

Lecture Four

Early Gnostic Christianity—Our Sources

Scope: This is the first of several lectures to deal with the fascinating group of early Christians called Gnostics, so named because they believed that special "knowledge" (Greek = *gnosis*) brought salvation to souls trapped in this evil material world. Before the mid-twentieth century, virtually our only source of knowledge about this widespread and influential group of Christian sects came from the writings of *heresiologists* (= "heresy hunters") who opposed them, such church fathers as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus of Rome. But that changed in 1945 with one of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries of modern times, a cache of thirteen leather-bound volumes accidentally unearthed by bedouin in upper Egypt near the village of Nag Hammadi. These volumes of the "Nag Hammadi library" contain fifty-two treatises written principally for and by gnostic Christians; they have, as a result, increased our knowledge of ancient Gnosticism immeasurably.

Outline

- I. In the past two lectures, we have examined the beliefs of two second-century Christian groups declared heretical: the Ebionites and the Marcionites.
 - A. The views of these groups were strongly at odds with each other.
 - B. Not only was each of these groups declared heretical by the other, but both were also attacked by the proto-orthodox who insisted that they were wrong.
 - C. Of even greater concern to the proto-orthodox, though, were religious movements that historians call Gnostic. In this lecture and the next, we will discuss the nature of the gnostic religions before examining several of the sacred writings revered by individual gnostic groups, writings now known through one of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries of modern times.
- II. Before we begin, we must first define some of our terms.
 - A. *Gnosticism* is a modern term used to refer to a widely diverse set of ancient religions that shared some key features.
 - B. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge." The gnostic

religions all maintained that salvation comes through knowledge.

- C. Knowledge of what? Gnostics did not claim that only the smartest people would be saved. The knowledge involved was secret, esoteric—knowledge available to those who are chosen—although ultimately it was self-knowledge, knowledge of who you really are, where you came from, how you got here, and how you can return.
 - D. As we will see more fully in the next lecture, the different gnostic religions maintained that this material world is a place of imprisonment for sparks of the divine, which became entrapped here, in human bodies, because of a cosmic disaster. For the divine element to be liberated from this evil material world, it needs to learn who it really is and how it can escape.
 - E. These religions have struck a sympathetic note for many people today, who also feel alienated from this world.
 - F. In this lecture, we will examine our sources for this ancient worldview.
- III. Until 1945, virtually our only sources of information about the gnostic religions were the lengthy and vitriolic attacks against them in the writings of proto-orthodox church fathers, such as Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul (c. 180 A.D.); Tertullian of Carthage (200 A.D.); and Hippolytus of Rome (c. 200 A.D.).
- A. These authors don't hold back in attacking their gnostic opponents who are ruthlessly denounced for espousing ridiculous myths, being completely self-contradictory, misleading the innocent, and engaging in wild and licentious activities that show their true colors.
 - B. There was, naturally, some question about how reliable these proto-orthodox accounts could be.
 - C. With the discovery of original gnostic documents, we can now evaluate the patristic reports—the writings of the church fathers—and get a much clearer picture of what the Gnostics were really like.
- IV. The chance discovery of a cache of original gnostic documents in 1945, near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi, was one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century. Some details of the find remain sketchy.
- A. It occurred in December 1945, when six bedouin camel drivers were digging for fertilizer next to a cliff in the wilderness of Upper Egypt, some

200 miles south of Cairo and 40 miles north of Luxor, near the bend of the Nile, close by the small village of Nag Hammadi.

- B. One of them accidentally uncovered a human skeleton with his mattock. Next to the skeleton was buried an earthenware jar, with a bowl over the top, sealed with bitumen.
 - C. Inside, they found nothing "valuable," just thirteen leather-bound volumes.
 - D. The leader of the group, named, remarkably enough, Mohammed Ali, took these back home with him to his village. That night, his mother used several pages to kindle the fire in her stove.
 - E. Mohammed Ali came to think that the books might be worth something and wanted to put them somewhere for safekeeping, all the more necessary because of suspicions aroused among authorities for his role in a recent murder.
 - F. He gave one of the books to a local priest for safekeeping, who showed it to his brother-in-law, a traveling teacher who recognized that it might be of some value. Eventually, word got out to antiquities dealers and the books were tracked down and sold to the Museum of Antiquities in Cairo.
- V. Scholars who learned of the discovery were floored by its significance. It was, in fact, a real treasure trove, a collection of original writings by gnostic Christians, including gospels about Jesus that had never before been seen by any Western scholar. These books were known to have existed in antiquity but had been lost for nearly 1,500 years.
- A. Contained within these thirteen leather-bound books were fifty-two tractates (that is, anthologies), written on papyrus.
 - B. The books themselves were produced some time in the late fourth century (demonstrated by the scrap paper used to strengthen the bindings, with dated receipts, the last of which is from 348 A.D.), but the tractates within them are much older, many of them dating back to the second century or earlier.
 - C. The books are all written in the Coptic language (= Egyptian), translations of Greek originals.

- D. They comprise different kinds of books: gospels allegedly written by Jesus' own disciples (e.g., Thomas and Philip); apocalypses; mystical reflections about how the divine realm, the world, and humans came into existence; expositions of important religious doctrines, such as the resurrection; and polemical attacks on religious enemies (including proto-orthodox Christians!).
 - E. Now widely known as the Nag Hammadi library, the books have been collected, photographed, published in Coptic, and translated into English.
- VI. This find is of incalculable value for scholars of antiquity.
- A. The books show that much of what the church fathers said about gnostic myths and religion appears to be right.
 - B. Other things seem to have been somewhat skewed.
 - 1. Much of the gnostic mythology appears to have been metaphysical poetry rather than historical description. An example is the Apocryphon of John, which describes how the divine realm and the human realm came into being.
 - 2. The Gnostics were not the wild profligates they were portrayed to be, but rather, strict ascetics.
 - 3. Above all, the Gnostics were sincere believers and sincerely religious.
 - C. On the other hand, even these sources are not problem-free for the historian wanting to know about ancient Gnosticism.
 - 1. They are written by Gnostics for Gnostics and presuppose gnostic beliefs; they do not, therefore, spell out these beliefs.
 - 2. One needs to read these texts carefully to see what they assume and what appears to underlie their various statements.
 - 3. When we engage in a careful reading of these texts, along with and in light of the comments made by the church fathers who opposed the gnostic religions, we can come to a clearer understanding of what these Gnostics stood for. That will be the subject of our next lecture.

Essential Reading:

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*.

Birger Pearson, "Nag Hammadi Codices," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. IV, pp. 984-993.

James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

Supplementary Reading:

James M. Robinson, "The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices," *Biblical Archaeology* 42 (1979): 2-24.

Gerard Vallee, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics*.

Frederick Wisse, "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists," *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971): 205-223.

Questions to Consider:

1. Scholars speculate about why the books of the Nag Hammadi library were buried in the Egyptian wilderness, just a couple of miles from an orthodox Christian monastery; can you think of some explanation?
2. Taking the modern political scene as an example, why is it difficult to rely on an opponent's claims to establish what someone actually believes and stands for?