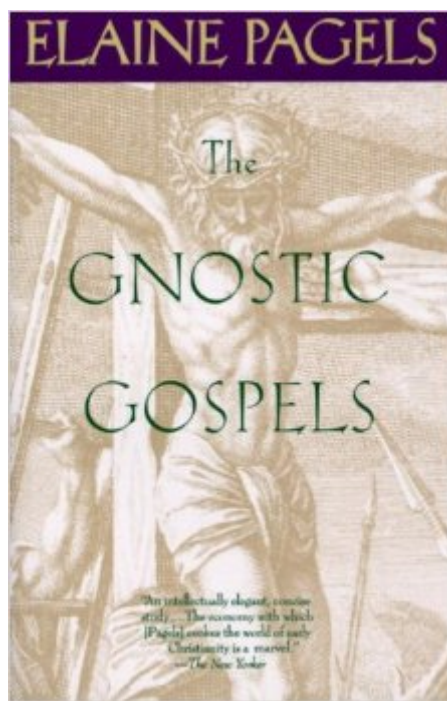


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The Gnostic Gospels



Synopsis

A provocative study of the gnostic gospels and the world of early Christianity as revealed through the Nag Hammadi texts.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Noted historian of the early church Elaine Pagels has produced a clear, cogent, and very effective introduction to the subject of Gnosticism, a different form of Christianity that was declared heretical and virtually stamped out by the orthodox church by the start of the second century after Christ. Most of what we knew of the Gnostic belief system came from the religious authors who worked so hard to destroy the movement, but that changed drastically with the still relatively recent discovery of a number of lost Gnostic writings near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. Unlike the Dead Sea Scrolls, this momentous discovery of ancient papyri has received little attention, and I must admit I went into this book knowing virtually nothing about Gnosticism. As an historian by training and a Christian, the information in these "heretical" texts intrigue me, and I believe that Christians should challenge their faith by examining material that does not fall in line with accepted beliefs. I should note that Pagels does not attempt to summarize or examine in detail the Gnostic Gospels in and of themselves; her particular focus here is the way in which Gnosticism affected the rise of the orthodox church that declared the Gnostics heretics. Still, she presents a great deal of information on many of the newly discovered texts and inarguably shows that the Christian church was founded in a society espousing a number of contradictory viewpoints. Pagels does a good job of presenting the context in which the early Christians lived and eventually argued against one another. The

debate was seemingly one over spiritual authority, and social and political issues played a part alongside purely religious disagreements between different factions.

The book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, by Elaine Pagels presents an easy-reading historical document that reveals the fundamental and theoretical similarities and differences of gnostic and orthodox Christians of the early Christian movement. According to Pagels, the finding of the 52 Coptic texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945, has seemingly shifted our very thoughts about Christianity as a traditional religious movement. Interpretation of the gospels reveals that historically, various diverse forms of Christianity flourished during Christianity's early formative years. Probably the single most threatening movement of the time was a group known as the Gnostics who formed from a variety of sources and traditions and who were often referred to as a heretical movement by the Christian church forefathers. The strength of Pagels work shows that although Gnostic and orthodox Christians believed in God and the value of sharing a relationship with God, they differed greatly in their approach to knowing and understanding God. Gnostics believed that one could know God by gaining insight into oneself, and that by knowing oneself, one might understand human nature and destiny. In general, Gnostics maintained an equality amongst individuals and established no fixed orders of clergy. They allowed all individuals to seek to know God through their own experience and to achieve personal enlightenment through rigorous spiritual discipline and self-discovery. Unlike the Gnostics, the Christian church developed as a religious structure to encourage social interaction amongst individuals and required only that individuals accept the simplest essentials of faith and a variety of celebrated church rituals.

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