-high jar buried at the base of a large boulder in the Nag Hammadi region of Egypt, near ancient Alexandria, buried there perhaps by monks from the nearby monasteries of St. Pachomius.⁷⁵ Inside the jar were 13 Codices. Muhammad asked a Coptic priest to keep the Codices safe for him. The priest's wife thought they were worthless and possibly a source of bad luck, so she burned one of the Codices, probably #12, and sold the rest to illiterate Muslim neighbors. Bahij Ali, a one-eyed outlaw, ended up with most of them and sold them to an antiquities dealer. Eventually the collection was reassembled through the work of scholars and the Egyptian government. In the 1970s a facsimile edition was published. James M. Robinson's team published a complete translation in 1977.⁷⁶

Reaction of the Early Church to These Gnostic Gospels

Around A.D. 180, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon in what was then Roman Gaul, wrote a massive treatise called *Against Heresies*. The book was a fierce denunciation of all those whose views about *Jesus* and his message differed from those of the mainstream church. Among those he attacked was a group who

⁷⁰ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 136.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 143.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 149.

⁷³ Cockburn, p. 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 81.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 92.

⁷⁶ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 21-25.

revered Judas, 'the traitor' and had produced a 'fictitious history,' which 'they style the Gospel of Judas. ...the angry bishop apparently knew of the original Greek text."⁷⁷

Modern scholars like to call Irenaeus and Athanasius "heresy hunters," as if that's a bad thing. Irenaeus did his congregation and the church-at-large a favor when he wrote against the heresies. And if he was angry, we can understand why.

Irenaeus began his book after he returned from a trip and found his flock in Lyon {Gaul, modern France} being subverted by a Gnostic preacher named Marcus, who was encouraging his initiates to demonstrate direct contact with the divine by prophesying. Hardly less outrageous was Marcus' evident success with women in the flock.

Oh, the bias! Irenaeus is painted as angry, but Marcus is a success!

The preacher's "deluded victim" wrote Irenaeus indignantly, "impudently utters some nonsense: and henceforth considers herself to be a prophet!"⁷⁸

As part of his treatise, Irenaeus listed those books only which Christians should read as the sacred Scriptures, among them the familiar four Gospels. "In 367 Athanasius, the powerful Bishop of Alexandria and a keen admirer of Irenaeus, issued an order to every Christian in Egypt listing 27 texts, including today's Gospels, as the only New Testament books that could be regarded as sacred."⁷⁹

Today's suspicious people eat up these bits of conspiracy talk, things like, "We cannot know how many books were lost as the Bible took shape," and "perhaps the alternatives {the Gnostic gospels} were simply outmaneuvered {by the canonical Gospels} in the battle for the Christian mind," and the strange words of *Judas* "had gone unheard ever since the early church declared the document off-limits for Christians."⁸⁰ as if those 'nasty' Christians were doing the world a disservice by destroying deceptive documents. I can understand the desire of people to be able to examine all points of view before making a decision. And I'm not in favor of "book burnings." But ignorance of evil is bliss. I must say, it has not been a pleasure (re)introducing you to that river of lies, the Gnostic Gospels. Besides, it could just as easily have been only a few books that were lost as the early church got their act together and excluded those books that were harmful to people's faith in the true Jesus.

Professor Balge has a great explanation as to how the New Testament canon came about. When Marcion tried to exclude from the New Testament books everything that he found objectionable, "the church had to being to argue the question of what is apostolic and what is not. Before then the collection {of the New Testament books} had gone on in a natural, unhurried manner, determined by use rather than by formal critical standards. There had been a gradual consensus, without any contest we know of."⁸¹

"Evangelical biblical scholar Craig Evans {a believer} of Acadia Divinity College says the canonical Gospels ultimately eclipsed the others because their version of Christ's teachings and passion had the ring of truth. "The canonical Gospels are the ones that they themselves considered the most authentic."⁸²

⁷⁷ Cockburn, p. 87. "Irenaeus had been one of the few survivors from the holocaust of 177. An immigrant from Smyrna, he had known Polycarp [alive in 108] as a young man and carried a lifelong impression of him as a bishop and a man of apostolic authority. It is also possible that before settling in Lyons, he had spent time in Rome and had known Justin. However, by 180 he was bishop of the Church in Gaul, and turned his efforts to smiting the Gnostics whom he found making inroads into his congregation. The five books *Against the Heresies*, written circa 185, both expose Gnostic theories to detailed and devastating criticism, and contain an good many of the seeds of western Catholicism." (Frend, p. 65)

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 88.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 92.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 92 & 91 & 81.

⁸¹ Richard D. Balge, "The Bible through the Ages: I. The Canon of Scripture," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Fall 1991, p. 288.

⁸² Cockburn, p. 91.

What Repercussions Have These Other Gospels Had in Our Day?

All this promotion and study of the non-canonical gospels is having an adverse effect on the people of our day. There is less respect for the canonical Gospels and the true Jesus they set forth as our Savior. The next quotation explores why.

"Jesus has always been able to move product, especially books. {several cited} What's curious is how many of the Jesus books reject or revise Bible teachings and pose radically different versions of Jesus' story. Books on the extended New York Times best-seller list posit that: Jesus survived his crucifixion ("The Jesus Papers"); Judas' betrayal was a collaboration with Jesus ("Gospel of Judas," "The Lost Gospel"); John the Baptist was a twin Messiah ("The Jesus Dynasty"), and Jesus' words have been grossly misinterpreted ("Misquoting Jesus"). This doesn't include the Holy Mother of all Jesus Revisionism books, "The Da Vinci Code," which (spoiler alert!) says Jesus married Mary Magdalene and sired a baby. Alternative visions of Jesus are not new. The earliest Christian movements were riven with competing understandings of what Jesus meant, and the generally accepted Gospel story has always contended with rival interpretations. In antiquity, the authors were burned as heretics; now they get hefty book deals. These books are rising with a general boom in religious-book sales. "The fallout from 9/11, the political power of the religious right, and broader retail availability of these books have combined to produce a 'perfect storm' for religion books," says Lynn Garrett, religion editor of Publishers Weekly. "That's especially true right now for books about Jesus, reflecting a continuing fascination with figuring out who he really was."

But a Beliefnet.com poll suggests another possible explanation for why readers are fascinated by alternative Christian histories: they suspect that Christianity as currently practiced is not exactly what Jesus intended. Asked whether Jesus would be happy with modern Christianity, only 15 percent in the Beliefnet poll said yes. Of course, respondents differed over *why* Jesus would be disappointed: 19 percent said he'd think the modern church too liberal; 24 percent said he'd think it too conservative. Seven percent said we're neglecting the poor; 11 percent that we're focused too much on worldly matters, and 23 percent that Jesus didn't intend to start a new religion at all. Either way believers agree that something went awry—and that he wouldn't be happy about it.⁸³

Robinson says that Gnosticism was ultimately eradicated from Christendom.⁸⁴ But Walker spends three chapters showing connections between Gnosticism and other religious movements throughout history down to our day in which Gnosticism reared its ugly head.⁸⁵ He says that several people have noticed how rife Existentialism (Pascal, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) is with Gnostic ideas.⁸⁶ At first many of his connections seemed a bit strained, making one feel like he saw a Gnostic behind every tree. But while searching for some Gnostic art as a possibility for the cover of this paper, my wife came across more than one website which promotes Gnostic thought for the people of today. One Gnostic website boasts millions of followers.⁸⁷ The artwork was usually mockeries of Christ or depictions of open sexuality.

A possible example of Gnosticism's influence on sexuality in our day is reported in Newsweek's "Periscope: Beliefwatch" column in the October 2, 2006 issue, p. 9.

"When sex is discussed in religious circles, the conversation is usually about morality: what you should and shouldn't do. But apparently for many Americans, sex is not just moral, physical or emotional—it's spiritual. In a new online survey conducted by Beliefnet, 55% say sex is at least a part of their spiritual lives, with fully one third reporting, "my sexuality is an integral part of my spirituality: 38% say they have prayed before or after sex, and 48% primarily define sex as "a gift from God." ... Liberals are more secular about sex—49% define sex as "a physical act of pleasure—but are more likely to use spirituality-

⁸³ Steven Waldman, "Periscope: BeliefWatch," *Newsweek*, May 22, 2006, p. 10.

⁸⁴ *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Walker, Chapter 9 The Gnostic Influence, Chapter 10 The Eleutherians, Chapter 11 The Moderns, pp. 161-187.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 187.

⁸⁷ <http://www.gnosticteachings.org>

tinged sexual practices: 44% have tried tantra, the Kama Sutra, couples yoga or prayers for intimacy, compared with just 24% of conservatives. The practices have evolved from religious thinkers who believed intense sexual pleasure is a powerful way for people to connect to their divine nature, not only to each other."

Conclusion

For the last two weeks I've been sharing some of my findings with the Sunday morning Bible class. I was asked yesterday how I could stand researching this stuff. It hasn't been as enjoyable as I thought it would be when I started out. The torrent of lies has washed close to me and has left me feeling dirty and sad for all the people who have been deceived by Satan. I have a renewed appreciation for the truth taught in the canonical Scriptures and for those who have stood up to defend it throughout the history of the Church on earth.

"The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10).

Though devils all the world should fill
all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
they shall not overpower us.
This world's Prince may still ,
scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none,
he's judged the deed is done.
One little word can fell him.
--Martin Luther

"Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:5b-11).

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