

Review: DG045

**A SUMMARY CRITIQUE****GNOSTIC "CHRISTIANITY" REVISITED:  
Seek Your Inner Light**

a book review of  
*Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*  
by Elaine Pagels  
(Random House, 2003)

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Rubbish from the second century that is still rubbish<sup>1</sup> is an apt description of the Gnostic views advanced in Elaine Pagels's *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. This is unfortunate because otherwise there are many things to admire about the book, including the scholarship it represents and the questions it raises. It is an amazing testimony to Pagels's ability to turn relatively obscure information about esoteric people and little-known texts from the early church era into an intriguing book that has already drawn hundreds of thousands of readers; however, the New Age/Gnostic views sympathetically portrayed and skillfully advocated make the book potentially quite dangerous for the unwary or uninformed.

One reason for this caution is that a clear goal of the book is to challenge traditional Christian views that doctrinally limit the avenues available to those seeking God. Pagels's commentary on the alleged teaching of Jesus illustrates this: "Jesus said: 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'" The strength of this saying is that it does not tell us what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true" (p. 32).

Similar personal comments sprinkled throughout the book reveal Pagels's dislike of traditional Christian doctrines and creeds as well as her sympathy toward inclusive religion. She loves much "about religious tradition, and Christianity in particular — including how powerfully these may affect us, and perhaps even transform us," however, there still are things that she cannot love: "the tendency to identify Christianity with a single, authorized set of beliefs...coupled with the conviction that Christian belief alone offers access to God" (29). These biases and personal preferences are reflected in her analysis of sources in *Beyond Belief*.

**The Gnostics Are Still the Good Guys.** *Beyond Belief* revisits Pagels's Gnostic vision for Christianity first advanced in her 1979 bestseller *The Gnostic Gospels*. Both books were prompted by an important discovery of Coptic Gnostic manuscripts in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. These texts were first translated into English in 1977 and later revised by a team of scholars that included Pagels. They provide an independent witness for many Gnostic beliefs previously known only from the refutations of Gnostic teachers and groups made by such church fathers as Justin (d. ca. A.D. 165) and Irenaeus (d. ca. A.D. 202). The Nag Hammadi texts have practically nothing to say about any individual teachers or actual groups that may have used them. They instead contain cosmological and anthropological myths, wisdom sayings, and other material that often reveal a dualistic, polytheistic worldview similar to that ascribed to

known Gnostics by the church fathers. Determining which groups used which Nag Hammadi texts, and when, can be difficult or impossible. Pagels is concerned with possible reactions *against* such Gnostic or related groups, and so she actually cites the gospel of John and Irenaeus's writings more frequently than the sayings from the gospel of Thomas or any other Nag Hammadi text. Readers who might expect a full translation or exposition of the gospel of Thomas based on the *Beyond Belief* subtitle will likely be disappointed.

The real novelty in both *The Gnostic Gospels* and *Beyond Belief* is Pagels's continued praise of selected Gnostic ideas as preferable alternatives to current core beliefs and practices in Christianity. She promotes seeking and bringing forth the "inner light" or "inventive consciousness," *epinoia*, that is mentioned in The Secret Book of John and some other Nag Hammadi texts. Pagels seems to believe that this *epinoia* can provide whatever essential spiritual awareness or link with the divine that a person might need; but this *epinoia* would not be limited to "Christianity," however defined, since Pagels believes that it is latent in everyone and can be found in other religious traditions (164–67). This universalistic message actually contrasts somewhat with Gnostic teachings as critiqued by the church fathers where the secret, higher knowledge (*gnosis*) necessary for salvation was reserved for an elite, spiritually enlightened group.

**What Is Orthodox?** Throughout her analysis of the early texts, Pagels operates as if there were no widely held or common standard for orthodox or "correct" beliefs in the first centuries of Christianity. She writes, for example, that Christianity existed for centuries "before Christians formulated what they believed into creeds" (5). This is true, however, only if "creeds" means large, formal, church councils, which did not begin until the fourth century. There were compact statements of key, essential Christian beliefs that were widely accepted and used in the first century (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3–8). Pagels actually cites passages in Paul, John, Ignatius (d. ca. A.D. 115), and other sources that show the early existence of such beliefs, including the view that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and was both human and divine. She dismisses these though by noting that they were not "universally accepted" and were interpreted to mean something quite different by the "Christians" behind the gospel of Thomas or other Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts (44–45).

These different interpretations, however, are precisely the issue. The constant comparison in the book between ideas in the Nag Hammadi texts, the practices of historic Christian mystics, and ideas present in other non-Christian religions seem designed to make the Gnostic idea of seeking an inner light or *epinoia* benign and appealing. But the Gnostic texts elsewhere *deny* either the humanity or the deity of Christ and other central Christian teachings that do go back to Paul as well as to other New Testament writers and early church fathers. It is misleading, therefore, to present these Gnostic views as if they were as equally ancient, valid, authoritative, or widespread as the views presented by Paul, John, and others.

Pagels also assumes that in the first and second centuries there was no "orthodox" Christianity, rather, only competing Christian groups that claimed allegiance to people such as Peter, John, Thomas, Irenaeus, or others. She treats the groups that accepted and used the gospel of Thomas (so-called "Thomas Christians") – Gnostics and others – as "Christian" without qualification. Her real concern is *how* the (in her opinion) unfortunate creedal orthodoxy developed and gained ascendancy in the fourth century. Her proposed answer stresses sociological power struggles among the various heterodox (i.e., partially unorthodox) factions. The truth or error of any particular view is, according to Pagels, irrelevant or impossible to determine; rather, it is "self-evident" to each person in a postmodern sense.

**John and Irenaeus Are the Culprits.** Pagels argues that the most important early step in the development of exclusive belief systems in Christianity was the production of the gospel of John. In the most unique part of her book, she attempts to prove the following account of events. First, the gospel of John was written primarily to refute the gospel of Thomas and to undermine support for the "Thomas Christians." Irenaeus then used John to popularize the view that Jesus alone was God in order to refute Gnostic teachers who were poaching his church members in Lyons. In the course of this struggle, Irenaeus helped to add John to the canon of Scripture and promoted a rather literal interpretation of the book to refute various Gnostic symbolic or spiritual interpretations of it. Finally, Pagels finds that the work of Irenaeus

bore fruit in the fourth century with the formulation and enforcement of the Nicene Creed on an otherwise doctrinally diverse Christian scene. A thorough critique of each contention cannot be made in this limited review, but some major problems in Pagels's arguments about John and Irenaeus are considered below.

**The Gospel of Thomas Is Superior to the Gospel of John.** Pagels suggests that the gospel of Thomas and the gospel of John "may have been written at about the same time" (34). In a procedure unfortunately common throughout the book, she then assumes that this possibility is an established fact and builds more theories on it. In this case, she supposes that the gospel of Thomas must have existed *before* the gospel of John since John "probably knew what the Gospel of Thomas taught" (39). She then argues that John, or whoever wrote the gospel bearing his name, felt threatened by "Thomas Christians" and deliberately shaped the presentation of Jesus in his gospel to refute their views (58).

Pagels weaves multiple higher-critical theories regarding the origin and accuracy of the New Testament texts with her own unique ideas in an attempt to support these contentions. She argues, for example, that since John's portrayal of Thomas as the "doubting" disciple differs from the portrayal of him in the Synoptic Gospels, John's portrayal therefore must have been crafted to refute the admiration for Thomas that existed among "Thomas Christians." According to Pagels, moreover, since John, unlike the Synoptics, teaches that "Jesus, and only Jesus" embodies God's Word, is "the Light of the World," and so forth, she contends that John included these ideas or even invented them to refute the view from the gospel of Thomas that divine light exists in each person (58).

**Wrong Time, Wrong Place.** The gospel of Thomas is sometimes dated to the first century as Pagels supposes; however, there is actually an amazing diversity of theories about its date, accuracy, and composition. It has been dated, for example, to the early, mid, or even late second century by scholars who are not evangelical Christians.<sup>2</sup> The only real objective evidence is the presence of a Greek fragment that dates sometime before A.D. 200. The Nag Hammadi manuscripts of Thomas (copies), however, date far later, to ca. A.D. 350, and they differ both in the order of the sayings and in content compared with the earlier Greek fragments.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there is solid evidence that John was written before the end of the first century. Papyrus fragments of John found in Egypt date to about A.D. 125, and significant portions of the book can be found in manuscripts dating to around A.D. 200.<sup>4</sup> The gospel of John, furthermore, was known to Ignatius before ca. A.D. 115.

Pagels's central contention that John knew and refuted Thomas is also harmed by the probability that their places of composition and earliest use were far removed from each other geographically. The best guess for Thomas points to eastern Syria, perhaps at Edessa, east of the Euphrates in northern Mesopotamia. A fairly reliable tradition places John and the writing of his gospel at Ephesus in western Turkey, many hundreds of miles away.

Given the date and location difficulties of Pagels's theory, it is more likely that the sayings in the gospel of Thomas were compiled under the name of the "doubting" disciple *after* John was written in order to redefine the character of Thomas as he appears in John. Gnostic teachers and works indeed react *against* the teachings in the gospel of John in the later part of the second century; moreover, striking redefinitions of scriptural figures were frequently made by Gnostics. The serpent in Eden, for example, is transformed into a positive character — the one who brings *gnosis* — in several Gnostic works. A similar amazing transformation is implied by a gospel of Judas known to Irenaeus.

**Wrong Heretics.** Aside from the "doubting" Thomas material, many of the John passages that, according to Pagels, are aimed at gospel of Thomas views would refute several other false views equally well. For example, the various "I am" passages (John 6:35; 8:58; 14:6, etc.) and the desire that readers will believe in Jesus so that they may have life in his name (John 20:31), would refute Jewish misapprehensions about Jesus at least as well as they would refute "Thomas Christian" views. Indeed, if any specific heretical teaching can be inferred to be targeted by the teachings in the gospel of John, it is more likely to be from Cerinthus than from the gospel of Thomas, since Cerinthus is known to have taught in western Turkey at the same time John lived in the area. It is surprising that Pagels does not explore this possibility in more

detail, but perhaps it is because Cerinthus can not be linked very clearly to Gnostic texts that, for example, urge readers to seek an inner light.

It should be noted that Pagels proposes that only certain *selected*, key teachings in Thomas were refuted by John (46). The gospel of Thomas, in fact, contains views that are far less “politically correct” than those in the key cluster that Pagels thinks John knew and refuted. Logion 114, for example, has Jesus saying: “Every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>5</sup> This idea is probably *not* “self-evidently true” to many modern readers! Other contradictory or obscure sayings also exist within Thomas, and Pagels makes little or no attempt to argue that John knew or reacted against them specifically or comprehensively. This raises the question: If John was actually threatened, and was willing to craft his gospel to refute that threat, why wouldn’t he do a more complete job?

**Irenaeus and the Establishment of Orthodoxy.** No one argues that Irenaeus attempted anything less than a thorough refutation of heresy. Pagels correctly notes Irenaeus’s comprehensive use of John, but her presentation seems to imply that without his work John would never have been in the Canon. Christian writers and works that accepted John as canonical as early as or earlier than Irenaeus are either hardly mentioned or are dismissed in footnotes (e.g., 209n40), but they deserve greater coverage.

Irenaeus, moreover, says that doctrines including the belief in one God and “Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation” were widely held by the church in his own day.<sup>6</sup> Pagels thinks that Irenaeus’s statements about such unity in the church were merely “what he hoped to create” and not what “he actually saw in churches he knew” (129). Her comments, as opposed to what Irenaeus claimed, seem to be based on the theory that the existence of Gnostics such as the ones Irenaeus knew in Gaul prove that there was no real doctrinal unity in the churches. This seems a bit like saying that the existence of Mormons proves that there is no doctrinal unity about the deity of Christ among evangelical Christians today! Without a standard beyond what is allegedly “self-evident” to Pagels, however, the equating of truth with error in *Beyond Belief* was probably inevitable.

— reviewed by Daniel Hoffman

## NOTES

1. This is a paraphrase of Raymond Brown’s review of Pagels’s *Gnostic Gospels* in the *New York Times*, November 1979, as cited in *Beyond Belief*, 76–77.
2. As cited in Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 211–13.
3. James M. Robinson, gen. ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 124–25.
4. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 289, 388–90.
5. Robinson, 138.
6. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1.